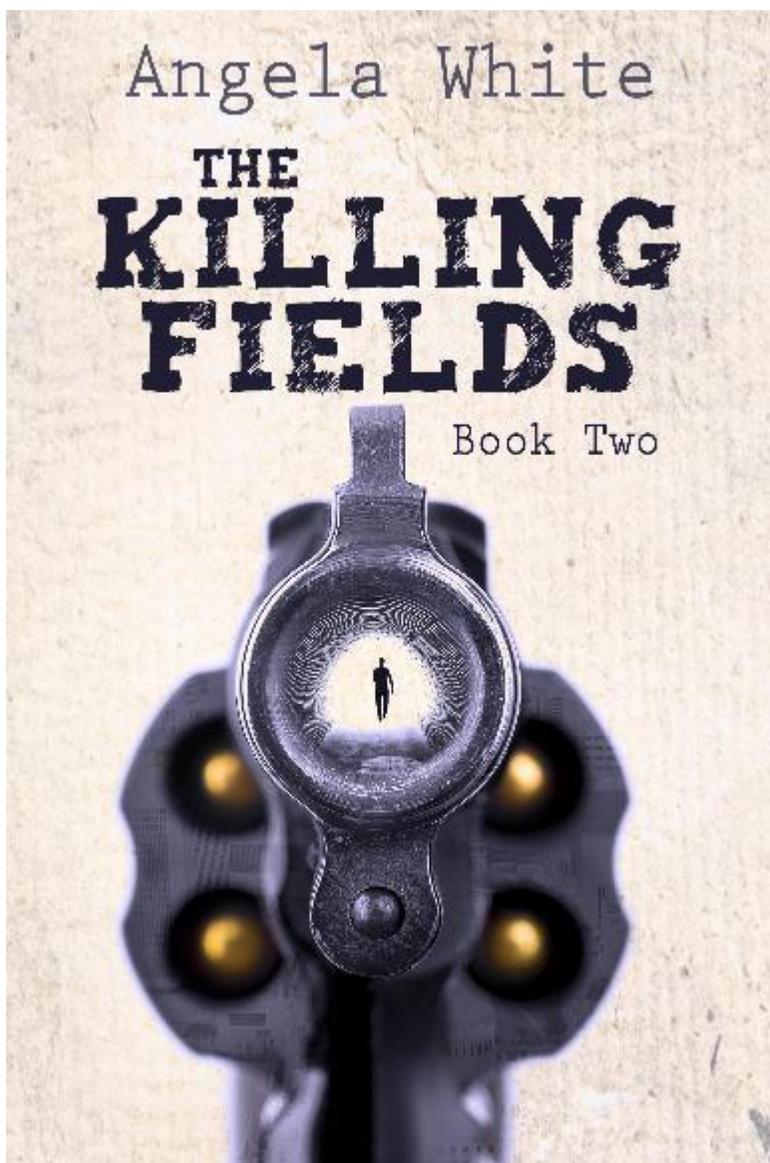


Angela White

**THE
KILLING
FIELDS**

Book Two



Copyright
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by
Angela White

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Thank you, Beta Eagles! You do amazing work.

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Chapter One
Remnants
Nebraska
September

1

“**Y**ou’re not going in there?”

Alexa’s men glared at Paul for the disrespect he was showing at questioning her, but they did understand his reluctance. The field of corn in front of them was menacing in its endlessness. The chilling wind and roiling gray sky under the green haze was simply overkill.

Paul retreated from the glares. “That’s The Killing Fields! No one comes out the other side.”

Alexa’s men turned to their leader and found her disappearing into the corn. Her choice had been made.

“She is crazy!”

That earned him another scowl from the men who had already agreed that it would be better for everyone if the awkward scientist gave up and returned to the government base. Out here, Paul was only a burden to be handled later.

“Can’t we talk about it?”

Alexa didn’t pause and neither did her fighters, but they did steal quick glimpses back as they

followed. They weren't able to ignore Paul like she could, but they had no doubts about their own choice, their own level of commitment. This would be a hard trip for anyone who didn't have confidence in themselves.

Paul was quickly out of sight, divided from Alexa's protection by rows of tall, black corn with orange tassels swaying eerily in the breeze. When the wind picked up, the stalks moaned like a dying man.

"Wait! Wait for me!"

The heavy clink and clank of panicked running shattered the silence.

"Don't leave me!"

Alexa stopped. Her shoulders were a straight line of annoyance.

The fighters glowered at Paul. They didn't want to go against Alexa, but they didn't understand why he was with them.

Paul drew up at the hostile vibes. "What?"

Edward growled, pointing. "Get in your place!"

Paul did it with jerky movements that banged more pieces of loose gear against each other.

Alexa's lips tightened as she began to walk again.

Edward fell in step with her, sensing a distraction might be good timing on his part. "I've heard stories of this place."

"I'd hear them later." Alexa was aware of his tactics. Her crew didn't want Paul here. They would

try to get rid of him, while also trying not to piss her off. That was a thin rope to walk.

Not offended by her curt tone, Edward stayed close, hoping she might talk to him. It had been two weeks since she'd told them a story or even held a conversation that wasn't related to their quest. It was maddening. He and the others had agreed to ask for more information and accept whatever punishment she gave in return for it.

“Wrong spot. Stay an arm's length to the left.” Daniel was still teaching David. “Remember rule 2b for close quarters.”

It was the same training that all of them were undergoing, but Paul wasn't catching on. He would be fine one day, but have to be told again the next morning.

Alexa listened vaguely to the conversations and lessons that were going on behind her, content that the senior men were helping the new ones in the ways she needed. Her annoyance wasn't as bad as her body language implied. *My father's training and mine are only different because I'm on foot with six men. If I had a full army, I would have to do things his way. I don't need that many for this quest. I've been blessed with six strong, loyal, beautiful men—exactly what I required.*

The males making a conscious effort to maintain her basic traveling formation had big muscles and dark hair that made them appear related, but each of them wore it differently. For David, it was loose and almost long. As a

blacksmith, he'd kept his hair trimmed for safety, but that wasn't necessary now.

Edward had a tame mass of ebony that curled around his ears to give him the appearance of someone who had earned a high rank or command. Billy preferred the previously gender restricted braids. He sported two on each side that were tied together in the back with the rest of his long hair to form his ponytail. Daniel had kept the short spikes that connected him to his past, and so had Jacob with his curls. Alexa liked to admire the sexy mix of hairstyles during the nights when she refused to sleep anymore and needed to be reminded that she still had a human side. She suspected there wouldn't be a lot of time for that during this part of their run. The Killing Fields were every bit as lethal as Paul feared.

Alexa's thoughts had drifted to Paul's very different coloring; she tried not to frown. What was it about blond men that she didn't care for? Paul was attractive and he wasn't built badly despite being hunched over, but she felt no desire for him at all and that was unusual. Descendants were especially aware of each other in ways that most people couldn't match, but with Paul, there was an actual repellant. She hadn't narrowed down the cause yet. She assumed it was his mental weakness, but she wasn't sure. There were plenty of faults to pick through.

Edward winced at loud crunching as Paul waded through the brambles the rest of them had just avoided. “He’ll learn. We all are.”

Alexa didn’t confirm or deny that.

Edward hadn’t expected her to. She preferred silence to lies.

They’d traveled steadily since leaving the Black Hills and though it would be a couple more weeks before the tracking drugs would be completely out of Alexa’s system, she’d made a full recovery. Only a small scar remained on her neck and in her heart. They’d stopped in a few empty South Dakota border towns to resupply themselves before dropping into Nebraska. They’d found old and new battlefields almost as soon as they hit this state. Alexa had collected several pouches of bone dust.

They’d reached the first cornfield two days ago, and it now felt as if the resilient crop had taken over the entire state. As they walked, cracked roads were becoming mere paths between the rows.

The wind sent a fresh round of moans through the tall corn, making the fighters peer harder through the jungle of stalks and tassels that now surrounded them. Ten-foot high plants rose haughtily in every direction and exuded a wet vegetable smell that hung heavily over the field, while the spongy ground under their boots suggested they might sink at any moment despite a lack of rain. It made them all uneasy. Paul’s loud clumping drew their emotions to an easy target.

David glared as Paul coughed and spat. “Shut up, damn you!”

“Hush now.” Daniel tried to soothe his student, but he understood. If things had happened this way when he had first joined the quest, he wasn’t sure he would have been able to handle it, despite being in Alexa’s healing glow. It had only been him and Edward for the first month after she’d saved him. Nothing would ever compare to it. Jacob and David were trying very hard to fit in, and they were making great progress, even with Paul along. Without Paul, they were all sure they would already be a stronger, better trained group. The scientist was a constant distraction.

“Why bother? He’s so loud that no one will hear us over that racket!” Jacob, and David, often felt cheated by Paul being here. It had ruined some of the magic for them.

“I agree.” Mark also glared at Paul. “You’ll get her killed!”

Paul glowered back, still hunched over despite all the exercise he’d gotten since leaving the bunker. “I will not!”

He’d been thinking about killing his father, not paying attention like they’d been telling him to do for the last ten days. He was trying to decide if he liked being an honest killer or if he wished he’d done it while the man slept. This feeling of freedom, of weighing nothing, might have been even stronger.

Two paces later, Paul tripped. His carelessly packed gear scattered across the ground.

Alexa stopped again, shoulders rigid.

Her fighters braced.

“Are you sure, Paul? A month more with me may get you killed by my men. The last fourteen days have already added up.”

Paul rose, flustered. “Please!”

There was silence as they all waited for her choice.

“Pick one of them to take charge of you. Five minute break.”

Her order surprised her fighters. If they had to take charge of him, he might become one of them.

That won't happen if I have anything do to with it, each of her men swore silently. The thought was unanimous.

Paul glanced at Edward, who he admired and feared the most after Alexa.

Edward rolled his eyes in prideful resignation. “Fine. Start by ditching the computer. That world is gone. Next, lay out everything in your kit and do it fast. I'll help you sort.”

Alexa stayed where she was, listening for trouble to find them as the others took up positions around their stopped group. It took time to learn new ways. Alexa understood that. The small issues, like Jacob occasionally fighting with his faulty foot and Edward's thickheaded pride, would settle themselves out in time, but not if she constantly harped on them. Even Mark and Daniel still made

too much noise with their hearty male voices. It sometimes brought trouble, but overall, she was pleased with the progress of her fighters.

Alexa's thoughts returned to Paul. He wasn't one of her men and thank the Gods for it! He was a twitchy, ticking bomb that she'd chosen to use to her advantage. It was tricky, dangerous, and not guaranteed to be as useful as she hoped. In fact, the man might even blow too soon and screw it all up. If it went well, Paul would keep his life, under his own free will. If not, he would die or return to the safe captivity of a bunker.

David came to Alexa's side. "I know what you need, what's going to happen." He looked at her arm, where the two small holes from the baby's bite were now odd black scars.

Alexa didn't blink. Her men were smart. She'd expected to be called on the future of the quest at some point. "You'll tell the others?"

"No, but if Lincoln doesn't work they'll figure it out for themselves." David hesitated, expression darkening. He ran a hand through his hair in an unconscious defense. "And if it doesn't?"

Alexa wanted to be angry, but the quest came first. "Carry on."

David didn't think that was possible for some of them. "Even if you die?"

Alexa's eyes flashed annoyance. "Carry on!"

David didn't confirm that he would. Alexa switched topics. "What are you hiding from me?"

David winced. "Protecting myself, not hiding."

Alexa wasn't going to settle for that. He'd brought this to her, forced her to have this discussion, and now he would open up, as well.

"Tell me who you are!" Alexa's voice was a deep command that was hard to refuse.

He stalled. "I'm a blacksmith on a quest." It was still how he felt.

"Tell me who you want to be."

"An Eagle in Safe Haven's army."

Alexa let a sound of longing escape her lips. "As do I. Now tell me who you were!"

David flinched at the second demand. "I'd rather not."

Alexa pointed ahead of them. "Evil resides there. We are the light. Get rid of your shadows or allow them to come between us."

David had no choice. He would never forsake this quest. "I was an engineer...on the *other* side. I went AWOL."

"You could have tried to join Safe Haven afterward." Alexa finally placed the feel of her father that hung around the man by her side. It had been bright and clear in the dusty street where she'd first found him, but here, it glowed like the neon signs that used to light Vegas.

"I fought against them. I wasn't worthy." David sighed raggedly. "I'm still not."

Alexa understood that feeling, but it didn't bother her that David had been with the enemy. So had Edward and Jacob. Mark had been a career criminal. None of that mattered. Alexa wasn't good

at comforting her men, but she managed to find a tone that sounded gentle. “You’ll tell them. They’ll make the choice. Until then, store up credits.”

David had already planned to do that. He felt he had a start on it, even. He was grateful to hear that there was a chance for him to earn forgiveness.

“Hold still!”

They both looked over to find Paul flinching from Edward’s big hands as the Horseman tightened, fastened, pulled, and tugged the scientist’s gear into the correct places.

“And stop drinking the crap you brought from the bunker. We can track you by the smell of your piss!”

Paul stumbled backward.

Edward snatched a handful of jacket to steady the nervous man. “Can’t you at least try? She *will* leave you behind if you keep slowing us down.”

Paul’s face filled with anger and embarrassment as he jerked loose. “I’ll still be with her when you’re dead!”

Edward snorted. “Sure. Come on. She wants to be moving. Can’t you feel her impatience?”

When Alexa turned toward the path she’d chosen, David took the place on her right to cover for Edward, who would have a miserable few hours of trying to reteach Paul the basics of their traveling formation. He should have learned it on his own by now just from doing it every day. It wasn’t hard, but it took concentration that the scientist didn’t seem to have. Paul often caused them to stop while he

examined some specimen that he'd only read about in the lab or while he exclaimed over the hues of the sunset. It was as if he hadn't been outside in his entire life. For all they knew, he hadn't.

"She's getting ready to drill us to burn off some of the anger." Mark made sure his gear was high and tight.

The others did the same, muttering.

Edward's frown grew as he shoved Paul into place. "It's your fault. You go ahead of me, so I can beat on your shoulders like a mule."

Paul started to protest. "What did I—"

Edward shoved the scientist. "Let's go. Now!"

Ahead of them, Alexa was already running.

The other fighters flew by Edward and Paul.

Angry, Edward snatched the scientist by his jacket and jerked him deeper into The Killing Fields.

2

"Get up!" Edward stopped and went back to the sweaty scientist, aware of his group getting further ahead with every second. The last hour had felt much longer.

Edward hauled Paul's cringing form to his feet. "The next time you fall, I'm leaving you."

Gasping, cheeks bright red, Paul couldn't spare air to argue.

"Useless!" Edward slid his arm around Paul's waist as the sound of boots faded. He hefted the man

over his shoulder and rushed to catch up. He ignored Paul's cry of discomfort.

Alexa heard the heavy steps, the crashing of two bodies through the corn that reminded her of their adventure on the bridge, and brought her team to a reluctant stop. She waited for Edward to put Paul down, giving them a one hundred count to catch their breath before she started walking at a quick pace. She kept it that way for the next hour, fighting the instinct that said going faster was better. If slowing them down was the worst consequence of bringing Paul along, they would survive it.

3

3 Days Later

“It feels like we're being followed.” David changed to walk backward, scanning. There hadn't been much in the way of sights today. It made the Blacksmith alert to even slight changes.

Not doubting him, Alexa signaled her men closer, but she didn't stop. They were deep into the fields now and trouble had to come sometime. She prepared herself mentally, hands falling into the comforting routine of checking her weapons and gear. She didn't need to confirm that her men were doing the same, but she did glance at Paul.

Paul tried to copy the others, but he didn't feel like he was being given a fair chance to prove himself. They had no sympathy for the sheltered life he'd led.

“Boss.”

This time, Alexa did stop. David’s tone said they had trouble and he wasn’t sure what to do about it. Alexa turned to see a little girl of about seven, blue as a corpse, standing behind them.

Alexa waved a hand and her men fell in behind, pulling Paul along as they all gawked at the undead child.

Alexa studied the girl, wondering who she had once been. The child wore a long dress made of simple wool that declared her origins after the war had been poor and untraveled. There were still enough old world clothes around to outfit a country, but those who controlled the items were ruthless in their pricing. The only other way to outfit a family was to scavenge for it, but this child’s clothes were handmade, suggesting a life in one place. Bare, scarred feet implied the same. Alexa wondered only at the braces still on the girl’s rotting teeth. Once upon a time, she’d had a life. It was heartbreaking.

“May we pass?” Alexa already knew the answer.

The little girl hissed. “Never!”

Sighing resignedly, Alexa pulled her gun and shot the undead child in the forehead.

Blood poured down her small face at the fatal hit, but the child only hissed again and darted into the corn.

“Word of our presence will spread now.” Alexa filled the stunned quiet that had fallen over her fighters. “Go quietly. Watch your six.”

She hadn't wanted to reveal her presence yet, but there was only one way to deal with such a threat. As a result, her hand had been forced. There was little doubt that it was intentional.

Her fighters recovered quickly, but David had to bump Paul on the elbow to get him moving again.

They fell into their normal march formation, but none of them were surprised when Alexa sped up. The encounter had been unsettling. All of them scanned the abnormal corn jungle for the child.

Paul tried not to trip over the thick roots and sharp rocks in the path. "What was she?"

"A guardian. They protect the places where reality has ripped open."

"That's a lie!" Paul began to roll out the same lines he'd heard Corbin use so often. "There are no gates! The government does not control or encourage the destruction of reality. There are no monsters in the—"

"Shut up!" Edward stopped and spun around. "Don't ever do that again!"

"What?!" Paul braced to take the blows.

"Call her a liar." Jacob glared. "Or any of us. *You're* the only liar here."

"And you just saw a monster, you idiot! Wake up!" Mark shoved Paul.

Edward sidestepped to let him hit the ground. "We'll be tolerant, but we will not let you restart that old shit, not in this group. Black is black and white is white. There is no damn gray."

The men hurried to catch up with Alexa.

Paul came along more slowly, now bringing up the rear. He refused to believe the child had been shot. *Alexa missed...*

Alexa spun around as she caught the thought, rushing toward the scientist before he could flee. She punched him in the mouth, hard enough to send him back to the dirt. “I didn’t miss! Tell me what happened! Now!”

Paul opened his mouth to spew his false narrative again.

Alexa lunged down and slapped him. “What really happened?”

“You shot her!” Paul whimpered. Then the dam broke. “And she wasn’t dead! She hissed! She would have killed you if she could! They lied to me!”

Paul began to sob at her feet.

Alexa recoiled in disgust. “Don’t make me do that again or I’ll leave you behind. I have no time to waste fixing your broken parts. Do that yourself.”

It was something she’d said to each of her men at one time or another, but they realized she was giving him a break by not demanding that he confess his sins to one of them. It was another sign that he wasn’t going to be one of her crew.

Paul pulled himself together, cautiously standing up. He wasn’t sure if one of them would hit him again.

“How do you kill a guardian?” Billy wanted the information more than to fill the awkward silence.

He couldn't help Alexa fight these battles if he didn't know how to handle her enemies.

Alexa resumed the walk. "You can only disable those like her for a while. You have to kill their creators."

"Disable?"

"Creators? Like vampires?"

Alexa used their interest to allay their fears of not being able to kill the dangers around them. Sometimes spilling blood wasn't possible or even needed. They were learning that. "Vampires die easily enough when you know their weaknesses. It's a myth that they're hard to kill. Guardians are different. They are an extension. You have to disable their visions. To do that, you would normally use the same disbelief that Paul clings to."

"Normally?"

"This creator is a fair bit tougher than most. The average conjurer can send a shadow of themselves to spy, but little else. They're weak. Those who've perfected their craft are Masters. The shadows they send are capable of everything that a person is and more."

"How do we—"

"You don't. I do. You'll handle the creatures the Master sends to stop me. Those can be killed with exactly what I've already given you."

It was then that her men realized they were here for more than just tracking down the next Safe Haven clue. Alexa had a livelier target in mind and she'd just handed out their assignments.

Satisfied that they were now in the right frame of mind, Alexa quickened their pace again. “Let’s move.”

4

“There’s something back this way.”

Edward’s words were passed up to Alexa, who brought the group to a halt again. Edward had been sniffing for such a place, hoping to be free of Paul’s weight for even a few minutes. The scientist would never be able to keep up.

Alexa joined him to survey whatever it was he’d found. Edward had a nose for stashes. “You lead, we’ve got Paul.”

That was something she hadn’t allowed since picking him up. Edward tried to be perfect as he took over the Point position. The sense of food being hidden here was clear; he found himself falling into the tracking zone. Alexa often used words to trigger their mood changes and actions, but it wasn’t needed with him. He’d watched her closely every time. After months, it was almost natural. “There’s some sort of wall here.”

The corn and weeds had mostly taken over the concrete wall that bordered the property, but the large ranch house appeared to be in decent shape. Only a few of the bricks were crumbling and the glass in the windows was gone, but otherwise, the house was intact. Even the front door was undamaged.

Edward stopped, considering, listening, feeling. “There.”

He led them toward a wide building that ran alongside the home. It was covered in thick vines that didn’t belong here. The front of the storeroom was cleverly hidden by a large tree, two small bushes, and a trellis with climbing ivy that had spread itself around since the war. The vivid green vines covered the roof and sides, leaving only outlines of doors and filthy plastic windows.

“Keep leading.” Alexa stayed in the bodyguard’s place.

David and Daniel kept Paul close, while Jacob and Billy watched the dark shadows of the house that was now between them and the corn.

Edward used a light hand on the knob and pushed the narrow door open, wondering if this storehouse had another entrance. It was hard to imagine people carrying boxes through that tight opening.

Edward went inside, with Alexa right behind him to check the dark corners with her penlight.

The Horseman whistled lowly in surprise. The cool room was lined with shelves, filled with a stash that other survivors might have killed each other to possess. The concrete walls and floor were covered, and the one window and ceiling were in good shape. The food was probably edible.

Alexa slapped Edward on the arm. “Nice.”

Edward glowed at the praise.

Alexa called the others inside and shut the door.

It was crowded once they were all in, but not in a bad way. It made it more obvious that Alexa's strengths weren't always clear upon a first meeting. She was petite compared to the stature of her men, but when the fighting began, she became a powerhouse of wrath and vicious intelligence. She'd learned that skill over a lifetime of fighting for the right to exist. Edward was sure that Alexa would use it to her advantage on this quest. She liked the element of surprise as much as he did.

"Inventory." Alexa waved as the men spread out a bit to explore their find. "Hit me."

"Bottled water."

"Jars of canned corn."

"Toilet paper rolls!"

"Some kind of juice. Can't read the first word."

"Five cases of canned items, no labels."

The list took a while. Alexa gleaned a lot more than ration counts from the find. If this stock had been here long enough for the labels to have eroded or worn away, it meant there hadn't been people here. No one in their right mind would leave a stash like this untouched, but there hadn't been a single print in the thick dust.

"I found something." Jacob had been searching for manuals or other reading material. "Emergency relocation supplies for Preparedness Capabilities Evacuation Plan Hotspot 42. Lot Four of Seven. Re: Item SAM23145 for coordinates. Radio upon confirmation. Proceed to pullout location Alpha."

Jacob paused.

Alexa motioned him to continue. They all wanted to hear it.

“Take the path cleared by Recon and set the charges according to the map. To ensure proper timing, the explosives are prewired and timed. Follow arming instruction with precision.” Jacob handed the paper to David to read, unable to take anymore. He’d already scanned the next lines and almost couldn’t believe it.

“When the city is at the height of fire, release the valve on the chamber. Wear masks with respirators or death will occur within seconds. Once chemical is released, evacuate area of all personnel and rendezvous at final coordinates within 21 days.”

Speculation and horror ran through the group.

“This is a joke, right?” Paul was the only one who still didn’t think the government would do something so awful. “Or a mistake?”

Alexa waved at Edward to handle him as she went to help Jacob dig through the other crates. They were doing it carefully now that they knew there were explosives and deadly chemicals here. The other men stayed back.

“Sit down over here and pay attention.” Edward led Paul by the arm to the empty corner of the storeroom. “And be quiet.”

Paul wanted to ask questions, to argue with the orders, but Edward’s scowl discouraged it. Feeling he’d been hit enough, Paul closed his sore mouth. He hated being with these men. They weren’t like him and Alexa.

“It’s here. Both of them, right here together.” Jacob was pale under his scars. “If this blows, the chemicals will be scattered on the wind.”

“Can anyone remove it?”

No one answered her.

Alexa gestured Jacob back. “Leave it alone.”

Billy offered a suggestion that he knew was weak. “We can damage the door. Make it hard to get in here.”

Alexa stared at the medical crate and the cloth satchel thoughtfully. She didn’t want to give away their location to anyone, but it would bother her too much to leave these things out here for anyone to find. They would have to handle whatever came from here. “We’ll take the explosives and burn the rest. Clear out everything that we can use.”

Satisfied the dangerous weapons wouldn’t fall into stupid hands, Alexa’s men quickly piled the new supplies outside the door.

Paul stayed in the corner where Edward had placed him, absorbing the lesson he wasn’t getting. Nearby, Jacob and David were being instructed on prepping a few of the goods they’d found. Paul was memorizing the instructions. Once he’d seen it done, only lack of strength or tools could stop him from repeating the actions. It was another of those gifts that Corbin had exploited.

Alexa looked over as she caught the thought. “Have you learned to pack it?”

“I’ve watched a lot.”

Alexa took pity on him. “Come over here and help with the explosives.”

Paul moved too quickly, once again tripping over his own feet.

Mark was there to grab the man before he fell directly into the gun rack. He directed the cringing scientist toward the more dangerous items. “Slow down! Control yourself.”

Alexa held a pouch out. “Hold this.”

Paul not actually touching anything dangerous sent relief through the room. The group continued their chores as if it were a normal day. For them, gathering supplies, traveling, learning, and occasionally fighting was now their way of life. Each of them enjoyed the quiet and the solitude. Only a bit of their daily time was spent bonding and talking. Alexa was guiding them back to nature, to peace, and they longed for it. Paul was a disruption of everything they’d come for.

Alexa kept Paul’s hands busy while they were inside, then put him to work once they moved outside. Mark and Daniel were on guard duty while the rest of them sorted and packed. Paul was told to close the pouches tightly and nothing else. A simple chore, Billy went behind and secured each carelessly sealed pouch. Couldn’t the scientist get anything right?

Alexa met Billy’s eye for a moment of shared sympathy for the Rabbit. No matter who his group was, he wouldn’t survive. They would do all they

could to keep him alive, but in the end, it would never be enough.

Billy stroked his goatee. “And there’s no way to change that?”

Alexa shook her head, and though she went right back to searching the corn without another word on the subject, Billy knew her mood had taken a hit. She was dwelling on it. Always good with a quick retort, Billy caught her gaze again. “Imagine the havoc he created in a lab.”

Alexa grinned. “It’s what keeps me walking. That, and the wonderful view.”

Before Billy could do more than chuckle, Paul’s loud voice came from the pile of bags and pouches.

“I thrived in the labs! The women used to ask for me.”

Silence came. Then laughter.

Paul reddened, but wasn’t wise enough to stop there. “It’s true. Many of them paid their allotments to have me.”

Now the laughter was uneasy, fading into disapproval.

“You charged prisoners to rape them?” Mark’s tone was icy.

Paul shook his head. “I wouldn’t do that. The women were breeders. It’s all they do. They’re treated well.”

Alexa signaled for the packed pouches to be loaded up. “They’re not treated well, Paul. They’re prisoners.”

The scientist understood their meaning, but he wasn't sure they understood his. "They have to have it once they get pregnant. You know? If not, they get out of control. And we can't sedate them—it interferes with the gifts."

All of them were staring as if he was insane now. Paul shrugged, heading for his kit. "Fine. Whatever."

"You mean they crave physical contact when they're carrying?" David was unable to help himself. Unlike Jacob, David had been the opposite of an abstainer. He'd indulged in the locals, the towns around, and any travelers who'd come through. The last two weeks without had been the hardest part of this quest for him so far.

"It's better than that." Paul smiled. "They have to have it or the offspring won't develop gifts. But it has to be with another descendant. Cases are almost nonexistent where a child develops gifts from only one parent with powers."

Alexa rolled her eyes and went to stand watch. Descendant gifts depended on fate and fate alone. She motioned the two males who were supposed to be doing that duty to go and help load instead. The sooner they got this over with, the sooner she would have her fighters back. Unless the bullets were flying, nothing else distracted a man like talk of sex. They would spend hours comparing notes if left to their own devices.

"What type of scientist were you?" Jacob wasn't interested in the female knowledge as much as the

others—he'd been with Alexa and no other woman would ever be enough for him—but there was still the sense of being lied to. How could this nerd, be a lover boy?

“I supervised several labs.” Paul huffed arrogantly. “The reproductive wing was my side job. I covered Corbin’s research division.”

Billy paused. “Research about descendants?”

“Yes, and their offspring.”

David lifted a brow. “So you assigned partners, took notes. That sort of thing?”

“At first, but for the last year, I’ve been one of the subjects.” Bitterness filled Paul’s voice. “My *father* wanted fresh DNA for his experiments and I had just started showing signs of my lineage.”

It was such an incredible story that all of the men had already dismissed it. There was no way the government had been using Paul for breeding purposes. It was too much to believe.

“You mean you took part in these tests?” Daniel was relieved that Alexa wasn’t angry at the conversation, only impatient. “And they were willing?”

Jacob smirked. “And asked for you?”

“Repeatedly.” Paul stopped another boast as he realized he was being taunted. He grabbed his now refilled kit and swung it over his shoulder. Not ready for the new weight, the kit pulled him over and he went sprawling.

The men burst into fresh laughter. Even Alexa was unable to contain a low chuckle.

Paul went scarlet. He scrambled to his feet, opening his mouth to shout.

Alexa cut him off with a sharp whistle.

“That’s our cue.” Daniel smirked. “Let’s go, *stud.*”

Paul’s lips drew in further, but he did as he was told. They didn’t have to believe him. He had the memories, the skill. If given enough time, he would have Alexa begging for his touch as well.

Edward paused as they prepared to leave. “Aren’t we going in the house?”

Alexa mentally snickered at Paul’s thoughts. “Is it something we need?”

Edward wasn’t sure and didn’t lie. “I don’t know. It has a feeling...”

Alexa concentrated and caught the vibe he was centered on so intently. “*Safe Haven.*”

Edward was glad to have that feeling confirmed. It was faint enough to be doubted.

Alexa led them into the main yard of the house, counting windows and floors to judge the size and possible threats inside. From the wild appearance, they could assume it was empty, but she would never let them treat possible danger that way. To do so now might get them killed later by carelessness.

The house was large. Seven windows with bars over them lined the front of the ranch home and that same wall-covering ivy had grown overtop everything, including water stained birdbaths and garden gnomes. The landscaping implied the people who had called this home had preferred flying pets.

All of them flashed to the vulture on the stairway. Edward and Jacob did a quick scan of their rear and then above them for an ambush.

“Two to the door, two up high.” Alexa got set to fight. She had noticed that the undamaged front door actually had small, deep gouges in it, as if something had tried to get in. That was contrary to the deserted feel. The coolness of battle fell over her mind.

Alexa’s serious attitude told her men what was expected. They hurried into the house like a team of professionals, efficiently clearing each room.

The inside was basic and bare. The walls were stripped, leaving only dust squares, and even the lampshades were gone. Empty of everything that could be burnt for warmth, the lack of furnishings said the residents had tried very hard to survive here. Alexa was sure they would discover fire cans and ash dumps if they searched hard enough. These people had used everything they had to keep warm.

“Things got bad that first year. The winter took a heavy toll.” She moved them on before depressing thoughts and memories could become a distraction.

They went through half a dozen dusty, neglected bedrooms before they moved down the cold hall. It ended in a main room with a huge bed of gray lumps, giving them the feel of being in a low budget horror film. Except, this was real.

As they neared the warped bed, they confirmed that it was a pile of bones, though the skeletons were much bigger than what they were used to.

Alexa paused as flashes of the past burst into horrifying detail in front of her. She could hear the screams, could see the bleeding wild man that she assumed was the ranch protector. She could smell the blood as they tried to tend the huge man's wounds while defending their home.

Alexa came back with a small jerk and looked around, mind automatically comparing it to what she had just witnessed.

Plastic and sheets of metal were over the windows in this room, and over the vents, with caulking and brittle, faded tape over baseboards and cracks in walls. Appliances had been pulled around half the bed to form a barrier. Baskets of long-molded corn sat at the foot of it.

“Did they try to burn the corn for heat?” Jacob was confused.

Alexa didn't answer. Neither of her theories was pleasant, but if she had to pick one, she would say it was intentional. They'd chosen to die of corn poisoning instead of starvation, freezing, or being eaten by predators.

Alexa gestured to the next set of plastic curtains.

Edward and Mark rushed through with guns out.

“Clear here.” Mark wrinkled his nose at the strong odor of rotten corn.

Alexa quickly scanned the kitchen. It wasn't very large, but it felt that way by how empty it was. No table and chairs, no cabinets on the walls. Only dusty squares proclaimed that life had once existed in this place. The floor did sport a rug—a shabby,

circle carpet only a few feet in size. It had faded to glare dingily. Even the walls were hostile, carrying gouges and holes that had been filled with what smelled like toothpaste.

“They tried so hard. We’ll honor that by not burning it down.” She narrowed in on the floor, the sole surviving rug. “See what’s down there.”

The shabby rug made a loud ripping noise when they tore it up. The carpet, like many other items, had molded to the surface it had spent so long covering.

“A tunnel.” Edward dangled down by his big arms and Mark’s strong grip.

Alexa allowed herself a moment to enjoy her men. They were beautiful to watch in action. “Describe it.”

“Used to be a sewer or maybe a storm drain. There’s an old rope-n-ladder set, but the rope’s pretty frayed. Can’t see much beyond a pile of bones and a stack of crates that I wouldn’t put a feather on.”

“Water? Wildlife?” Alexa waited, body flashing need that bled through her tones.

“No, to both. Doesn’t even look damp for being a tunnel. You want me to drop down and scout it?”

“No.” Alexa felt the temperature in the room rise. “I have other duties for you.”

Both males felt her warm regard and moved her way without waiting for the invitation. What she wanted was clear and they were willing. It was

something each man had already decided he could tolerate or better.

Alexa tugged the plastic back over the doorway.

Daniel grinned as he realized what was going on. Her moments of need usually came at night when they were camped, but it wouldn't be the first time that she'd stolen a moment during the day. He signaled to Jacob; the males left the house.

Outside, David and Billy took the news the same way—they were amused and the tiniest bit jealous.

There was silence as the guards and their guest tried to hear what was going on inside that kitchen. Even the corn was suddenly quieter.

Billy caught Daniel's attention. "Up high?"

Daniel was glad for the excuse to stop thinking about it. He was so hard that he could barely walk. "Good idea. One roof, one tree?"

The two men settled in, leaving the three rookies to suffer through the torture of listening and not reacting. It wasn't as if they could sneak off to take care of it. The top men out here had already experienced that hell. Making camp had been greatly anticipated, with early goodnights given so hands could be filled.

David and Jacob were tormented, especially David, who hadn't been used yet. Jacob hadn't been touched again since his joining ceremony, but at least he had the memory. It was rough on him and the woman loving blacksmith. For Paul, it was demoralizing. Alexa was showing him that she

didn't want the future he could provide, that these wild men were what pleased her. The Rabbit's jealousy was loud.

Back inside the kitchen, things were nearing their peak. Alexa's groans and gasps were a perfect torment to the hurting, sweating males. She opened her legs wide as a climax burst through her.

Edward went first, gentle and respectful, remembering to pull out at the final moment.

Mark took his place with a cry of devotion that echoed to those outside. The Convict took advantage of the moment and stroked his rough hands down her long braids, skin tingling. He tangled his hands in them and lowered his mouth to hers eagerly.

Alexa twitched in satisfaction as Mark pounded, fighting the urge to hold him close when he too backed away. It was a woman's duty to accept that offering and nourish it, but she would have no children with these men. The quest came first.

The trio recovered without speaking, fixing clothing while sharing stares of contentment. They weren't bound by the old rules. There was no one to hide from, so there was no shame to ruin the moment. They emerged happy, ready to continue on their quest.

Alexa took the lead after a rare smile at the waiting males.

Feeling her pleasure was a balm to the small jealousy that remained in her men. Mark and Edward had pleased her. That was good. Too often, they all felt like she was disappointed in them. It was a relief to have a few moments free of that heavy weight.

Mark felt a bit differently about the moment. He'd felt Alexa's pause, that brief instant where she'd almost pulled him deeper instead of wasting his seed. It had made his heart thump and his mind race. What would a child with Alexa be like? He'd never had that happy family life that some of the other cons had talked about incessantly. He'd never missed it, until now. A life with Alexa was wonderful. It was why he was here. He'd never been more alive, more useful, more deadly, but to have the dream that had been stolen from him was an impossibility that he tried not to dwell on during moments like this. That was his old life. Now, there was only the quest and these magical moments. It would be enough.

Alexa was aware of Mark's slight discontent, but she didn't do anything about it except to send him to set fire to the storeroom. Facing this world, these new ways of living, was hard for all of them. Mark would do his duty and then some, and be happy with it all in the end. Alexa planned to handle the futures of all of her fighters when this quest was finished. It was what they deserved if they survived—a life of love with a deserving female

chosen from Safe Haven's loyal herd. What more could a man ask for?

5

"Those bones were big." Paul was finally finished with sulking. He'd chosen to view the kitchen moment as proof that Alexa needed to be serviced by one of her own kind. She hadn't needed a nap or even a rest after being with both men. They weren't enough to satisfy a woman like her.

"They were giants." Alexa motioned Edward to cover their rear. "Would you hear the story?"

She was clearly in a good mood. Daniel answered quickly. "Yes."

Alexa began to roll a smoke, slowing a bit to keep from spilling it. "Giants prefer the cold. They stay in the mountains as much as they can. With their rocky skin and hulking forms, they blend rather well despite being so large."

Paul frowned. "You're talking like they exist."

Alexa adjusted their path to the north by a bit. "When I was little, I stayed in the mountains for a year and learned how to survive there. Giants were great training tools."

Not sure if they quite believed it, no one spoke.

"Honestly, my pets. Giants are the Bigfoots of old world legends. They're no mystery, simply a race that prefers to be left alone. They don't even usually stay with a mate for more than a few years.

It's rare to have an entire family down here. Very curious."

Now there were plenty of questions.

"So they were real? Why didn't we take any of the dust from them?" Billy ignored his growling stomach.

"There's no demand." Alexa motioned them to eat while they walked. "People are still like Paul. They don't believe giants exist."

Billy looked over. "Does the dust have power?"

"Oh, yes, very much so, but not the good kind. Much like trolls, giants are a cursed species. Their ashes can be used for all sorts of dark spells that such as us will never have contact with."

It was a relief to hear.

"What could have killed a giant?" Jacob lifted his chin proudly. "Besides us, I mean."

"Didn't you smell the corn?" Mark had brewed enough homemade alcohol in his day to know that answer. "The fumes can be deadly."

Alexa filled them in. "Giants die as easily as any other creature. They are large and rough, but they're also primitive and slow—another thing that makes this family unique."

"Do you have a theory?" Billy did. He wanted to compare.

"They were *too* different. They were probably forced out by their own kind for being advanced."

Billy nodded. *My thought, exactly.*

Distracted by his disbelief, Paul started to argue and forgot to be careful. An old watering trough

sticking up from a pile of moldy stalks caught his boot as he tried to step over it instead of going around. He fell forward onto the pile of rotting wood, sending noise through the peace.

Alexa sighed, still warm and tingling. She ignored it instead of handing out a punishment that would have been wasted on Paul. The fire from the storage room would attract a lot of attention anyway. The enemy knew they were here from her shot at the corpse child, and the fire would narrow the location, but the enemy wouldn't know exactly where her group was by the time they tracked those signs. Paul's clumsiness wouldn't get them killed right now. Only time would tell about later.

The fighters doublechecked to be sure they weren't adding any noise.

Edward reluctantly dropped back to where Paul was to help him do the same. Despite his good mood, he still loathed being saddled with the scientist and part of the reason why was having to do this. He'd checked, repacked, and tightened everything Paul had, but half of it was loose again from the man getting into things and not putting them away correctly. He'd done it by the book for Alexa, though he hadn't sealed the pouches correctly, which meant he could have taken care of his own gear the same way, but he didn't care enough to.

Paul did as he was shown without speaking, not even to say thanks. He was still stinging in places from his falls and from the blows that he'd taken.

He was ready for Alexa to call it a night so that he could cry himself to sleep.

Angered by the thought, Alexa glared at him over her shoulder, then switched into a full run.

Not sure what had flipped her into anger, only sure who had caused it, the others shoved by Paul to catch up, each one pushing him back to the ground as he rose.

Paul realized he hadn't been shielding his thoughts. "Why can't I get it right?!"

"That's what we'd all like to know." Edward jerked the scientist into position and started slapping him on the shoulders to make him run.

Chapter Two
The First Night

1

The afternoon had been hot, with no breeze to be had except for the one made in passing. Everyone was relieved when Alexa finally stopped running. It had been especially hard on Edward, who had again been forced to scoop Paul over his shoulder to keep from being left behind. The pair had traveled that way for hours.

Alexa led her tired men toward the only tree they could see in any direction. The wide cottonwood was moldy and light on leaves, but surviving—much like the people left in this broken country. They were alive despite massive damage and low faith. It was a testament to the strength and the tenacity of life in any form.

Edward dumped the drowsing scientist on the ground, angry. He moved to a guard position that was as far away from Paul as he could get. The smells of neglect were rank, but his rage was flickering dangerously. Paul snoring and drooling while being carried like a baby was a huge insult to the honor of this group. The scientist had to go. Edward was now determined to see that happen, to help it along.

“That hurt!” Paul had been having a wonderful daydream about being a king who was carried everywhere.

Alexa gestured curtly, good mood long gone. “We’ve made too much noise to go further without paying for that mistake. We’ll make an early camp and be on our way before dawn.”

Paul wisely kept his mouth shut about the early rising, but he couldn’t ignore the more pressing concern. “We’re sleeping here? Not in a barn or something?”

Edward scowled across their small area. “Shut up.”

Paul argued anyway. “But I’ll be in the bathroom area in your tent again. I get pissed on in there!”

Alexa knelt by Paul’s feet and used her knife to scrape away the thick, stinking layers of moldy tassels on top of the soil. Under it was a layer of squirming, crawling, fleeing insects and spiders that sent Paul leaping back in disgust.

“Ugh!”

“You can sleep outside if you prefer.” Alexa covered the queasy mess of bugs.

Paul was pale except for two furious red cheeks.

Alexa gestured toward the clear area next to where her men knew she wanted their tent erected. “There’s room for your own canvas, Paul. We made sure you have one. If you insist on being with us at all times, you’ll tough it out in whatever way you can.”

Paul dropped his head as the other men shook theirs. He would rather be pissed on than put up his own shelter each night. What was he doing out here with them?

When Alexa motioned to the spot beneath the tree, her two rookies hurried to get things set up. It was rare that Alexa stopped before the sun sank. Both men hoped she might spend some of that free time with them talking. They'd agreed to come along without asking the thousands of questions they had, but with the Rabbit here, Alexa was forced to be even stricter on her rules as an example to prevent her group from growing lazy. To get the answers they wanted, the rookies had begun to direct Paul into the questions, setting him up for the punishment they would have gotten.

"I'll be back. Stay here."

Mark went with her anyway, being careful not to get in the way when she began a patrol of the area. He trailed her quietly, listening to the wind moan through the nasty stalks that surrounded them. *This place is bad news.*

Alexa agreed with his thought. "Yes, it is and we're only at the edge. Deeper, it'll be worse."

Mark didn't doubt that. From blackened vegetation to huge insects that they'd been crunching under their boots all morning, there was nothing to indicate an improvement was coming. Mark pushed that away for the moment. "I'd like to talk to you about something that's bothering me. Is there a time when we can have a few minutes?"

“Now.” Alexa didn’t stop her patrol.

Mark got closer before speaking. “I’m worried. One of our group might be sick.”

Alexa snorted at his carefully thought out setup. “Get on with it.”

“If we lose one of our group, what happens to the rest of us?”

Alexa wasn’t to be humbled or reached by guilt. “What do you want?”

“To help you.”

“Then do your job. Leave me to do mine.”

Mark frowned. “That’s only going to work for so long.”

Alexa spun around to admonish him and found a hard countenance that she couldn’t lie to. She stepped around instead. “Mind your words, Convict.”

Mark didn’t even wince. He’d heard worse, and he knew she didn’t mean it. Anger was Alexa’s defense, one that she insisted upon hiding behind whenever one of them called her on something and refused to back down. It worked as much as they allowed it to. After this run, it wouldn’t fly at all.

Alexa knew that, but she couldn’t have them worrying over her health instead of catching important details. She loved these men. She wasn’t going to sacrifice them just for herself. Only for Adrian would she ever trade their lives.

Mark followed her to their camp and took a spot beside Edward, covering the opposite direction.

“Any luck?”

Mark shook his head once.

Edward sighed. They hadn't expected her to cooperate, but it still would have been nice.

Picking up the thought, Alexa turned a hard glare on both men. "Mark and Edward will cook. Paul will help."

Not likely. Mark moved that way without complaint. At least between him and Edward, tonight's meal would be decent.

Edward stiffened at the punishment, but sucked it up to do as he'd been told.

Paul approached them slowly.

Edward nearly growled. "Just watch!"

Mark quickly directed Paul toward learning to build the fire. "Hand me the logs. You remember that we collect and carry our own wood, right?"

Edward pulled things from his kit, not speaking to either of them. He was the one sulking now, and the other males understood. If they were unofficial second in command and been reduced to cook and babysitter, they would have gotten upset, too.

Alexa didn't care for their emotions, only their willingness to follow. She also wasn't worried about Edward recanting his loyalty. He was hers.

"I'm going to have another look around. *Alone.*" She vanished into the corn.

All seven men stared after her in concern.

Alexa didn't plan to go far, but she had to escape for a moment. She hated to discipline her men, especially Edward. They could never be allowed to see how much she wanted to take it back.

“Is she okay?”

Paul’s question drew immediate scorn.

“She’s fine!”

“None of your business.”

“She’s more than okay.”

Paul flushed at their hostility. It said he had no idea what he was getting into, but they didn’t understand who he had been. Healing descendants was also on his resume.

“Paul, why are you with us?” Daniel didn’t plan to waste their time alone with the man. “You don’t fit. Why come?”

“I do fit. I’m like her!”

Standing next to the loud scientist, Mark roughly slapped his hand over the man’s mouth. “Quiet!”

Paul cringed down until his face was no longer in contact with Mark’s big hand. “Okay!”

“What do you mean you’re like her?” Daniel found it hard to believe.

“I’m a descendant. I have her blood.”

“No way.” Edward didn’t hide his contempt. “You couldn’t be more different.”

“She had Adrian! I had no one.”

“She has the fire inside, the drive to survive. You don’t.” Jacob pinned him with an ugly stare. “Why are you really here?”

Paul fell silent as the men all glared at him.

“You will tell us.” David didn’t feel bad for threatening the weak man. “All of it.”

Daniel pointed. “We’ll get it from you in any way that we have to.”

Billy added his support. “Nothing will ever come between us and the quest. You better tell us now.”

Realizing he was trapped, Paul huffed out a reply they weren’t expecting. “I need the time with her so she’ll mate with me and continue our line.”

Five of the listening men barely contained chuckles. The other stood up and rushed toward Paul.

“Wait! Stop! It’s what destiny says has to—”

Edward jerked Paul up by the front of his coat, lifting the scientist off the ground. He held him there. “You’re not good enough for her!”

To their surprise, Paul shoved free and caught himself before he hit the ground. “Slam you, snob!”

The name took Edward by surprise and he didn’t retaliate. *Snob? Me?*

Paul took up a sloppy copy of the fighting stance the other men used during training lessons. “Come on, then!”

This time, loud laughter rang out.

It drew immediate attention from the blood-soaked fields that hated any form of happiness. Anger rumbled through the ground.

Alexa knew it would be upon her men before she could get to them. A sharp whistle sounded a

second later; she returned the call, bringing them to her.

The rumble grew louder and the corn shook, but Alexa didn't sense an honest threat until she heard the light boots of her men. They were being chased.

Something roared, sending her into full battle mode. "Here!"

Edward, with Paul over his shoulder, came into view first. He dropped the scientist at her feet and drew his gun.

All of the men surrounded Alexa, mindful about her words of creatures.

The roar grew louder as the threat neared. Whatever they'd drawn sounded angry.

Corn moaned and fat black crows with sharp red talons rose noisily into the air as the ground buckled in front of them.

"Jump!"

Everyone but Paul leapt over the furrow of dirt shifting their way.

Edward snatched him off the ground as it collapsed, shoving him aside.

"Thanks!"

The ground roared again at the sound of a human voice.

Alexa took off running, drawing the danger.

Her men followed, with Paul stumbling along last.

Alexa stopped suddenly and dropped to her knees. Her knife replaced the gun in her hand. She stabbed the ground mercilessly.

Her men thought to join her, but it was already over. The ground ran red, though not with her blood, the males were happy to see.

Alexa motioned Edward forward, keeping her knife out and body in close position in case it wasn't dead.

Edward used his feet to kick away the dirt. He cleared enough of it for them to determine their attacker was a big mole.

At first glance, the mole looked albino, but Alexa realized it was gray fur where the black should have been. The teeth were long and jagged on the ends, like a pair of dentures that had been used for chewing rocks. Larger than a dog, it had only a stub for a tail and claws that gave them all a creepy feeling.

"That's a grandmother or something, right?" Daniel noted nervously. "Should we be on the lookout for the family?"

"I doubt it." Alexa stood up. "It's ancient even by mole years. This is a remnant of the old world, my pets."

"And the cleanup crew is already on the way." Edward pulled Paul back.

They all looked over to find a long line of large ants coming toward them from a wide hole in the ground. Centered between two rows, the hole was shaped like a volcano instead of the cone anthills they'd known from right after the bombs fell. The ants had almost disappeared within a year of the

war. This many of the big mutations in one place was uncommon.

The ants were the size of a small boot and healthy. They marched along without struggling, going over and around the piles of moldy stalks that covered the ground. Their antennae twitched continuously, scenting the air for trouble.

The fighters stared in fascination. The ants were a part of the old legends, one that few of them had believed in.

“I thought they were all gone.” Paul’s loud voice traveled to the ants. The entire line of hungry insects came to a slow stop.

The fighters got set to battle, most of them thinking this was a better challenge to their new skills, since the mutated ants were much smaller than a human target.

“Wait.” Alexa stopped the battle as she spied something familiar. “Look at their formation.”

The ants had spread out and were now in the same V that Alexa used for fighting.

“Safe Haven.” Jacob kept his voice soft so he didn’t trigger a fight that didn’t have to happen. He actually liked most of the animals that America now offered, and the ants were something new to him. The west hadn’t seen an ant, big or small, in a long time.

Paul remembered to speak softly. “Corbin didn’t believe those stories. I don’t either.”

Alexa rotated a finger and her men got into the matching formation, leaving Paul to stand by himself.

Edward studied them. “They’re all soldiers here. Maybe the females are in the nest?”

Alexa shrugged. “Or out hunting and fighting. Women are not required to hide in their holes anymore.”

It was a reminder that Alexa didn’t usually give, but her men had to be aware that females across this country blamed them, and every other walking nutsack for the war. The days of women ruling and men ruling were in full swing, and if her fighters forgot that it could cost them their lives down the road.

The ants were clearly studying them. Paul had no choice but to recognize that fact when the ants switched their formation right in front of him. They became a simple pattern of lines and circles to form a word that all of them were exceedingly familiar with.

“FOOD/”

There was even an attempt to form the question mark at the end.

Alexa clapped in praise that surprised her men. “That’s so good!”

Paul didn’t react. He was frozen in shock.

“Please take this mole.” Alexa retreated a bit to show respect. “You may have anything we kill during our time here, as payment for safe passage.”

The ants in the front were larger than the others, with rougher pinchers and longer antennae that searched the air continuously. The two in the very front of the V were connected at the abdomen, making them appear even more ominous as they came forward to inspect the carcass.

Edward used a soft tone. “Is that a fresh mutation?”

“No, just an old one that has survived longer than the rest, I think.” Alexa was proud of the way her men were holding their positions even though more of the soldier ants were now crawling by their boots.

A simultaneous, piercing call came from the conjoined ants, making Paul flinch.

The waiting ant colony hurried toward the dead mole, chattering eagerly.

Alexa motioned her own group back toward the narrow road in the corn. The jaws on the ants were large and strong. She wasn’t sure if they would have trouble with the insects, but she suspected they’d be forgotten about if they got out of sight quickly.

“That was interesting.” David exhaled as they reached the road. The whole thing felt surreal.

“Yes. I think we stumbled upon a war that the moles have finally lost. Many fates will be decided over the next decade—humanity’s, as well.”

“You mean they’ll go extinct?” Paul was in the rear with Edward.

“We just saw it.” Daniel sneered at the scientist. “*Your* kind has destroyed everything.”

“I’m not like them!” Paul’s voice once again carried.

“Paul?” Edward’s tone was deceptively kind.

“What?”

“What did you do before the war? Before you became Mr. Stud?”

Paul flushed, mouth opening, closing, opening.

“Come on, Paul. What was your civilian job?”

“I didn’t have one. I helped my father before the war.”

Alexa added to the building wall against him. “Helped with what?”

Paul caved under the pressure. “Capture descendants. He liked my toys.”

Jacob stopped to stare in confusion. “Toys?”

“The tracking darts are Paul’s baby.” Alexa’s voice held no rancor. “They’ve always been able to knock us out, but being a descendant too, Paul was able to fill in the missing pieces and provide a way to track us *after* an encounter. It’s quite brilliant.”

“I thought you handled things like the breeders!” Mark automatically blamed Paul for that feeling of helplessness he’d gotten when Alexa had been darted and fallen.

“I told you I worked in several areas.” Paul shrugged. “I followed orders.”

Edward’s anger lashed out. “Oh no, little man. You don’t get to use that excuse. You had the knowledge to help your own kind and you betrayed them!”

“My father was my kind, too!” Paul growled. “You make the choice when you’re eight-years-old and then come talk to me about picking the correct side.”

Surprised into silence, Edward found himself considering that scenario and coming up with exactly the ugly person in front of him. It was unsettling. “Don’t talk to me!”

Alexa suddenly tensed. “Pay attention!”

“Shit!”

Jacob’s softly muttered expletive was followed by the sound of his gun leaving his holster.

“No noise!” Alexa pulled her longest knives from her belt as the shadow of the newest threat loomed over them. They’d run directly into something.

“Is that a—”

Edward sent his elbow into Paul’s jaw, knocking the man down and nearly out.

The giant was disorienting. Feet the size of small sleds and legs like saplings were intimidating. It was the width of three men and shamelessly shuffled through the corn with a huge cock that any of her fighters would have killed to possess. Alexa wasn’t impressed.

The three rookies in her group stood in shock as it charged toward them.

Mark snatched his bow from over his shoulder and grabbed for an arrow, but missed. During his second attempt, the giant’s club swung down.

Mark grunted as Alexa slammed into him, knocking them out of range. “Roll!”

They kept rolling as the club followed them, thudding violently into the dirt where they’d been.

Rows of stalks snapped under the chaos as observing crows cawed encouragement.

Alexa shoved Mark aside and ducked the swing. She darted forward as the scarred giant roared angrily, running between his legs to slice at the backs of both ankles.

The giant fell forward, roaring in rage and pain.

The giant’s agony echoed over the killing fields, but cut off abruptly as Edward and Daniel slit its throat from each side. Blood sprayed in a wide geyser, splattering them all.

Paul opened his mouth to scream, already swiping at the red gore on his chest.

David knocked him back to the ground with a rough elbow. “Shut up!” He spun to scan for the next threat.

Alexa spent a moment listening, feeling the disappointed wind, and then waved her men into a tight guarding position. Paul, still on the ground, she ignored.

Alexa knelt in front of the giant, admiring the beautiful cuts her men had made. The worn collar of slavery that had been around the giant’s thick neck was in pieces at her feet. She took the largest of these, placing it in a pocket of her cloak.

Alexa had Daniel kneel down and boost her onto his shoulders for a higher vantage to look from,

but there was only what she expected at this point into their journey—corn.

Alexa slid down. “If more of those come, we’ll handle it the same way, with Edward doing the first cut. Let’s go.”

Still not understanding that his opinion wasn’t wanted, Paul started to protest.

Mark slapped a bloody hand over his mouth. “Don’t.”

Paul nodded hurriedly, cringing.

Mark shoved him into the front. “Take the lead so we can get away while the other monsters grab you.”

Paul inched forward, terrified.

Alexa allowed the treatment. Having Paul along was exactly what she’d feared it would be—chaos—but it was already too late to turn back.

3

“She’s here.”

“Good. I’m tired of waiting to kill her.”

“Surprised that order came down.”

“Yeah, well, she did wipe out both of Corbin’s squads. Not exactly a textbook case.”

The hired men gathered their things from the wooden platform they’d built in the corn upon arriving a week ago. It blended in with the ugly landscape perfectly.

“She’s late, right?”

“Yeah. It’s the Rabbit. We timed it right. He slowed her down.”

“That’s all he ever did to Corbin, either.”

The three soldiers had been hired guns for so long that they no longer bothered to pretend they were fighting for the government’s right to rule. They’d brought in hundreds of captives for various reasons, but it was still rare to receive a kill on sight order.

“We’ll track her down in no time now. There’ll be signs and sounds from them fighting through this hell.”

The soldiers hadn’t been sure about hearing her, but not long after the single gunshot, they’d heard the roar of a giant and the upset cry of birds. One more sight or sound would be a confirmation that it was Alexa and pinpoint her location. No one else would survive repeated attacks in just hours and keep going.

The three men had been sent on run after run since the war, collecting those wanted by the government. Once they got the needed details, they didn’t bother reading the rest. Descendants, murderers, rebel leaders—they’d been sent after some of the worst people they’d ever known, but not one of them had been female. Alexa would be the first woman they’d taken this way and that challenge, along with the boost in reputation, had been enough to keep them waiting as long as it took.

The trio finished gathering their things and then settled onto the platform to wait for the next sign. If

none came, they would leave at dawn and try to track down the remains of whomever it had been. Base had said to be certain, and they intended to be.

“Ambush odds?”

“Low. We haven’t made a noise in days.”

“But the gifts—”

“She may feel something if she gets close to where we are, but as long as we stay down and still, we’re good. Now shut up. We don’t want to blow this, right?”

There was silence in response. This would be the biggest job they’d ever pulled off—one to make a person’s career. No mistakes or excuses would be allowed.

“Over there.”

Smoke was slowly winding up from a place in the distant corn to the south. A campfire in these fields was so rare that it had to be a descendant. Only a magic user would be so bold.

The three men rose. It was time to go.

4

Their camp hadn’t been disturbed. The giant had been drawn to the sound of them running toward Alexa.

They all quickly cleaned up. The smell of the hulk’s blood was so sweet that it was nauseating. Once finished, the group resumed what they’d been doing, but this time they all kept track of Paul to make sure he was quiet.

Alexa was sure that their location had already been pinpointed.

“When should we expect them?” Edward was stirring a pot of rice and beans.

“Not tonight.” Alexa was pleased with him. “They’ll watch first, maybe wait until dawn. It’s the way slow thinkers work.”

“What’s a slow thinker?” Paul earned more frowns for missing the obvious answer.

“*Your* kind.” Jacob sneered. “Those who can’t remember the rules, let alone come up with ideas of their own.”

Paul lowered his voice. “I don’t get it.”

“Slow thinkers never do anything differently, but still expect a change.” David glared from his post. “They follow the book and die out in the real world.”

Paul grumbled, arms crossing. “Not everyone can be a hero.”

“Yes, they can.” Alexa’s hard tone sent silence through her group. She signaled for the meal to be served.

Alexa listened to the new sound of paws padding outside their fire line, but she didn’t feel enough hate coming from the predators to worry over it yet. Nature here seemed to be as sparse as people were and Alexa had shown that they were capable of defending themselves. If the vibes changed, so would her reactions.

“We will reach a station tomorrow. There may be other travelers there.” Alexa gestured for Edward to explain so she could take a bite.

Edward kept serving while he talked. “There are groups sometimes. People gather and wait. When there’s enough, they try to cross a dangerous area. It’s the Herd Defense. They figure the more travelers, the greater their own odds of not being picked off during the crossing.”

“They’ll need our caliber and want to hire us. That is not allowed.”

Jacob frowned toward Alexa at her words. “We offer, right?”

“Yes, if we feel they deserve such an honor, but we are already on a quest. It would take a lot to detour me from our current mission.”

Paul tried to keep up with the conversation as he waited for his share of the food. “And that is?”

“To survive. Fate has set our path through Nebraska. We will not go around.”

“Is there another problem here?” Mark felt it even though he hadn’t placed it yet. “Beyond the obvious?”

“There is more than one. The biggest we’ll face is the House in the Corn.”

The ominous silence after those words told Alexa they’d heard the rumors.

Edward caught the subtle gestures of his fellow teammates and cleared his throat. “You’d have us challenge the Master of that haunted house?”

“No, my pets.” Alexa scooped up another bite, tone brutal. “I’d have you *kill* the Master of the house and burn that evil residence to the ground.”

Each man there found an immediate desire to give her both of those things, but Edward was the only one who felt comfortable expressing that emotion. “Then that’s what you shall have.”

Edward and Mark finished serving the meal that neither of them had trusted Paul to deliver, then did a quick cleanup before eating. When everyone was done, the two men would wash the dishes and repack the supplies.

“Do you feel like telling a story?”

Alexa was almost shocked that Edward would ask. Her tales came when she chose to tell them, not when her fighters desired one. They were not for entertainment. Alexa was set to deliver a punishment, but she chose to handle it differently than her man was braced for. He would still pay, only in a different form. “Did you have one in mind?”

Edward knew from her tone that he’d crossed a line, but it didn’t make him back down. If anything, he was now free to push a bit more because he already knew he was in trouble. “Anything about you. We all crave it.”

Paul opened his mouth...

Mark tossed his entire bedroll, dirt and all, into the man’s face. “Shut up!”

Paul scrambled away, swiping and coughing.

Alexa took another bite of the deer goulash. It was a very good meal for traveling. She knew the richness of it had been done to please her. She couldn't be softened with little luxuries like they could, but it didn't stop them from trying. "So this was planned?"

"We're curious." David stayed ready to run or duck.

Daniel smiled, hoping charm would help their cause. "And you tell us so little about yourself."

Jacob chose to whine. "We only want a little more."

Alexa held up a hand and got quiet. This wasn't the time or place for this, but then honestly, when would that time ever come? It's not as if she had any plans on taking a break until the quest was finished. "Fine. I'll tell you a story about me every night that we spend in this corn."

Edward heard her tone and braced. "The punishment?"

She smiled cruelly. "I'm going to sleep with Paul each of those nights."

Paul glowed with happiness while her fighters bristled in anger that they couldn't express. She'd said sleep. If they pushed her, she might actually accept him into her body and then he'd be one of them.

"That wouldn't make me one of you." Paul tried to rub it in that he had gifts like Alexa. "I won't ever be."

"No. That's not your fate, is it?"

Paul wouldn't look at her. "No, it's not, but I still matter as much as they do!"

Alexa sighed patiently and finished her food. When she was done, she rolled a smoke and kept it to herself, making them use their own supplies if they wanted one. It was another way to show that she was displeased, but they knew it wasn't true anger, only annoyance. None of them wanted to find out what she would do if pissed.

Each man got comfortable, anticipating the story to come.

"Remember that you asked for this."

The fighters were already expecting ugliness. It was Alexa. How could it be pretty and fit her?

"I was born in captivity. My mother died during my birth, so I was told. My kind doesn't reproduce easily, if at all."

"Your kind?" Paul scowled. "Don't you mean *our* kind?"

"Female. Males spread their DNA throughout the population at will because it is in their design. Female descendants are fragile. Mixed births take a toll."

Jacob frowned. "Why?"

"Perhaps Paul would like to tell us what Corbin suspected in those areas."

Flushing a bit, Paul remembered to keep his voice down. "It's because the magic side fights constantly with the human side. There can't be peace like that, no health."

"Do you believe that?"

“No.” Paul stared at her. “I think a descendant child requires more power, more energy from the mother. Simple.”

Alexa nodded. “That makes sense. I’ve often wondered.”

It was odd to think of Alexa being curious about her origins.

She smirked. “Like you own the rights to curiosity.” She rolled a second smoke, something she rarely did.

They waited silently for her to go on.

“I stayed in the same lab until I was five. Then I was transferred to a testing wing.”

None of them wanted to hear those details, but no one interrupted.

“There were a lot of kids. We could all do things, but we weren’t allowed to unless we were in the lab rooms. If you used your gifts or broke a rule, the punishments were harsh. We obeyed, mostly. There were a few times where we banded together to get something we needed, like when we had to have medicine for one of the smaller kids. He’d been sneaking outside at night to play in the damp grass and gotten a cut that became infected. If we’d taken him to the nurse, he’d have been put to sleep.”

“Put to sleep?” David frowned. “Like when they caught you after the war?”

“Killed, like an animal.” Alexa’s voice was shakier than they were used to. “We got one warning and then one punishment usually, but being out of the lab unsupervised was the worst crime we

could commit.” Alexa looked into the fire. “We were caught, plenty of times. I tried to take the punishments or draw their anger, but I was valuable. I didn’t realize they were using me that way, keeping me there, until I got out.”

“Until Adrian came for you.” Paul said the name with awe.

“He sent a group of his men to break us all out. I was taken to an island. The other kids were sent to relatives and friends, I’ve heard, but I didn’t see any of them again. I was nine then.”

Edward took a fast look around. The feeling of being stalked had grown. “How long did you stay on the island?”

“Three years. In that time, I learned who I was, who my father was to the future, and the fate of the world. It was a long time ago, but I can still hear my tutor telling me that my father would save the world.”

Daniel smiled. “He was right.”

Paul shook his head. “If we can find him, he can’t change this mess. We can only stay where he is and enjoy his light.”

“You haven’t met my father. There isn’t anything he can’t do.”

“When did you leave the island?”

“When did you meet your dad for the first time?”

“Why did he leave you here after the war?”

Alexa raised a brow. “Pick one of those.”

The fighters exchanged glances and answered together, “Why did he leave you?”

Alexa stood up. “Because he loves his humans more than his only daughter. He would do anything to keep them alive. As would I.”

Alexa dropped down next to Paul in the pleased silence, and felt the good mood change to dread and regret.

“Take off your coat.”

Paul hurried to comply.

“And those pants. The shirt as well.”

Paul slid out of his clothes with bright red cheeks; the sounds of the other men grunting and snorting kept him a wreck. How was he supposed to do it with an audience of men who were all bigger and meaner than he was?

“On your side.”

When Paul would have rolled toward her, Alexa shoved him the other way. “Not until you’ve washed. You stink.”

Understanding she’d made him remove the clothes for the smell, the other males felt better and also tried to settle down for sleep.

Paul wasn’t about to miss his chance to accomplish a goal. He scooted into Alexa’s warm embrace and pushed against her without hesitating. “My back’s comfortable.”

Alexa started to refuse, then sighed. “What the hell.” She collapsed across his body, soaking up his heat.

Paul moaned in delight.

Six heads popped up in perfect unison.

“You can draw from me.”

Paul’s open offer shamed the others. None of them had found the courage to give her such power over them yet.

“My thanks.” Alexa’s mouth lowered to his shoulder. “It has been long and long since I took from my own kind.”

Alexa’s hand snaked around his mouth as her new fangs drove into his skin.

Paul screamed against her hand. Alexa tightened her grip, drinking.

Paul tried to fight the sensation of Heaven and Hell hitting at the same time, but he quickly sagged in her grip, lost in her glow.

Jacob scowled. “Lucky bastard.”

Close enough to view what was really happening, Edward shrugged. “If you say so.”

Alexa slowly withdrew her fangs and ran a light finger over the puncture wounds, healing them. “Paul?”

Paul roused himself. “Yes, my love?”

“I’m not satisfied.”

Paul shuddered. “Again, then. I’m ready.”

Alexa drove her teeth into his other shoulder with a brutal lunge.

Paul screamed against her hand again. She drew harder and he arched in her grasp, a slick, fiery heat that she could have drowned in. Alexa slowly withdrew, healing the marks again.

“Will that help you? Hold it back for a while?”

Alexa nodded against his skin, shivering as his blood raced through her. “Yes. My thanks, Paul. You’ve bought me time.”

Paul snuggled into her embrace. “Then it was worth it. Thank you for bringing me, even if it was only for the medicine in my blood.”

Alexa laid her cheek on his shoulder. “Close your eyes. Enjoy the time you have left.”

She didn’t have a watch posted, telling them she didn’t feel the need to waste two men simply to confirm what they already knew—they were surrounded. They would sleep while they could and face the enemy when they chose to attack. Alexa could have barricaded them into a dirt row and started the fighting, but she wanted the herding they were about to get. It would put them with the rest of the travelers faster and allow her to evaluate their chances of actually surviving this trip before attempting it. The killing fields hadn’t earned their reputation by being merciful and they’d already revealed their presence here too many times in a single day. Hiding wasn’t going to be their strength.

“I don’t want to die. What should I do?” Paul’s low, pitiful query was met by a thoughtful pause where all the males tried to imagine making a stand or fighting on the run while trying to keep the Rabbit alive.

Alexa gave him the truth. “Go back come the dawn. The odds are low for your survival.”

Paul didn’t say anything else, but he made no plans to leave. He’d chosen his path and with Alexa

drowning on his back, there was nowhere else on earth he'd rather be, except in Safe Haven.

As the others began to snore softly, Edward and Daniel rolled toward each other and held a conversation with their hands. Alexa's training was useful in many ways.

She's softening toward us.

Yes, I agree.

We'll all come through this.

I'm not worried.

I meant Paul. She'll protect him now.

You think so?

I'd bet on it.

Edward grinned. *I won't take odds against you.*

They paused for a moment, and then Daniel asked what he'd been worrying about. *Being bit by the baby made her sick, didn't it?*

Edward nodded slowly. *Yes. I think so.*

What can we do for her?

Edward hated the answer. *Feed her or try to kill her. It's the only two choices we have.*

We lose Safe Haven if she dies.

More than that. We lose the future that Adrian will provide. She has to live and if it takes blood, well, I've got plenty.

Daniel didn't have anything to say after that.

Chapter Three
Follow the Smell

1

“**H**ello in the camp!”

Alexa’s men were on their feet in seconds, bleary-eyed, but ready to fight. The dull orange sun was just rising through the haze, barely illuminating the foggy campsite and moaning corn. Alexa was nowhere to be seen.

“Hello? Comin’ in!”

Edward quickly traced Alexa’s faint tracks to the cottonwood tree, discovering furiously waiting Colts. He tried not to smirk as he faced the strangers coming cautiously through the corn. There was no doubt about who it was. Even Paul knew the government had left them alone too long.

Edward wondered who would be the next of their group to find Alexa. Certainly not the hunters who’d come for her.

Mark’s chuckle echoed, and then the rest of the senior team joined him. David and Jacob didn’t discover the source of the amusement, but the two rookies wouldn’t have laughed anyway. They were still too green, too nervous to shove aside those volatile emotions like the senior men were able to do. They settled for still and silent, ready to kill.

None of them noticed Paul staring at the hunters in recognition and hatred. He'd seen these men, had handled the captives they brought in, and listened to the awful stories. He was looking forward to watching them die.

“Don't shoot. We're not a threat.”

Fingers tightened on triggers in response. Alexa had told them that anyone who claimed not to be a threat after surviving in the wastelands of Afterworld was a liar. The sight of their company did nothing to dispel the black mark that had been given for the lie. The three men wore their gun belts low, holsters scuffed and cracked from constant exposure, and the half buttoned white shirts under long coats said they didn't care much about safety or blending. These men might also be hardasses.

“What brings you around here, strangers?” Edward drew their attention, thinking the males were probably true killers. It was the one way that his kind wasn't enslaved. A man could be free if he had the sand to fight for it repeatedly. The women now took what they wanted and if that meant stalking for months or even years, they did it. Men were slaves, soldiers, or gunfighters, with few exceptions.

These men carried their guns on the outside of their coats, hats slanted low to hide scheming faces. These were bounty hunters and Edward was glad of it. These hired guns usually ran alone, which meant there wouldn't be a squad of soldiers nearby setting up an ambush. *That comes later.* Edward was

beginning to filter things the way Alexa did to come up with her answers. It was exhilarating. “What do you want?”

Randolph had been relying on Paul’s darts and the fear of his reputation to make the men cower before him. He respected only his main target, and even that was the barest amount. “We’re just out visiting.”

The hunters snickered.

Edward was offended. “You’ll all die here.”

Randolph didn’t scan the single large tree behind Alexa’s men. No one used them anymore because of the rashes caused by the mold. He spit a wad of nasty juice at Edward’s boots as the other bounty hunters sneered and leered. “Where’s your leader, little man?”

“Don’t talk to him like that!”

Paul’s order brought snorts from the bounty hunters.

Randolph held up a hand. “I’m sorry, Rabbit. Perhaps you’d like to answer the question.”

Alexa’s men exchanged angry glances. The hunters knew Paul. Who was this loud man she’d allowed along?

“Yes, I will.” Paul stared coldly. “She’s in the tree.”

Alexa’s colts crashed as the three men finally spotted her.

She hit Randolph in the throat, sending him to his knees with hands coming up for futile protection. Her next two shots came so close

together that there was hardly a pause. Neither of Randolph's men got off a shot. Not coming into the camp with their guns already drawn had hurt them.

Jacob smiled softly as the bodies slid to the ground. "Amazing."

"Agreed." Edward went to the large cottonwood. Alexa had shown them how to make a lotion from bone dust that they only had to apply once to get rid of mold rashes. They didn't fear the trees. It was a powerful advantage to have. "Good morning."

Alexa rolled her eyes before scanning her men, the bodies, and then the corn as she reloaded. She also noted Paul's satisfied face. "Climb up and snooze. My shots will echo."

Realizing more threats might be coming, her men quickly gathered their things and cleared the ground of prints so that it would appear they had vanished.

Alexa wasn't sure if anyone else would come. The masters of the dead men might assume their hunters had won. If so, she could sleep for a while longer. Traveling with Paul was quite tiring.

2

An hour later, Alexa got them moving.

The fighters searched expectantly for the next signs of trouble as the walk began. It was in the clouds that roiled over them, in the stalks that moaned an ominous accompaniment to their boots.

Paul was the only one who didn't notice it, but even he was quieter than usual. Edward assumed it was from Alexa taking blood. He kept his anger to himself. He didn't like Paul at all.

The path they were on gradually grew wide enough for three of them side-by-side. Alexa signaled them into the protection formation, but the random stalks still required the group to keep stepping out of their line. None of them cared for that. The symmetry Alexa had taught them was sinking in, becoming a natural reaction, and they disliked anything that interfered with staying close to their special leader.

Alexa held up a hand. *Wait.*

Her group stopped.

Edward snatched Paul up by his coat when he didn't.

Paul jerked away and went to stand behind Alexa.

All the other men frowned.

Alexa sniffed the air as her stomach growled. The males caught the scent a moment later and grimaced with the memories. It was a Thanksgiving dinner, a bakery, a fresh market. It was in the ground, the corn stalks, and the grit in the sky. It was Heaven and Hell.

Alexa motioned them to pull their bandanas up. Each of them did, but not before inhaling deeply of that sweet scent, hoping to carry it with them.

Alexa started moving again, feeling her nerves wake, her senses come alive with need. It wasn't

exactly hunger and it wasn't sexual, but it tempted her just the same. She wanted to remove her bandana to stay here and inhale for hours and hours of that...

Alexa snapped around to find only two of her men in sight, both doing exactly what she'd been daydreaming about.

Alexa whistled loudly.

The sound of running boots echoed in response. The other five men, with Paul over Edward's shoulder again, ran into view. Mark and Daniel were retying their wetted bandanas in place. It was the proper response, the one they'd been taught.

"Good idea." Paul shoved free of Edward's grip and clumsily handled his own.

Alexa tried not to be encouraged by him. Paul was a sacrifice and worse, deep down he knew it. His attempts to fit in were for naught.

They traveled steadily east for the next few hours and the smell grew stronger. It swirled into their noses through the cloth, pungent enough to cause stumbles and grumbles.

Alexa wasn't worried yet. That would come later when it was needed. Right now, she kept them moving, occasionally making sure they were all still together. Wandering off into this massive cornfield wouldn't be good.

Their lunch stop was dried meat and fruit, and both tasted like dust compared to the smell of the air. None of them ate much.

Jacob restlessly fingered the cross around his neck. “Do you know what it is?”

“Yes.” Her tone implied there was danger.

“Well?” Paul cringed down when Edward glowered at him.

“A Death Maker is nearby.” Alexa let out a sound of barely restrained impatience at the stares. “They make the undead. That smell lures people in.”

“You mean the walking dead.” Jacob caught on. “And we need to deal with it?”

“Yes. This path goes by one of them and you already know how I feel about going around.”

Her men checked their gear as Alexa lowered her bandana. “Follow the smell.”

Edward approved. “I miss hunting something strong enough to be a real challenge.”

“So do I.” Mark chuckled. “But not the way you mean. I hunt *indoors*.”

Both men shared leers.

Paul stared at them in fear.

Alexa waved Edward his way.

Edward’s good mood vanished like the dusk. “*You* ever hunt anything?”

Paul grimaced. “No.”

Edward growled in frustration. He wouldn’t be able to lead the hunt while babysitting Paul. He’d been robbed of another adventure, another moment of proving himself to Alexa, thanks to the Rabbit.

A sullen group began to track their prey, with Paul and Edward in the rear.

The pungent odor quickly grew stronger. The scent was overpowering, mouthwatering. It was easy to understand how a starving traveler would be lured in. The smell promised a warm hearth and friendly company.

Alexa put the men into a line and carefully made her way through the black brambles that sprang up where none should have been. The thick thorns were designed to draw blood, to weaken, but Alexa and her men were dressed for the road and passed through unharmed. Paul, who'd been given an outfit much like her fighters wore, still managed to scratch his hands.

The fighters reached a small clearing where there were no brambles or corn. They all knelt down on the perimeter when Alexa motioned them to.

A moment later, a woman shuffled into view. She was short and gory, a recent convert to undead. Her empty eyes sent chills over Alexa's men.

Thinking fast, Edward slapped a hand over Paul's mouth, not giving him the chance to make noise.

The woman slid into the shadows of the corn on the opposite side of the clearing. When the next stiff figure came through and there was no attack order, and then three more zombies behind it, the men understood the walking dead weren't Alexa's prey.

“Hunting for me?”

They swiveled in time to be hit with a blast of something blue that sent the two front fighters

flying into the corn. It knocked the others to the ground.

The wizard had once been a man, perhaps one who'd enjoyed dressing up and going to Comic-Con. His pocket protector and faded Fantastic Four shirt were at extreme odds with the hatred coming from his dead eyes. The fighters noted his gray skin was marked with brown spots that appeared to be decaying flesh. He was also becoming undead.

On her ass between the rows, Alexa sent a blur of flames. It knocked the tall, thin man to the ground. He immediately rose and vanished.

“Over here, little toys.” The wizard reappeared. He was behind them all for a second and then gone when Edward lunged.

Already tired of the game, Alexa quickly estimated where the wizard would reappear and was there to have one of her guns at his temple when he solidified.

The man threw up his wrinkled hands in defense, shocked at her victory. He missed Mark coming up behind him.

Alexa met Mark's gaze for a brief second, then gave a curt nod.

Mark grabbed the wizard's head and snapped his neck.

The zombies in the corn moaned in furious rage, drawn their way. As the body fell, they rushed toward Alexa. A large zombie wearing overalls and one cowboy boot swung out to snatch Jacob's arm, mouth opening. The Preacher brought his knife

down on the man's neck as he jerked himself out of the way. The corn turned red.

“Level three blades.”

Paul watched in awful comprehension as the fighters grinned at her order and pulled out long, ugly weapons stained with use. Each of them had something different. Edward and Alexa had serrated grass whips, while Jacob and Daniel preferred curved axes. The other two had landscape sickles with long handles and sharp edges. The shuffling, moaning zombies didn't stand a chance of escaping the fight and as expected, they didn't try.

Alexa swung, sliced, ducked, and switched to the next monster, but inside, it hurt her to end these former humans. They'd been people once and she hadn't forgotten that.

Paul stayed down and still, hoping he wouldn't have to fight, but the undead always preferred easy prey. It was usually the elderly or the kids they attacked to make up for slow wits and even slower reflexes. A cold, hard hand brushed Paul's hair.

He scrambled forward to avoid it, screaming.

The zombie was mostly a skeleton under a checkered dress. Paul continued to scream as she crawled toward him on her remaining knee.

Daniel and Billy stabbed their blades down into skulls and necks. They went to help Alexa, and found five undead corpses at her feet. Edward and Mark were right behind her, handling the half dozen targets that had tried a rear ambush.

Gore splattered over the corn, soaking into the ground under the group. The zombies dwindled to random figures that the group quickly dispatched to the afterlife, all aware of Paul screaming behind them.

As the fight finished, Alexa and her men scanned the corn and the battlefield for more threats.

“Damn.”

They all turned in surprise at Billy’s curse.

Paul had ended a zombie, in his own lap. His computer, which he’d refused to leave, was in pieces. He had used it to shatter the zombie’s skull and save himself.

“Well, ain’t that interesting. Now if he would only learn to be quiet!” Mark glowered at the shaking scientist. “Your screaming would have brought all of them to us if there had been a herd. You’re gonna keep endangering her, Rabbit.”

“Stop.” Alexa didn’t offer Paul comfort, but she halted the coming fight. She was also surprised that the scientist was alive after all the screaming they’d heard, but fate was fate and she wasn’t going to second guess her own choices. It was a sign, though, that he wasn’t supposed to die yet. She motioned Edward to care for him.

While she waited, Alexa ripped the talisman from the wizard’s bloody robe and shoved it into her cloak. She knew her men were curious about the things she was gathering, but they would find out in time. Alexa hated to waste words on something that

would be revealed naturally anyway. She'd inherited that trait from her father.

3

An hour after killing the wizard, they reached a clearing with edges of tall, rusted buildings covered in crow shit. Alexa had timed their arrival at the first waiting station with the longest part of the day, the lazy time when sleep snuck up and stole the ability to react quickly. She waved her men into that tight V formation, and felt them all respond by checking their gear.

In the center, Paul shivered with nervous tension and weariness. The fight with the zombie had worn him out.

“Hello in the camp!”

The station appeared to be an old equestrian farm set in a huge circle, with a dozen wide corrals, barns, and sheds twinkling in the dim morning sun. The vegetation had been pushed nearly ten feet from this weathered circle of civilization, but there were no fences around the gathering point for wary travelers. That was a mistake. The animal tracks the fighters stepped over were fresh, and dangerous in their sizes and quantity.

As the fighters came from the corn, all movement in the station ceased except for heads following their progress. Conversations abruptly stopped and a thick silence replaced them. The sight of Alexa brought immediate flashes of the war and

all its horrors, but also of the legends, of Safe Haven.

The expressions said these people both already loathed and loved Alexa's group. She had a strength that would increase their odds of survival. The strangers wanted to be able to get on the road finally. They'd been here a long time, but the loathing was for the same reason. No one was looking forward to the coming trek, and some were even hoping that she might delay here for a while.

Alexa straightened her shoulders, jaw set in a determined clench. She waited for no one. Her schedules were her own.

The expressions of love and loathing changed to dread and resignation. Stay a few days and rest? Not her. The only question was how soon she would depart.

"Look around, my pets. Remember what you see."

The fighters assumed she meant the people and did as she said, picking out details. In the large center warehouse, Army men went in and out, working. On what, none of them knew yet. In a small shed behind the warehouse, an old woman and her grandkids were resting, obviously depending on the protection of the soldiers who ran this station. In front of the barn was a prep building where a group of slave traders and their guards had ensconced their precious wares. Beside the slave nest was a map scribe bunking in a smaller barn with three gunfighters that he'd likely hired for

protection. They had a prisoner nearby in a wooden wagon cell, shackled and covered with bruises.

In that cell, the thief stared in longing at the playing children, hands clenched into tight fists. Their laughter aroused and repulsed him; it was a very good thing he was in a cell.

Alexa noted that all of the travelers wore thick layers of dark clothes and hats that blended well with the corn. They'd obviously spent enough time here to make a few things to soften the hard trip.

The shed to the left housed three messengers on their way to the government's eastern headquarters with explosive dispatches. All mail carriers now strapped C-4 around their documents and then placed it around their chests. Trying to steal the letters ended in destroyed messages, a dead mailman, and dead thieves.

On the farthest side of the station, three families were going about their daily lives in front of tents and wagons. It took Edward a minute of watching to finish estimating the number of people there. He would spend time later observing each group, judging, getting details to verify his assumptions. "Fifty or so. I expected less."

Billy wiped dust from his arm. "Maybe they heard Lincoln was holding on."

Jacob saw one of the families had a slave washing clothes outside their tent. He could tell by the ugly lock tattoo on the thin man's cheek. "Is it good or bad to have so many?"

"If you're in the middle, it might be great."

Edward forced a smile at her quip. “True.” He’d also seen the slave family, but it was the traders he glared at as they walked through the gawking station. Their last days of giants, zombies, and wizards had taken a small toll that was well hidden except for Paul, who didn’t understand that jokes were a great coping mechanism for nerves. He still thought complaining was the best way to go.

Alexa subtly calmed them. “You missed a few on the count.”

“Where?” Edward scanned the slaver’s shelter harder. He’d only counted five pieces of property there.

“Out patrolling, and under the main barn. They have a couple stashed. Women, I assume.”

That sent anger through their group and Alexa was satisfied. She didn’t know for sure that all the females she’d sensed were being held against their will, but at least one of them was. Her silent misery had been impossible to miss during Alexa’s mental sweep of the area.

“We’ll have to do something about that while we’re here.” Edward turned his menace toward the mapmaker and his three gunfighters.

“When they let them out to play.” Alexa led her men to the center warehouse as the watching travelers gaped and whispered. “Be careful of the slavers, as well. They used to be carnival owners. They often take their captives from an audience.”

Activity around the station resumed slowly, but the whispers grew louder. Some of it was muttered

orders to get packed, but some of it was about how healthy, how hard, her men were. The slaves being guarded nearby in comparison were pale, fragile creatures that squinted and had little grace. Alexa's men were the opposite of that and more. They were clearly unbroken. The rest of the talk was excitement about being in the same camp as the legend herself when she faced down the soldiers here. It was something that had to happen.

Alexa used their hand code to pass an order.

Edward leaned closer to Paul. "She wants you to be silent. If you talk at all, she says I'm to knock you out."

Paul paled and stumbled.

Edward jerked him along. He wasn't sure what Alexa was worried about Paul saying, but he had no doubt the clumsy scientist would spill his guts if he was left unsupervised.

As they came to the ramp that led to the main door of the warehouse, Alexa held up a hand. "Wait here."

Again, Mark followed her against orders.

The soldier on duty there lowered his rifle and then let it hang by the strap after he caught sight of Alexa and her guard.

The rest of her group stayed by the ramp. No one else would go up until she was done here. As for whoever might already be inside, Mark and Alexa were a dangerous pair.

Paul's gaze followed them through the door that was plastered on the inside with Wanted posters. He

opened his mouth as he recognized one of the wrinkled faces.

Watching and hoping it would happen, Edward raised his big arm.

Paul snapped his mouth shut so fast that his teeth clicked together like a firecracker.

Edward lowered his arm, shrugging. "I can wait."

"She can't go in there."

"Doesn't she know they're looking for her?"

"Forget her. Look at those males!"

Alexa stepped by the soldier on duty with his rifle, giving him only a disinterested glance. She opened the inner door and ignored the words and mutters of the dozens of people already gathered at this station. Alexa went to the rear of the wide warehouse, admiring the small cluster of horses in the corner. She clucked softly to them as she passed.

Mark followed Alexa alertly, aware of soldiers coming from the far rooms and the loft above them. The warehouse was stacked with crates and boxes that appeared to have been there since the war. The layers of dust and prints in grit said this was more of a drop off spot than a pickup area. The military liked storing supplies and then denying everyone their use.

Alexa glanced toward a small trap door in the floor, much like the one they'd discovered in the giant's home.

Mark caught the hint and listened for the female captives, but he didn't hear anything.

Alexa stopped at a long row of counters, choosing the one that was labeled for sales. The clerk behind the counter gaped in surprised curiosity. The posters of people the government was offering rewards for stood out glaringly behind the kid. Alexa scanned his wrinkled uniform and thin frame, trying to judge how long this group had been here. "I need eight tickets to cross the state."

The Private swallowed, hand reaching for the radio. "I have to clear that."

Alexa tensed as the young clerk radioed to someone for permission. *I know him...* Alexa locked down on her thoughts, heart thumping.

Brian keyed the radio, also locking down on his thoughts. *Maybe they won't recognize her.* "Uh, I got a big group asking for a ticket."

The voice that came sounded annoyed and tired. "Damn it, Brian! Sell 'em what they want and leave me alone."

Brian flushed. "You got it."

He sat the radio down and began gathering the papers, aware of Alexa studying him intently.

The radio lit up again. "Ask if they have any tobacco for trade."

Alexa shook her head. She was busy digging into Brian's thoughts, finding interesting tidbits even through his lock. She was also changing her plans. "We're not selling or buying."

Brian stared at her, mesmerized at the sound of her voice as she leaned in.

"You don't belong here. Find a new job."

Brian nodded, heart thumping. “Sure. That’s what a lot of people do.”

Alexa turned, waving at Mark to gather their tickets.

Mark felt wrongness invade the air and hurried the transaction. He wasn’t sure what had given her pause, only that something had. He would keep an eye on the boy.

Mark scanned the notice board with the faded, stained images of people Wanted by the government. His own face glared at him from two of the chipped corners. He was glad of Alexa’s whistle when she called him to her side.

As the door closed behind them, the Private peered at the board for a final confirmation of what he already knew. Brian had escaped from a bunker and been recaptured by Merrik’s patrol; he wasn’t here willingly. He didn’t sound the alarm. He didn’t want Alexa arrested. He wanted to go with her to Safe Haven.

The soldier on the door was the opposite. He grabbed for his radio the second Alexa was out of range.

Mark had to confirm his suspicion. “He’s calling for help with us, right?”

“Yes.”

“Should we get set to go on?”

Alexa was still adjusting their plans. “Not without something I didn’t know was here. We’ll wait for our chance.”

Alexa met Mark's eyes for a brief, intense look that said he knew what she wanted. When he spent a moment considering it, he realized it could only be one thing. She hadn't shown a real interest in anything else since they'd hit these fields. "I'll watch for an opening. Anything I need to be careful of?"

"Fire. It's a common issue."

Mark groaned inwardly. "I'll handle it."

"Good. Let's settle in."

4

"We're drawing a lot of attention." Billy didn't like the feeling. The slavers and their protectors were staring in open need and greed, ignoring the meal that was now burning in the pan over their fire. Thick smoke rolled upward, but none of the scantily clad females noticed.

Jacob glared at the big women ogling him as if he was chocolate. "Let 'em try."

"They like your scars." David frowned. "They already plan to ask Alexa if she'll sell you."

Jacob glanced at David, a little embarrassed. "How would you know? We can't hear them from here."

"I read lips." David grinned at the shortest Powder Protector. She didn't have as much blush and lipstick on, and had drawn his attention. "Wanna know what the biggest one said?"

Jacob noted the leer on David's face. "No, probably not, but tell me anyway."

"She thinks you'll be rougher in bed because you're obviously wild. They can charge a higher price to rent you out."

The other males snickered.

Jacob's face went red. "No, thanks." He smirked. "Even if that is true."

His joke startled real amusement from all the males.

Alexa found them that way as she came outside. Alexa soaked up their moment of happiness as if she was drowning.

Beside her, Mark did the same, only it was her joy that he absorbed. The pleasure flowing from her was enough to make him dizzy.

Edward felt it a second later, the same feeling of perfection that had Mark frozen right outside the door. Farther away, the Horseman was able to pull himself free and speak. "We're all set."

The hard voice helped Mark regain control, but Alexa stayed still for another moment, letting their emotions refill her heart. Some days, hope was hard to come by.

Alexa slowly came down the ramp, hearing sharpening, drawing out small conversations and reactions as she led them toward an empty fire ring at the far end of the waiting station. "Set us up."

Her men did as they were told; those around them relaxed a bit upon finding out she didn't plan to stride instantly into hell. It gave them time to

prepare, but it would also provide time to talk to each other and make deals for protection. Until they'd been ready to go, there hadn't been a reason to do so. More than half of the people who came to these places ended up deciding to take a longer, safer route.

Walking by the other camps to reach Alexa's chosen place allowed them to hear bits and pieces of what the other travelers were saying.

"Alone, with all those, she's hard."

"Healthy. Must be eating well. She's strong."

"Nice guns. Bet they aren't empty."

"They'll make it through, I'd wager."

"So would I."

It proved the stories. People gathered at a station and waited until enough protection came through to make the worst of the trip together. Strength in numbers was a way to survive this new life, and apparently, Alexa exuded enough of that to trigger the trek. It made her men proud.

Alexa was aware that her gifts were still growing. Years ago, she could pass through crowds and stay undetected by most, but now her light was a beacon in the apocalypse.

As they began to set things up, Alexa's men fell into their usual routines, not realizing their quiet, helpful organization would come as a surprise to the others around them. It drew even more attention and made Alexa's men briefly wish for isolation again. Being stared at wasn't fun.

Alexa and Mark swept the roaming people as much as the corn around the station, repeatedly going to the family behind the main building. There was one old woman with two unruly children in a small shed with a tiny fire and a rocking chair in front of it. Beside the shed was a tan mule and a small cart that they obviously rode in. What was curious about the trio was their lack of protection.

“How do you think they’re getting by?”

“That is a fine question. We shall see.” Alexa had chosen to make their camp next to the main warehouse, where the corn met the cleared dirt. She had them set for the evening before the sun sank, leaving free time to observe the people around them while they ate. David’s salted bacon and beans was good enough that each of the group had seconds, including Alexa. Tomorrow’s meals wouldn’t be as generous.

The other people watched them eat, but didn’t come near. Only the gunfighters and the soldiers stood a chance of challenging Alexa’s team, but both of those had their own distractions. The gunfighters played cards, cleaned their guns, and held lowly whispered conversations. The soldiers ran their patrols and kept watch over five loaded wagons on the opposite side of the warehouse from Alexa. The former searched Alexa with a curious boredom and the latter avoided her gaze all together.

Alexa felt a shift in the atmosphere and stretched out on her bedroll. “Don’t shoot. We’ll need them later.”

Her fighters tensed, searching for the threat. They found it coming through the corn on the opposite side of the clearing. It was a group of ten soldiers carrying guns and eager expressions.

The new group announced their arrival, but only after they realized Alexa had seen them coming. “Hello in the camp!”

The soldiers stomped straight to Alexa, surrounding her crew as best they could with only two more in number. Alexa didn’t move from her bedroll.

One of the men came forward, gun aimed at Alexa. “You’re under arrest. Get your hands up.”

Alexa shut her eyes. “I just had a big meal, Captain Zale. Talk to me in the morning and maybe we’ll make a deal.”

The Captain racked the slide on the 9mm in his hand. “Get up.”

“I’m the only one who can get your wagons through The Killing Fields.” Alexa’s voice was a cold chill that carried to everyone around them. “Be nice or you won’t like my price.”

Zale considered his options only briefly. The pride quickly overrode common sense. He knelt down to grab Alexa’s arm.

Edward viciously kicked the Captain in the face as the others quickly stood between her and the armed soldiers.

Zale stayed down, cradling his mouth and nose.
“What the hell is going on here?”

The cold bark made soldiers snap to attention for the man approaching from the jungle of corn. He had no men with him. Also a Captain, Merrik wore a black leather jacket over his fatigue shirt and pants. His mirrored sunglasses twinkled as they caught the light. The scar running down his jawline added to the impression that he was a hardass. He was dark, dirty, and dangerous. It was in his step as he padded toward them from the opposite side of the cleared area that Zale had come from. This man liked being cruel and he wasn't stable.

“I bought a ticket and they tried to arrest me.”

“On my orders. I'm Captain Merrik. You're Alexa Mitchel. You killed three of my hunters today.”

Alexa chuckled softly. “Darius Merrik. I heard they let you out. Nice post they gave you.”

Merrik didn't care about her attempt to embarrass him. “Get up.”

“Did you know the rains come through here only once a year now?”

Merrik hesitated. “Yes, we've been briefed.”

That told Alexa he hadn't been out here long enough to have experienced the new weather. *Good.* “You should be covered then.”

Merrik didn't like not knowing. “What happens when the rain comes?”

Alexa slowly stood up; her men closed in tighter around her. “Blood spills.”

“Ghost stories.” Merrik gestured toward the warehouse. “Let’s go. Your men can stay here. We don’t need them.”

Paul started to come forward in her defense.

Mark neatly tripped him.

“Aww!”

Edward looked at Alexa.

She denied him. “Remember what I said.”

No shooting. We’ll need them later. Edward got it and stood down, but he didn’t like just letting them take her. “Shall we go on?” Edward used the code for breaking her out.

“No. Dawn will bring changes.”

Merrik shoved her to end the talking, reconsidering leaving her men out here to plan.

Alexa shoved Merrik back just as hard as he had her. “Don’t ever touch me!”

The distraction worked as he pushed her again. “Go on!”

Alexa disappeared into the warehouse and the soldiers returned to their work with snickers. Alexa Mitchel, captured without a single shot fired. It was almost disappointing.

5

Merrik escorted Alexa to the cell in the rear of the warehouse, the one they’d only recently built, but he didn’t disarm her. He knew she didn’t need the gun to be deadly. In fact, on that level, he might

have a chance. He was the best shooter of all his men. “Why are you here?”

“You need me.” She settled onto the narrow cot.

“For what?”

“There’s a shipment about to come through. You’ll be told to get it to the destination no matter what, even if it means letting me go.”

“I won’t do that!”

“That’s your choice.”

Merrick scowled and left the cell, locking it. He then told a man to radio base and find out what was coming his way. He didn’t suspect Alexa of bluffing. She had no reason to and Merrik had no intention of challenging her unless he had the advantage. It was how he’d survived since the war. He saw no reason to be reckless now. He didn’t know why the government wanted her, but he would hold her here until someone else came for her, and until then, she would be fed and left alone.

Alexa glanced toward the front of the warehouse. A second later, Zale came in, holding out a paper. His face was bruising and the wound on his lip oozed red.

“Brian says the message is still repeating if you want to listen. It was already coming in before I could tell him to call base.”

Merrick crumbled the note and tossed it into the corner of Alexa’s cell. “Shit!”

He glowered at Alexa. “We’re being sent on. Are your men going to be trouble when we leave?”

Alexa snorted. “Long before that.”

Merrick frowned deeper. “I can’t get the wagons and you across The Killing Fields at the same time. Why don’t they know that?”

“What makes you think your boss doesn’t know it? Perhaps you’ve heard or done too much?”

Merrick grunted. “I’ve only been topside for 6 months. Got sent to quell an uprising in the swamps and then they put me here.”

“Guess they weren’t happy with the job you did.”

“Not really, no.” Merrick grinned. “But I could make up for it by bringing you *and* the wagons in.”

“How do you expect to accomplish that?” Her tone said it would be a hard sell.

“I’ll make a deal with you. Help me and we’ll fight it out after all of us get through.”

Alexa actually laughed aloud. “What would force me to do that?”

“I’ll kill your men if you refuse.”

Alexa’s eyes blazed, causing Merrick to take an involuntary step back.

“Even if you could, you still wouldn’t gain my help.”

“You will if I threaten to kill these people. You’re known for helping the weak. Can you be responsible for their deaths?”

Alexa switched to a tone of submission. “They must give instructions for how to handle us now.”

Merrick lifted his chin arrogantly. “Yeah, here and there, and we picked things up from fighting your kind before the war.”

Alexa laughed again; the sound of it was chilling.

The Captain turned to leave without securing the agreement he needed. Once the people out there started screaming, she would bend.

“Fine.”

Merrick stopped. “You agree?”

“I’ll help you get these people and your wagons through, and then I’m going to slaughter you and your bunker babies.”

The Captain walked away without answering. She and her men would be taken down at the boat docks instead of the end of the trip. That was near enough to Lincoln for him to do the rest. He would take her body back from there. Alive was asking too much.

“Open her cell.”

Brian hurried to do it, glad he hadn’t had to come up with a plan of his own.

Alexa moved by him without speaking or reaching out to hug him like she wanted to.

Chapter Four
That's How It's Done

1

“There are seventy people here.” Paul assumed they would be breaking Alexa out as soon as everyone else was settled down and asleep. The talk was only to kill time before rescuing their leader.

The temperature had dropped as night fell. The other travelers had gone to their shelters, but many of them still lingered in doorways and flaps to stare at Alexa's fighters.

Edward ignored Paul's comment. “That last group to come in only had old mule drivers on the wagons. The wagons are filled with boxes.”

“Someone's supply train.”

Jacob nodded at Mark's comment. “We can use that.”

Paul didn't like being left out. “What about Alexa? We can't leave her in there.”

“We'll do what she told us to.”

Paul scowled at David. “I won't leave her!”

“No need to leave me at all, pets.” Alexa came through the dusty darkness and joined them. “We're no longer the priority.”

Edward quickly got her a cup of coffee. “Were they smart enough to make a deal?”

“Not an honest one. Merrik hopes to deliver me along with the supplies—after we do his job for him, of course.”

Daniel scanned the wheels. “Are those wagons going to a bunker?”

“I believe so, but they won’t arrive there.”

Above them, the sky had faded to black. The breeze settled to nothing, allowing snores and lowly spoken conversations to carry. Alexa studied the people.

The soldiers wore outdated uniforms even for the apocalypse. Alexa doubted many of their sidearms would fire. The government was finally running out of both men and gear. Even the canteens were a decade old. Alexa noted the same was true of the more basic gear, like bedrolls and weapons. All of it was mismatched and varied, giving the soldiers a ramshackle appearance that Merrik complemented perfectly in his black jacket over Army green as he came out to do a fast sweep from the porch. He didn’t look at Alexa or her men, but it was obvious that he was making sure she hadn’t fled.

By midnight, the station was settled and mostly asleep. Snores rolled through the quiet, occasionally breaking the silence, and those still awake were able to hear every nerve rattling sound of the night. It let them wonder what might be lurking, waiting for

them to get even a foot out of safety. Giants and zombies were the least of their worries.

Alexa's group stayed awake. Even Paul was alert, though he couldn't stop yawning. Sitting around their small fire, the fighters swept their surroundings and each other often. They'd eaten and smoked, chatted a little among themselves, and studied the other people. Curiously in some cases, with admiration of others, but with scorn for most. It was clear that the majority of their fellow travelers were weak.

The slavers were also still awake, observing Alexa and her men, though their stock had long since been sent to bed like good boys. The slaves had gone almost eagerly, leaving Alexa's men to share frowns. They couldn't wrap their minds around being slaves, but even worse would be to like it.

The gunfighters were also still up, sitting in good positions around their ward as he snored loudly inside his tent. The cart and horses they shared were stashed behind the tent and the four nags appeared glad to be unharnessed. These fighting men also studied the slaves with confusion, not able to accept that type of surrender, but their hard gazes returned repeatedly to Alexa and her guns. They were obviously trying to figure out who she was. The soldiers letting her go didn't fit with the legend, but everything else did. Someone like her got a reputation quickly and it was harder to shake when face-to-face. Edward assumed one of

the gunfighters would attempt to confirm it at some point, but he doubted they would leave their current job to challenge Alexa for the reward. They looked smart enough to know better.

The only other people up and about were the two roaming patrols that Zale had put in place before disappearing into the warehouse with one of his females. Alexa was glad the woman had been willing. She didn't plan to interfere with the soldiers until they interfered with her, but a rape would force her hand.

Alexa watched the second woman curl up in a blanket on the ramp; her brows drew together. That one wasn't willing, but there was little Alexa would do right now without strong cause. "Volunteer sleep schedule—you pick it." Alexa liked letting her men set their own duties.

Edward opened his mouth to volunteer, but was beaten by Daniel.

"I'll stay up."

"As you would."

Everyone else headed into the tent, slightly disappointed that Daniel would get to enjoy Alexa's last waking moments of the day. As they got settled, the men were quiet, hoping to listen as they fell out.

Alexa lit a rolled smoke and allowed Daniel to refill her coffee cup. The fire crackled softly; the wind howled gently. Alexa yawned. "They'll hit us soon. Don't nod off."

"I won't."

Across the dirt, two of the slavers stood up. Alexa sighed. “Company.”

Daniel rose as the two huge females came over, hand resting on his gun.

Inside the tent, there was silence except for the flap opening further to clear a line of fire.

Alexa leaned against a large rock and gestured toward the now empty seats. “If you like.”

One of the women with hair in black braids that coiled around her thick neck did sit down. The other brunette, hair cut to her ears, stayed standing, watching Daniel.

The slave master smiled. “My thanks.”

Daniel scanned the Powder Protector, as they were now called because of their heavy makeup and male roles, and wasn’t impressed.

Alexa motioned toward the pot. “Coffee’s not bad.”

“No.” The braided slaver cleared her throat. “I’d like to talk about a trade, if you’ve a mind to hear it.”

Alexa laid down the law firmly. “My men are not for sale or rent. They are not slaves.”

Braids sighed resignedly. “I assumed as much. May I offer you anything at all to change your mind?”

Alexa studied the two women. “You have nothing I need.”

The shorthaired woman grunted. “You need ammunition, I bet.”

“That, I could trade some things for, but not my men.”

Braids finally showed true emotions as wistfulness flooded her voice. “What if it wasn’t a trade, just a night between a man and a woman?”

Alexa raised a brow. “Why?”

The slaver flushed. “Fresh meat.”

Alexa rolled her eyes. “That would be up to them. Enjoy the coffee or fire.” She stood up. “Excuse me.”

Alexa ducked into the tent.

Daniel went to stand in front of the flap.

The slavers shared angry glances as they returned to their site.

Daniel didn’t let himself chuckle. None of Alexa’s men had any interest in the slave masters, except in freeing their stock.

Might be worth a quickie to do it, though. Daniel grinned inwardly. It was one of those I could do it, but I might get hurt moments that most men had over a woman who was the same size as he was. Daniel thought it might be fun, but he wouldn’t seriously consider it unless the slaves would be freed and that wouldn’t happen. The new law of the land encouraged male slavery, and there were few who could fight those chains. Alexa and her loving ways were the best a man would get out here now.

As if to prove him wrong, the family next to them stirred.

“I want you!”

“Shh!”

“Roll over, baby. Let me hold you.”

A soft male giggle echoed. “Get under the blanket or we’ll wake up the others.”

It was almost normal life continuing. Daniel had forgotten about the small family. He continued to search the corn and the people, comforted a bit. Not all men were slaves. Some had found real homes or had already belonged to one. He and the other fighters with Alexa had done the same. She was their protector, their wife in ways and mother in others. It was odd, but it worked.

Alexa waited until Paul was almost asleep and then rolled over, taking her blanket along. She curled against him for a few minutes where a stifled scream echoed.

She then rolled over, wiping her mouth.

Behind her, Paul shuddered.

Beside her, Mark settled into sleep.

In front of the tent, tall corn waved mockingly at the single guard.

2

A slow, silent hand crept toward Daniel’s ankle in the darkness. Long, tattooed fingers reached out...

“Nice try, Convict.”

That startled Mark into a laugh. “Damn it, man!”

Daniel chuckled. “Next time, maybe.” He slid inside the tent and took Mark’s warm place against

Alexa's hip with a groan of pleasure. Lying down was good, but the feel of her was better.

Alexa turned toward him in the dark, arms curling around his neck. Daniel pulled her onto his chest, where she liked to sleep.

“Mmm...”

Daniel stiffened instantly and willed himself to go down. She sounded good, too.

His arms slid around her and he drifted off almost right away.

Secure in Daniel's big arms, Alexa listened for a minute to make sure they were safe, then joined him.

Mark squatted near the fire that Daniel had nursed through the night, keeping it going. Alexa didn't like it when they wasted the light or the warmth of their flames, but they didn't quite have her gift of timing for adding the fuel. It appeared that Daniel had done a good job, though. Mark warmed his fingers over the glowing coals and burnt stalks that remained.

Mark swept the tall fields around them. Calling this mess a cornfield was like calling a scooter a motorcycle. The corn was twined in and around thick weeds and scraggy grass that was trying to choke the dirt into submission. In most places, it was succeeding.

Mark swept the other camps. No one was up or about yet, other than the soldier patrol that hadn't been relieved. They stared at Mark angrily because he was well rested.

The Convict yawned contentedly and then began to make himself a cup of coffee. While the water heated, he went a few feet into the tangle of plants. As he finished relieving himself, a large rat scurried over his boot.

Mark shuddered. He loathed rats. It was something he always felt the need to kill.

Mark stomped, barely missing, and ran after it, crashing through rows before it vanished as if it had never been there.

Mark stopped as the sense of danger fell over him. The corn was tall and taunting, blocking his view. He sighed, opening his mouth to call out for a direction.

“Shh...”

The child stepped from the row next to him, giving Mark a fright that snatched part of his breath. It was one of the twins, not the corpse child, he was relieved to discover. “Where did you—”

He stopped as the child put a finger to her lips, following her line of sight. All he saw was corn, weeds, grass, and...

Mark stiffened, hand sliding toward his gun. In the corn to their left was the largest wolf he'd ever seen. It was brown and gray, with a head the size of two men.

Mark drew his gun.

Alexa sat up so fast she scared a yelp from both Daniel and Paul.

“Check on our guard.”

Jacob was the first one to come to alertness. He hurried from the tent when Alexa didn't speak again. He noticed their empty fire, the heating water, and followed Mark's boots into the corn.

He found the missing man a minute later.

"What are you—"

"Shh!"

Mark didn't want to fight with a child at his side, but there was no time to get her out of here as the large wolf padded closer to where they were. Mark wasn't sure if the big animal had noticed their presence or not. If so, it was coming to get a meal. If not, it was about to be surprised and defend itself. Either way, he wasn't allowed to use his gun and he wouldn't.

Jacob wasn't sure why Mark hadn't pulled the trigger yet. He lined up his sights to take care of it before remembering Alexa's no gun rule was still in place. As Jacob had the thought, Mark snatched his knife from his belt and threw.

It was amazingly accurate. The blade sank into the creature's eye and dropped it to the ground with only a whimper and then the dull thud of the body falling.

Mark retrieved his blade. The little girl remained by his side.

Jacob examined the carcass from where he stood. "It's huge!"

"Yes." Mark bent down and scooped the child onto his hip, where she curled as if she'd been there all her life. "Let's get you to your family."

Jacob trailed them, watching the corn for more predators while replaying the throw in his mind. He wasn't nearly as good. He wondered if Mark had learned that skill before or after the war.

Alexa was at the flap as they emerged from the corn. She sighed tolerantly when Mark first carried the little girl to her shed and waited for her to slip inside.

When he returned, Mark paused so Alexa could punish him for becoming distracted, but she only returned to her place and laid back down. After a few minutes, there was silence again except for snores.

Jacob joined Mark on duty, unable to go back to sleep. Daniel and Billy now had the best places in the tent on either side of Alexa, and Jacob was still admiring Mark's throw. He wasn't sure he could have even hit the wolf in these conditions, let alone have killed it. "Can you teach me?"

"Yep." Mark gestured. "Have to pick up a stronger blade than the one you carry now."

"Okay. You'll advise me on it?"

"Yes."

The men enjoyed the coffee and the end of night finally coming, though they both also dreaded it. Right now, they were alive. Come daylight, Alexa would put them all in danger again. This morning was to be savored, as each one with her had been, because there was no promise of another.

In a dark corner of the circle, a shadow pulled a handful of dust from a pocket and blew it across the station. The tiny yellow spores scattered, blending in as they landed. Those who inhaled them slid into a deep sleep.

As the bodies fell and the dreams ceased, the shadow walked calmly into one of the camps and resumed a hiding place among the sheep.

The girl giggled and was quickly hushed by her brother.

3

The sight of a single, lanky white wolf inside their ring of protection was something of a concern to the fighters lying on the hard floor of the tent. To see dozens of glowing eyes waiting hungrily in the tall corn behind it, was terror for Alexa.

Her men shifted, waking at the feeling.

The two men outside the flap began to wake also, but it was slower, without the awareness that trouble had arrived.

“No one moves!”

Alexa’s command froze the men who were now taking aim on the wolf closest to her.

Time slowed as the animal in the open flap also reacted, baring its fangs to grin furiously.

Alexa tried to barter. “We will leave. Now.”

The predator snarled in response. Death was in those red eyes. There was a slow pause as the sun

continued to rise, and then chaos ensued as the wolves attacked.

Alexa opened fire, careful with her aim. The lunging wolf in the flap was knocked into the side of the tent, clearing the exit. More wolves took its place; there was little time to plan or think as the fighters shot their way from the tent to find wolves spilling through the corn like rats. Most were going toward the warehouse, but small groups were also attacking the other travelers.

Alexa didn't have time to aid anyone else as she and the others helped Mark and Daniel to their feet. It was a shock that they weren't dead.

"Use the wall!" Alexa led them to the warehouse, shooting as she ran. They placed their backs to it like she did.

Paul pulled his weapon, intending to help.

Edward shoved the scientist behind him in annoyance. "Clear my line of fire, Rabbit!"

He had no idea if Paul was as clumsy with a gun as he was everything else, but he didn't want to find out right now.

With the wall behind them, Alexa's group was able to defend themselves and even clear a small area of safety. They were also able to keep the animals away from the grandmother and kids, but everyone else was on their own. They watched in horror as soldiers and civilians were mauled. Blood ran repeatedly over the ground.

At first, it appeared the attack was random, but Alexa's men knew herding when they saw it. The

wolves were coming from three directions, pushing the people toward the corn behind the buildings. The travelers were trying to flee toward the main warehouse, where Merrik had no doubt promised them safety if they could make it. Some of them did.

Alexa's men fell into that deadly V formation without an order, firing at will.

"Line up!"

Merrik's loud command drew the fleeing soldiers into a shaky line in front of the ramp. They'd clearly done it before by the way they hurried forward together without any more orders.

The wolves also seemed to know what was coming. The area emptied of the predators in seconds. Less than two minutes into the attack, it was over. Other than the moans of the corn and the wounded, there was silence.

Alexa reloaded and holstered her guns, and her men did the same. Paul stayed behind them.

"I'm sorry, I—"

Alexa cut Mark off, holding up a finger dusted with yellow pollen. "It wasn't your fault. We were knocked out."

Mark let the relief fill the growing black spot in his heart and heal it. Thinking that he'd fallen asleep on watch had been devastating.

Jacob echoed his thoughts, relieved and also furious.

The other groups immediately began tending their wounds and salvaging their valuables from the debris. Alexa understood the people had been

suffering these attacks regularly to be so desensitized. Other than Paul, there hadn't even been screams. Alexa raised a brow at Merrik.

Merrik felt her disapproval across the blood-splattered dirt. He wasn't able to cover his shame. "There are only so many bullets. Base says to protect, not hunt."

"Base doesn't understand how bad things are out here."

"You got that right." Merrik waved Zale over. "The usual."

"Wagon's got some damage from slugs." Zale glared at Alexa and Paul. He still didn't care about her men, though he wore the print of Edward's boot on his face.

Merrik's voice rose in annoyance. "How long?"

"Three hours to fix it."

"We leave as soon as it's ready."

"I'd wait another day."

Alexa's suggestion gained the attention of all the soldiers in hearing distance. No one openly questioned Captain Merrik, but none of them had faith in him, either.

"Why is that?" Merrik's tone gave away none of his rage at being questioned.

"The second wave is going to do more damage than you're used to."

"What second wave? We've been living here for five months! There's nothing you can tell me—"

"Duck!"

The red talon crows came from the corn in silent, pecking shadows that hurled toward the people who began to flee from them.

Alexa signaled for her men to get down, but Paul had been staring at the blood and bodies. He'd missed the short conversation. A line of crows slammed into his hip and knocked him into the small pile of corpses that the soldiers had been stacking.

"Nooo!" Paul screamed in revulsion. "Get me out of here!"

Seeing he was fine, the fighters left him there to wait out the flyover. The small crows couldn't do much.

"Decoy!" The shout came from the other side of the clearing.

Everyone turned to find the wolves streaming through the corn again.

"They never hit us like this!" Zale shouted through his bruised mouth. "This is her fault!"

Alexa didn't spend time giving orders like Merrik was now doing. She got her men into that deadly V and headed for the point where the wolves were coming in.

The soldiers joined her line, curving at the ends, and they were able to drive the wolves back, but not before the grandmother and kids had been forced from their shed and into the warehouse. Bloody handprints on the rail said one of them was hurt.

Zale pointed toward Alexa, ready to shout again.

Edward slid in front of his boss. The barrel of his gun rested against Zale's chin.

Zale went still, but his face screamed for Merrik. None of the soldiers wanted to miss what might happen, though. No one went for the boss.

“May I?”

Alexa wanted to tell Edward yes, blow the idiot's brains out. “No, and I'm sorry for it.”

Edward stepped aside, glowering.

Zale's brush with death gave him a respect that was evident in his lowered tone. “You're trouble. *You* led them to us.”

Alexa walked away, not answering.

Edward smirked at her insult before following.

Paul was wiping away blood and other disgusting things, hating everyone for his own cowardice. He'd thought about helping them during all of it, but in the end, it had been easier, safer, to let them protect him. He shoved his way by Zale.

Still angry himself, Zale stuck out a foot and tripped the scientist.

Paul fell again, right back into the same pile of bodies.

His screams echoed through the corn.

Zale laughed cruelly, turning away.

Alexa felt it coming, but she was too far away, too late, to stop fate from disrupting her plans.

Furious beyond anything he'd ever felt, Paul rolled over and shot Zale through the neck with the same gun that he'd used to kill his father.

Mark huffed in the stunned silence, grinning. “And we didn’t think he was learning anything!”

“Time to go.” Alexa scanned the scattered station’s residents, then Merrik, who was angrily moving toward them.

Alexa grabbed a camo wearing shadow on her right, wrapping him up tightly in front of her. “We’re leaving now.”

Brian didn’t struggle. He inhaled her scent and fought hard not to cry or scream.

Merrick stopped and signaled for his men to do the same. He had no doubt that Alexa would kill the boy.

Alexa scowled as her worry was confirmed. “What’s this kid doing here, Merrik?”

“I captured him.”

“From the slavers or from the Draft?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not yet.” Alexa let go of the perfectly still boy.

She moved toward the corn at a fast clip, men covering her with their guns. “There are a few possessions we’re going to want back. I’d be careful with them if I were you.”

Alexa spun and vanished into the corn; her men came swiftly behind her.

Last man to disappear, Paul shoved his gun into his pocket and tried to keep up.

Brian came to Merrik’s side with a pale face. He hated lying, but he needed to buy her time to escape “Why was she asking about me? And why didn’t she kill me?”

“Move!” Merrik shoved the boy aside, heading for the weapon room to get ready for the trip. “We leave as soon as the wagon is fixed!”

4

Alexa led her men in a wide circle, then brought them back to the edge of the station. She'd counted on Merrik not wanting to lose men to hunt her in the corn. She watched the soldiers pack their campsite and toss their gear into the rear of the last wagon. Alexa didn't know if it had been an order, but nothing was stolen or destroyed. She assumed Merrik had taken her seriously about their belongings.

Alexa silently gave her fighters their assignments. She put Edward with Paul, after telling Edward to take Paul's gun. She directed Mark and Daniel toward the wagon with their things, and took the rest with her to create the distraction. It was a simple plan that she had used many times. Simple was often the best choice. It was easier to remember the details during the chaos.

Mark and Daniel stayed on their stomachs as they crawled through a few feet of corn to the clear area. They were only a couple seconds from the wagon when gunfire echoed from the opposite side of the station. Soldiers ran that way.

Mark darted forward, with Daniel right behind him. They were in the wagon seconds later and hidden by the thick cover.

Alexa whistled.

A few hundred feet to the left, Edward fired into the air, then grabbed Paul and ran for the place where Mark and Daniel had snuck through.

A minute later, he dumped Paul into the wagon and joined him.

Alexa and her three fighters ran back into the corn as the soldiers spotted them, vanishing.

The angry shouts of Merrik and his men filled the air.

“Give yourself up!”

“Come out of there!”

Alexa began circling around again. In a little while, she and these men would be in the wagons also to rest and conserve their strength for a few hours of the trip. If they stayed lucky, they might pass a full day’s travel that way and be ready for whatever came.

Standing in front of the barn, Merrik ignored his men and concentrated. What was she doing? What did she hope to gain by drawing them out? Weakening their numbers to get their supplies? *Maybe she wants Brian.* She’d shown interest in the kid, as if she knew they were holding onto him for someone. “Get that damn wagon ready!”

The soldiers rushed to comply, but with the covers on, none of them noticed that two of the warped, wooden vehicles now had occupants.

Edward grabbed Paul by his jacket and jerked him forward until they were nose to nose. “Don’t ever do anything like that again!”

Paul squirmed, trying to get free.

Edward gave him a harsh shake, being careful not to rock the wagon. “Well?!”

Paul’s head bobbed furiously. He pulled away as Edward let go, falling into the side of a stack of boxes.

The boxes slid over, jarring the wagon.

Edward’s hand went to his gun as he glanced toward the driver.

The eyes staring back at him were not a comfort.

The driver of their wagon was at least sixty, with grizzled features set into a gray and black beard full of wild curls. His oversized hat blended into the cover of the wagon perfectly as he glared at the stowaways.

Edward slowly held up a hand, and then moved it toward his pocket. He pulled a pouch of dust free and held it out. “I have coins if you’d rather.”

The driver grunted, still studying them. “What are you buying?”

“A ride, nothing more.”

“Will I be shot in the back or hit by accident?”

“Not by me or mine.” Edward’s voice was a perfectly cold copy of Alexa’s. “We’re better than both of those.”

Edward held out the pouch, hoping the driver would make the right choice. Behind him, Mark was doing the same.

The driver of wagon one looked at Edward's pouch for a long moment. "I didn't see anything, hear anything, I don't get killed?"

Edward nodded. "Agreed, but no man can speak for fate. You understand?"

The driver appeared to accept that and turned around to spit. He didn't look back for a long time. When he did, the pouch was on the edge of the wagon bed and Edward's hand was on his gun.

"Don't steal anything. Keep your pay and owe me something later."

Edward didn't like owing a debt, but didn't feel he had a right to argue. "Done."

Paul grabbed the pouch and spent a minute examining the powder inside before handing it back to Edward.

Edward allowed it, hoping he wasn't the one who ended up killing the scientist. He didn't want to be on Alexa's bad side, but as sure as his skills were guns and horses, Paul wouldn't be alive by the end of this trip.

Instead of more argument, Paul rested his head against the boxes and tried to consider his options. He needed a way to prove to Alexa that he belonged at her side. There was a way, he knew. It would involve saving one of her beloved pets, but even that wasn't too much to ask in return for what he wanted.

Edward peered through the cover to wagon two and found Alexa's hand giving the all clear signal. Her driver was snoozing.

Edward settled into a thickly packed corner, next to Paul. He used his hands to position the scientist so that he wouldn't be seen and ordered him to go to sleep.

Paul did it eagerly, worn out. He couldn't wait for this day to be over and it wasn't even noon yet!

Edward leaned his head against the wagon, exchanging looks and grins with Mark and Daniel. It was a stunning moment of life that only they understood. One day on the edge like this with Alexa was worth years of their old lives. They would never quit this quest.

Chapter Five
Small Favors

1

The travelers were jolted from their drowsy boredom by the rear man, Private Richards, calling a halt and Merrik refusing the order. Those inside the wagons listened in anger.

“We are not stopping.”

“Their horse is injured. They’ll fall behind.”

“Not my problem. They’re not on my list.”

“What list?”

“Those who matter and those who don’t.”

“Sir, I think—”

“Get moving, Dick!”

“Yes, sir.”

The travelers kept going.

Inside Edward’s wagon, he waited for a signal to go help the family. When it didn’t come, he worried over it. Alexa would send someone. He was once again missing a chance to earn more of her affection.

Mark and Daniel felt the same way. All of them blamed Paul.

“Who will she send?” Paul didn’t notice the hostile tension.

None of them had thought Paul was smart enough to realize Alexa would help the family. It stopped them from being nasty.

“Billy. He’s good with people.” Mark sighed. “She loves him for that.”

Paul scoffed. “She doesn’t love him. Or any of you.”

“You have no idea, little man.”

Paul’s cheeks bloomed with color at Edward’s scorn, but before he could respond in kind, Edward peeled up a corner of the tarp to look outside. “She sent Billy.”

Paul tried to be brave, but it was hard. “What did she say for us to do?”

“She didn’t!” Edward nearly growled. “We’re babysitting. How hard is that?”

Paul opened his mouth.

“Shut up back there!”

Silence fell in the wagon at the driver’s order.

After a moment, they realized the man had likely just tired of their bickering. He was a lot like their fearless leader—quiet and effective. It was almost comforting.

2

Billy found the small family easily. They reacted the way he expected them to—fearfully.

The man stood up and ushered the children behind him, while the two women raised guns. The females were clean, with pants that fit and coats that

provided protection. Their slave had a dingy white robe and bare feet that announced his status. If Billy had to guess, he would say they were from the south.

“I came to help. I’m with Alexa.”

The words allowed a bit of the tension to ease.

Billy carefully skirted around them to view the horse. Edward would have normally been sent to do something like this. Billy was determined to do as good a job.

He knelt down by the mare, listening. He examined her gently, noting the colors and conditions that Edward had drilled them on during personal lessons. “What did she have to eat over the last day?”

Billy got the information from them as quickly as he could, aware of the two women now standing over him with guns and leers. Leaving might be a little harder than getting in. Thanks to Alexa, he was also ready for that.

“I think it’s just a sore ankle.” Billy stood up. “Walk her all the way and a friend of mine will come by when things settle down. He’s much better with horses than I am.”

The women were still viewing him as if he was water. Billy flashed the asshole inside. “I’ve killed women before. Won’t bother me to do so now.”

They both retreated from the barely bridled rage in his tones.

“I’ve done you a service.” Billy glared. “You owe me a debt. How do you intend to pay?”

“We’re letting you go without a fight.” The younger of the two women clearly hated men and was likely the one who was abusive. “That’s all you’ll get here.”

Billy helped the slave male get the horse onto its feet. “I’d take everything you have if I wanted it. Be grateful my mistress isn’t evil. I’d beat you both, and then slit your throats in payment for the bruises on your male.”

Billy didn’t wait for them to respond. He padded to the front of the group, giving them no choice but to follow. He strode down the path made by the other travelers, shoulders set in rigid anger. Male slavery was something he would never submit to and he’d begun to loathe all women for it.

His mind tossed out an honest question. *But aren’t you Alexa’s slave?*

Billy nodded. “Until I die.”

3

The day was hot and long for most of the travelers. As the insects buzzed maddeningly out of reach, the smell of the corn distracted them. It was hard to stay awake, let alone alert and those with carts or wagons dozed miserably in the heat of the day.

Inside the two mule wagons, Alexa’s group wasn’t suffering the same way. They were used to the heat and trying to breathe through it. Getting a ride was a gift. They joked quietly, taught Paul and

the two newest men needed rules, and slept comfortably with their hats over their faces. Traveling stayed that way for the first five hours. It wasn't until the day was at its hottest that Alexa felt the need to get them ready.

“They'll have us park away from the group to minimize losses. Stay down and still. You won't be noticed.” The mule drivers were dressed in the same brown pants and long brown coats. The only difference was in the wild hair of the three men and the neat cut of the only woman. All dark skinned, rugged, and quiet, they were a relief to ride with.

Alexa used her hands to deliver the message to Edward.

“Let's pick a spot!”

Merrick's call, too early in Alexa's opinion, was repeated by the soldiers patrolling the long caravan.

“Make camp! Set us up! Camp time!”

The shouts continued long enough to make Alexa and her men nervous. They never made so much noise, but to do it so openly in such a dangerous place was a level of incompetence they hadn't expected.

“He hasn't done this before. That changes things.” Alexa had planned to travel with the group, much like they were with the mule wagons, but Merrick wasn't going to be able to handle what was coming. “Why do they keep sending these idiots out into hell?”

Their driver heard her and snorted. “That's a fine question.”

She leaned toward the front of the wagon, sending her scent over the man. “There’s a set of buildings an hour further along. Any chance you can get him to go there?”

The driver broke out into a sweat and quickly took a swig of warm water. “Not likely. My boss says never argue unless it endangers the haul.”

“Who is your boss?”

The man spat off the side of the bench and wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve. “At the moment, Roscoe.”

Alexa considered. Fate was setting them up to cross paths. She would get a plan ready for that challenge. “Thank you.”

Alexa’s gratitude sent a bolt of hope into the driver’s dark heart. He grunted. “Men can be bought.”

“Aye. A good thing, too, otherwise people like Merrik might rule the wilderness.”

The driver wheezed out a chuckle as he climbed from the wagon. “Wouldn’t that be some new hell?”

“What of your previous employer?” Alexa had recognized his original profession easily. Old Army men were easy to spot if you knew what to look for.

“There are two bunkers holding that I know of. One east, one west.”

“Fully staffed?”

“Not even by half. This apocalypse has taken a toll on them as well.”

“Is that why they’re sending up bunker babies now?”

“Yes. They’re down to almost nothing in manpower. The hunters you ended are another example of that.”

Alexa nodded in agreement. Those bounty hunters hadn’t been a speed bump on a quiet street.

She listened to the convoy stop. It wasn’t calm enough to steal peeks with so many people in the middle of making camp, but the sounds would tell her where everyone was and how much security was being used.

“Get those wagons into the center! That’s an important shipment!”

“Slide those slaves down! Make room for the wagons!”

“Get on there, mule!”

Alexa’s group tried to disappear into the wood and boxes as her driver returned to do as he’d been ordered.

“Now spread out those sites! Give everyone some room!”

Alexa’s lips tightened. *Idiot!*

In the wagon ahead, Edward made sure Paul knew to stay awake. “She won’t be still much longer. He’s putting us all in too much danger.”

“If it interferes with the quest, remove it.” After shooting his own father, Paul had accepted that as truth.

“Exactly. Be ready.”

“What will she do?”

Edward didn't answer. Paul should know it was nearly impossible to predict Alexa's moves. That was a large part of why she was so hard to capture. He listened to Merrik as the man continued to call out orders in a voice that echoed.

"Perimeter patrol A, get on it. Everyone else get fed and settled in for the night."

Edward very slowly lifted a larger corner of the wagon cover. He'd been glancing through a tiny rip, but the feeling of needing a clear view was strong.

"What's going on?"

Edward was glad Paul had remembered to be quiet, but they needed to be silent right now. He glared until Paul dropped his head. When Edward looked out again, the driver of Alexa's wagon was standing a foot from him. The man leaned down to check on the wheels, speaking in a quick blur.

"She said one hour further, on a straight line."

"Many thanks." Edward was relieved. He tried to send out that wave of gratitude that Alexa could easily blind people with.

"From you, it's nothing." The driver grunted as he straightened up to go to the other wheel for the same fast check. "From her, it's an honor."

4

No longer as angry as he had been, Billy left the family as soon as the noises of their fellow travelers echoed. During the walk, he'd had a chance to talk with the women a bit and to realize they were

following a pattern of behavior that was expected. It didn't excuse the cruelty, though, and he'd told them so.

The convoy came into sight as Billy blended into the corn without a word.

The family didn't give him away when he joined Alexa's wagon while everyone was distracted with their arrival. The slave among the relieved family stared at Billy's hiding place with tired longing and gratitude.

Now in the wagon, Billy held out a pouch to his mistress. They usually kept individual rewards and gifts that were given in moments of aid, but in this case, Billy wanted her to handle it.

Alexa peered inside. "Are you sure? We have no rules for sharing our luxuries."

"It's been a while." Billy smiled, almost harshly. "I'd rather share."

Alexa ran a loving hand along his jaw, letting him feel her approval. "Take a rest now."

Alexa stowed the pouch after letting the others view what was inside. The handful of chocolate kisses was worth a full night with a woman in nearly any town. Everyone's fondness for Billy went up.

Merrick's men made camp along one side of the wagon train. A few of the soldiers made fires, ate, and then immediately crashed. Merrick himself disappeared into a large tent with the two blue robed females who had made the trip inside a large crate

on the rear of a buckboard. With his sunglasses atop his dark hair, the Captain appeared to be getting set for a party.

Alexa's men felt her rage building over that and knew it wouldn't stand longer.

Jealous, Merrik's remaining men leered at the traders, but those traders had protection. Five extremely large females wearing black coats with spikes and short, bobbed hairdos stood outside the slave tent.

Alexa felt the curiosity of her men and gave in to it. "Their bulk comes from the protein powder they consume. They used to be jocks, like wrestlers and basketball players, but now, they're called Powder Protectors."

Billy flipped a bug from his arm. "Why do they wear so much makeup?"

"So they can still feel feminine. They've confused themselves."

Their slaves, five heavily made-up middle aged men, appeared happy despite the situation. The jumpy males hadn't been rented during the trip so far. The females in this convoy already had their own entertainment. Jacob was glad. He knew abuse happened and he couldn't stop it all, but it was anyone's guess as to how he might react to the proof.

Clowns wear fewer colors on their face. Billy watched as the slaves sat around their fire and sang softly to each other between bites. Their guards and owners did the same. The women who owned the

slaves were large, with bright clothes and cigars that they smoked continuously.

The five slave owners were a mix of brunettes and redheads with weathered skin and sly gazes. They didn't seem to be friends, despite being partners, especially the one with long braids held in a ponytail. She looked harder than the others, mean even. Daniel couldn't help the male response when she winked at him. He didn't wink back, however. Personal moments weren't allowed while on watch.

The only other unprotected female in the convoy was the girl traveling with the old woman, but with her matted hair and pissy smell, she was safe from attention. Her brother was an adorable blond and blue-eyed twin that the grandmother wisely kept in the rear of the creaking carriage being pulled by three skinny cows. Followed by an old nag, it effectively blocked curiosity with odor.

The map scribe with his gypsy-style wagon and three hired guns had no fire, but they bought dinner from the family Billy had helped. As did the slavers and a few of the soldiers. The messengers ate MREs, secured their possessions inside a lean-to, and vanished for the night. The prisoner with the mapmaker had no choice but to eat the moldy bread that one of the gunfighters pitched into his wooden cage. The gunfighters were all tall and wide, with jeans and plaid shirts to keep out the weather. Their short hair and freshly shaved faces would do just the opposite.

The wagon drivers were stocked with hard bread and dried meat that they enjoyed with their boots off and their flasks in hand, after taking care of their animals. They didn't talk much, even to each other. As the sun sank, they stretched out on their benches with ponchos and tired yawns.

The evening faded into night as Edward continued to mark the people around them and their habits. He was sure Alexa was doing the same from a small hole in her wagon cover. The corn was the same as yesterday—high and tempting, and hiding any manner of creature being drawn by the light. The sky was black, the grit was greenish, and the sounds of light buzzing insects echoed softly. It was too peaceful, too calm. Edward braced for trouble.

Alexa waited for the exact moment she would have chosen to attack, then quietly drew one gun.

A second later, shots rang out and shadows filled the area.

“Stay down!”

Her men and the driver obeyed.

“What is it?”

“Wolves!”

“Check the other side!”

“Fire!”

Shouts and more gunshots echoed, and then it was quiet except for the occasional mutter or running boots.

Flames suddenly lit up the corn beside the wagons.

Alexa hefted herself out, moving toward the front wagon.

Edward saw Alexa and quickly got his group out to her.

“Mark, go get what I came for. Everyone else goes that way.” Alexa pointed. “Two men, every hundred feet. Defend those coming down the line, stay with them. Go!”

Around them, the travelers were either busy trying to battle the fire with water they couldn't spare or gathering their things to run.

Alexa fired, defending herself from shadows that snarled and lunged from the dark rows.

The fighters spread out into pairs and placed themselves spine-to-spine, waiting for the travelers that were now running toward them with screams and curses as the wolves continued to attack.

Alexa's guns echoed louder than the screams, but not by much as the wolves took their toll. Outnumbered and unable to traverse well in the dark, the humans were not going to win against the animals.

Alexa grabbed a fleeing human shadow by the arm and spun him toward her first pair of men. “That way! Keep going straight!”

The messenger departed eagerly as Alexa headed toward the chaos, leaping over shadows and crashing through rows of sharp stalks in her haste.

Those were her people, most of them, and she had to help.

She snatched two shadows from their flight, spinning them around. “That way! Keep straight. Get to my men!”

More people were heading her way now, some soldiers, too, but Alexa didn’t spare them a thought. “Get to my men. Go straight!”

All of them obeyed, leaving her with just the sounds of gunfire and Merrik screaming orders. His men were fleeing, leaving him and his precious wagons.

Alexa dashed through the last rows and then into the camp, where the drivers had the wagons ready to roll, but wolves were everywhere. Blood and bodies from both species littered the ground.

Alexa grabbed a reloading wagon driver by the leg, pointing. “That way. Go!”

The wagon drivers didn’t argue or waste time on questions. They put the whip to their asses and left Alexa and Merrik in a cloud of dust.

Alexa didn’t wait for Merrik to recover from the shock of seeing her there. She took off into the corn, not caring if he survived it or not.

Merrik, now completely alone, tore through the corn like a wild man to catch up.

Alexa let him, reluctantly. It really would be easier if he died here and now. What was waiting for him was uglier than wolves.

Mark slipped through the corn, shifting his prize to the other shoulder. He waited for a minute, letting Alexa's guns draw the wolves away from him before continuing. The corn was alive with shadows and snarls. Mark kept both guns out as he traveled. It would have been an impossible balancing act if not for Alexa's training sessions where they did exactly this while traveling. It gave the man being carried a needed break, toughened the man doing the carrying, and allowed the others to examine the struggles and make adjustments for their own training. Mark liked the way Alexa did things. Most of it was hands-on, learn as you go.

Mark crouched down as large shadows flew overhead, waiting. He couldn't identify the flyers, but he didn't need to in order to know they were bad news that he couldn't handle alone. It was as if the wildlife here was using bullhorns to magnify their intimidation factor.

As soon as the shadows were gone, Mark took off running toward the location he'd been given. As he departed, the screams and gunshots faded and the worry grew. He was sure Alexa would be there before he was, but that didn't stop the concern that she was out there alone. There were wolves, some strange flying shadows, bats, rats, and Merrik, who was likely less dangerous of all of those, but still a threat.

"She's got it covered. Now cover your own end." Mark increased his pace, hoping to reach the

shelter before the soldiers. As he leapt over a large rut, the heavy weight over his shoulder shifted and he lost his balance. Mark fell forward, hard, to land face first in the dirt and stalks.

As he lay there, breathing evening, Mark decided it would be better to arrive with his package alive. Being first didn't mean anything if it was emptyhanded.

“Ugh!”

Mark punched the slowly waking soldier; the male sagged against his bonds again.

Mark quickly took his prize to the concrete tunnel he'd been working his way toward since spotting it. The narrow storm drain would do just fine. Once daylight came, he would rejoin Alexa. She would know what he'd done and approve of it. She wanted the package alive and she would get it.

6

Alexa's men were with the survivors running blindly through the corn. They tried to lead them like she would have, but it was hard to keep going straight in this tall hell. Fifteen minutes after Alexa disappeared, her fighters finally got the people under control and put them into a line to march. The fighters roamed around them, guns in hand, as they kept moving. The wolves hadn't followed them yet, but there was little doubt that they would.

The sounds behind them—screams and Alexa’s Colts—were comforting. As long as they heard the guns, they knew she was okay.

“Over here.” Billy pointed at the outline of a building.

The stalks around the edge of the new site swayed angrily in the breeze, reaching out.

“Get down!”

As Jacob shouted, hundreds of the razor sharp stalks broke apart and launched at the travelers, slicing hands and faces.

Screams came from both ends of the strung out convoy as Alexa’s men shoved the people by the ambush spot. Using their bodies to shield people, the men were hit the worst.

“Get inside the first building you come to!” Daniel doubted any of the panicked people would listen or remember.

“Watch out! Get down!” Jacob hit the ground as a giant scythe swept over his curls with a vicious whine.

Jacob rolled and fired.

The shadow wielding the scythe didn’t flinch despite being hit.

Jacob rolled onto his feet and took off running with the others.

Paul gasped for air. “What was that?”

Daniel shoved him into the shed they had emerged near and the others surrounded it, ready to fight. The rest of the travelers were spread out in the

empty buildings, but they didn't go as far as the fighters had thought they would.

Alexa's men stayed ready, but the night fell silent.

They'd come to a larger station, this one with dozens of homes and structures. After a while, Jacob led Paul to the center. The buildings here were made of rusting metal and cracking wood, set in a patch of sickly brown dirt that even the corn wouldn't grow through.

The other men cleared it from the inside out. The spiral setup was a little disorienting. The Preacher settled in front of a storeroom-type barn with a sigh of relief. With some luck, any surviving soldiers would stick to the outer edges of this town and be picked off. They certainly hadn't shown much in the way of survival skills so far.

Who Jacob was rooting for, besides the kids, were the wagon drivers. If they lived, they would eventually be through here with whatever was left of their supplies. Those boxes and pouches could help a lot of Americans instead of this Roscoe creep. After the attacks, Jacob was hoping the drivers would be willing to sell their cargo and lie about it being destroyed.

Edward waved. "It'll be hours before any of them get here. Eat, stretch, and piss. Cold camp."

“She should be here.” David made sure his gun was fully loaded.

Billy did the same even though he knew it was. “She’s bringing the others. She’s fine.”

The silence around them belied that comfort, but they continued to wait as the travelers with them slowly came out and wandered the new campsite. They listened, hoping to hear her guns, but nothing came.

“Go get her!” Paul glared at all of them. “Go help her.”

“Shut up!”

Paul opened his mouth to protest Edward’s refusal.

Billy interrupted him. “Not a good time, *Rabbit*.”

Paul flushed. He had finally grown sensitive to the name. “Don’t call me that!”

Edward waved at the shed. “Shut up or wait there.”

Paul glanced at the shed, then the corn, and didn’t speak. He liked being in the thick of things.

Jacob kept his voice down as survivors wandered by them. “Should we?”

Billy shook his head. “She’ll be along. Let’s get it set up.”

Each man spotted things that would need to be done to convert the area into a temporary camp and got busy, leaving Jacob and Paul to stand guard. Paul’s hands were the only part of him that was clean. Jacob tried to stay downwind.

The wolves hadn't followed them from the corn and that was a relief, but Jacob wondered if that was because they were now in a more dangerous area that even those animals wouldn't trespass on.

8

Mark and Brian stared at each other for a long time. The inside of the storm drain was mostly dry, with that black mold growing up one corner. It was colder inside the huge pipe, but also safer.

It wasn't comfortable for the males, though, and the hostility on Brian's face was hard on Mark. "What? You want a drink or something?"

Brian snorted. "I want my freedom, you big thug."

Not used to the term, Mark chuckled. "There's one I haven't been called."

Hating to be laughed at, Brian sent flames up his hands that immediately began burning through his ropes.

Mark grunted, understanding now why he'd been sent. He quickly leaned over and rapped the struggling soldier on the skull with the butt of his gun. None of the others would be so rough on the boy.

Brian slumped against the damp concrete.

Mark cut the boy's charring ropes and resumed his place after making sure Brian was still breathing and the flames were out.

He hadn't struck him that hard. In only a couple of minutes Brian was groaning and trying to sit up.

Mark growled as Brian focused on him and tensed. "We're gonna talk or I'll make you kill me."

Brian thought about trying anyway, but he wasn't strong enough to gather the energy that fast and Mark knew it. He'd been with Alexa long enough to understand that when she expended a large amount of power, she was exhausted afterward, sometimes for hours, but sometimes for days. "What do you want to know?"

"Why does Roscoe want you?" He'd had a moment to consider it and the conclusion was easy for Mark to make. Face bruised, clothes wrinkled and dusty, Brian appeared every bit the unwilling hostage, but Mark wasn't sure that impression was the truth. Had he known Alexa would take him?

Brian clammed up as he realized Alexa had sent someone who understood how to deal with their kind. "I'll tell your boss, not you."

Mark was sensing a lot about the late teenage boy. He thought of what he knew about her past. "She won't keep you. She can't."

Brian didn't answer.

Mark shut his eyes, body language demonstrating that he wasn't afraid of Brian's gifts. "Play this hand on her side and be given your freedom as a reward."

Brian wanted to say yes, but he was tired of running. If he were set free, where would he go? How long would he run before he was caught again?

Mark wasn't sure what the problem was, but he could feel the indecision. He opened his eyes to find the boy shedding silent tears.

Mark's heart broke a little, but he pretended he didn't notice. Alexa was the healer. Mark was just the delivery system.

9

It was a large relief to hear the calls of mule drivers and the steady clip of boots moving forward calmly instead of in panic. Those who'd made it to the small town came from their chosen places cautiously.

Alexa's men lined up in front of their barn door, keeping Paul behind them.

Alexa jumped down from the lead wagon and joined her men, not speaking to anyone. In dawn's grudging light, she was beautiful. Alexa held a wildness that was complemented whenever she was forced to show what she was made of. It sent more pride into her men and more determination into her enemies.

Alexa settled into a corner, happy enough with the pallet they'd made for her from brittle straw and blankets. She was asleep a minute after finding a comfortable position, not talking to them at all. She didn't have the strength. She'd used up her reserves and needed to rest.

Her fighters positioned themselves around the door, spreading the word not to disturb her. The

males easily found things to occupy themselves while they listened to the late arrivals. It didn't take long to discover that Alexa had saved all of them by going back, and with the exception of the soldiers and gunfighters, everyone was grateful. They'd lost two soldiers and one of the sisters in the farming family, and had multiple injuries, but the group was mostly intact. There had been four sisters to start this trip, but they could still open their market with one less. It was the loss of the food supplies that would hurt them the most.

When their lowly spoken conversation came around to the hired killers, David frowned. "We may have to handle those three before we get through here."

"I agree." Daniel kept sewing a small rip in a sock. "Maybe soon, while they don't expect it."

"What about the soldiers?" Paul squeaked from his corner. The others had made it clear that when Alexa was woken, it had better not be by him.

"She'll decide. She saved them for a reason." Billy looked around. "Anyone know what it is?"

No one answered. They only saw benefits in removing those men, especially since the wolves would have done it and not Alexa, who didn't need the bounty on her to go any higher.

In all that time, none of them asked about Mark. They were afraid to curse his mission, whatever it was.

On guard duty, Jacob peered out the half open door, aware of the chill in the air and the ugliness of

the sky, but his attention was immediately drawn to the corn and the little girl there. The corpse child Alexa had shot was standing just outside the ring of civilization.

Their eyes met, locked. A spark of good and evil clashing exploded, sending out a silent vibration.

The corpse girl bared her fangs at Jacob, hissing in anger.

Jacob reached for his gun.

“What is it?”

“What’s wrong?”

Remembering Alexa’s words, Jacob returned his gun to the holster. “Nothing there.”

As Jacob watched, the child vanished and he gave thanks. Not to a deity, but to the leader who had taught him how to face his fears.

10

Alexa woke to normal routines being carried out. She’d been exhausted when she and Merrik had finally gotten his wagons rolling through the dirt and sharp stalks. By the time this barn had come into view, she’d been running on fumes. The sickness from being bitten had stolen her energy, and though Paul’s blood was helping, it wasn’t doing it fast enough.

Alexa stretched slowly, relishing the feel. She took the coffee Edward handed her and the smoke that David tossed, spending a few minutes bringing

herself to alertness without a rush or someone to kill. It was nice. “Watch rotation?”

“One more hour.” Jacob was still at his post on the door. He hadn’t seen the little girl again, but he could feel something out there watching him.

Alexa registered the nerves in her rookie’s answer and raised a brow at Edward.

Edward shrugged. “Been quiet so far, even the soldiers. They’re all still sleeping, except for a rotating patrol.”

Billy frowned. “Yeah. A very cheap patrol. They’re only doing the farmhouse that Merrik chose and the immediate property. The other travelers are clustered around us.”

“Good. And the wagons?”

“In the barn next to it, with the men he didn’t want in the house with him.” David looked away. “Both women are in there this time. We heard a fight over their order.”

Alexa’s face was blank instead of showing the anger that they had expected. “Anything else I should know?”

“The two kids with the old woman are sneaking around again. Almost been shot twice.” Jacob didn’t say one of those moments had been him when he’d first noticed them. They were similar in height and weight to the corpse girl; he’d nearly pulled his gun again without having a reason to. *I’ll get better at it. I’ll learn more control.*

Alexa settled onto her pallet with a bowl of the soup Billy had made. Thick, it held more than his

share of the goods. Alexa gave him a look that said not to do it again.

Billy wasn't one to encourage her praise the way the other five were, but he did tend to mother her more than she was sometimes comfortable with. In this case, the healthy meal would help her recover faster and he wasn't sorry.

"He's not back?"

No one spoke.

Alexa felt the calm slip from her shoulders. "I'll be out for a bit." She stood up, putting the steaming food aside. "Stay here."

No one followed like Mark would have. It made them worry about him even more.

Jacob saw her hit the stalks for the moment of privacy, but upon emerging, she proceeded to a different building. The Preacher started to tell the others.

Alexa gave a curt hand signal. *No!* She didn't want company right now.

Jacob stayed quiet, frowning.

Alexa strolled by the tent with the slavers and then the gunfighters on the porch of the next lot. She walked around the farmhouse, where a patrol of soldiers only gaped or grimaced. They'd been warned to avoid her. *Good.*

Alexa went to the old woman and two kids who had chosen a shed right behind the barn. She dropped a pouch of supplies outside the door and resumed her rounds.

The small family she'd sent Billy to help was next. Alexa received smiles and greetings from them. She found out their horse had been lost in the fight with the wolves. She might have offered to help with that under other circumstances, she didn't this time. She didn't like their abusive nature any more than her men did. Now they would either buy a new mount from one of the other travelers or carry their possessions themselves.

When the next couple asked her inside the quaint farmhouse for a meal, Alexa declined reluctantly, sure it would be wonderful food despite the limited conditions. The family was indeed heading for what they'd heard was a more civilized area; they'd been out here long enough to know how to pull solid meals from the land.

Alexa finished her rounds, marking where everyone was. By the time she made it back around, the gunfighters were snoozing. She strolled to the small cell wagon, staying out of sight of the porch, but not caring about anyone else who might witness.

The man inside the wooden cell was thin, but his skin was clean, his teeth were all there, and the bruises on his wrists were fresh. It didn't appear as though he'd lived a life of crime, but rather, had been caught in a moment of such.

“Who are they taking you to?”

The man stared at Alexa for a long moment where she spotted the sly insanity glaring back at her.

“Roscoe.”

Alexa was tired of hearing that name. It made her tone sharp. “For what? Speak up.”

The man eased away from her reach before answering. “Rape.”

“Are you guilty?”

“No! Roscoe wants me because I’m the best tracker in the country. He accused me when I refused the job, so I ran.”

Alexa didn’t respond. The gunfighters were coming from their places to check on their prisoner. She vanished into the corn as they came into view.

Still observing from the barn door, Jacob blew out a sigh of relief.

Edward stirred behind him. “Something wrong?”

“Nope.” Jacob grinned. “Boss has it covered and then some.”

Chapter Six
Haunted

1

“**M**errik and his merry men are coming.”

Daniel watched from his post by the open door. He was becoming weary of other people, though they’d only recently made contact.

Everyone waited as the door opened.

Merrik paused in the doorway. “Comin’ in.”

“Nice and easy.”

Alexa’s voice was a surprise to the Captain and his men, but to their credit, no one fired. They had hoped she’d gone on ahead.

Edward spotted the small tattoo on Merrik’s arm, a purple triangle with old symbols, and wondered if he was the son of someone important. Edward couldn’t think of any other reason that Alexa hadn’t killed the man yet.

Alexa stood up, but kept eating. It was too good to waste. David had shoved the second bowl into her hands as soon as she’d returned. “Light us up.”

Edward quickly stoked the fire so the two groups could stare at each other. Alexa’s men were spread out, guns in hand. Merrik’s men were clustered in the doorway, making perfect targets.

“Can we help you?”

Merrick took a step into the room, trying to act like he hadn't been caught off guard by her being here and using a civil tone. "Thought you'd be long gone."

Alexa's tone was cold. "Not until I get what I came for."

"And what is that?"

"You, of course. The rebellion still whispers of you in loathing for your crimes at the refugee sites." Alexa recognized the guilt in Merrik's silence and on his face. She pushed harder. "I see you recall that day. The price on your head is entry to Port City."

Merrick's men muttered over the reward. Port City was a small haven on the east coast where almost normal life continued. Getting in as a resident was nearly impossible. Their silence spoke volumes.

"Do you hear that? It's the sound of your men wondering if they can find a way to collect that bounty."

Merrick snorted uneasily. "My men are loyal. We were just clearing these buildings. We didn't come for you."

Alexa didn't put her gun away. "I can't say the same, but *this* den is obviously taken."

Merrick continued to backtrack. "I get that."

"Then get gone."

Merrick glared at Paul as he exited. "Your payment will come for Zale. The government will hunt you."

Paul surprised them all by responding harshly. “They already have been, you bunker baby! Get a clue.”

“First impressions aren’t always right.” Jacob stared as Merrik stopped to argue. “Upon first sight, I thought you were a man to beware of, but you’re really just a yapper humping our ankles, aren’t you?”

Merrick flushed, face flashing violence.

Jacob grinned coldly. “Oh, yeah. Do it.”

Merrick abruptly left, taking his men with him.

David didn’t relax. “They’re not done.”

“Nope.” Alexa stood by the fire. “And when the rains come, he’ll miss the men we’re going to kill.”

Paul asked the question that none of the other men needed to. They already knew the answer. “When will Mark get here?”

“When he completes his chore.”

“What is he doing?”

“Giving us the advantage.” Alexa faced Paul, handing out his punishment. “Most of this is your fault, Paul. When we reach Lincoln, you’ll stay there. I’ve made my choice.”

Paul wanted to argue, but she cut him off. “No. You’re clumsy, prone to anger, and you don’t pull your weight. All of that, I could have overlooked and retrained out of you, but when you shot someone in the back over an insult, you chose your own fate. We have no room for you.”

“This is a mistake.” Paul’s skin faded to red on pale again. “You need me.”

“No, Rabbit, I don’t. We’ll never make it to Safe Haven while pulling your stink.” Alexa was pissed that he had shot Zale at all, let alone in the back. There was no honor in killing over meaningless words.

The men silently agreed, relieved that it was settled. Paul would remain in Lincoln while they continued their quest. With Alexa’s choice to be shed of the weight, the feeling of family, of it being time for another story, fell over the room. Alexa complied to keep them from worrying over Mark.

“I had to be retrained after my years in the lab. The truth was hard for me to accept. I resented my father for leaving me there. If he was so important, so powerful, why couldn’t I be with him? There were few answers that I accepted during those first months.” Alexa settled into the stone chair, rough fingers tracing the sharp edges of chiseled arm grooves. “We were told the government was the protector, the good guys. We were shown films of our kind, films where we killed innocent people. It was why we had to be locked up. We weren’t safe to be around anyone except soldiers and even then, things could go wrong.”

“Like what?” Daniel sensed Paul already had that answer playing in his mind in vivid detail.

“Everyone wanted to be marked as an Alpha. It meant more privileges and more care, but more importantly, it meant trips to other labs and places. It meant getting out, being free for a while. We craved that above all else. When a real Alpha

exerted their power over the others, fights happened. Betas were sure if they could kill an Alpha, they would get a jump and become top dog themselves. It was ugly.”

Jacob didn't hide his anger. “Surely you mean older teenagers? Not kids?”

“Children of *any* age have short tempers and little control over themselves.” Alexa's voice was as hard as the stone she was sitting on. “Give those kids power and that tantrum becomes flames or the shouting match ends in a storm. I've witnessed both.”

Jacob was intrigued. “Can you do those things?”

“That and more. You can understand how it set me apart from the others, even as it bonded them to me.”

Paul spoke up before one of the others could ask another question. “They had no choice. We have to obey the Alpha. There's actual pain if we don't.”

Daniel frowned. “What if the Alpha is bad?”

Paul shrugged. “I've never known it to make a difference. Only a stronger Alpha can take over.”

Daniel denied Paul's mutter. “No one's stronger than Alexa. She'll always be the lead.”

Alexa didn't correct him. If they never found her father, it would be true. She was Adrian's only daughter and her gifts were beyond what most descendants had. She was unique.

As if to prove that point, Alexa ran a rough hand over Paul's face and healed his injuries.

There were gasps and confusion, mostly because her men didn't understand why she would waste her energy on Paul.

Alexa shrugged, settling back with a groan as her spine popped. "I got tired of looking at his face. It was creeping me out."

Men snickered as Paul flushed.

"Someone's coming."

Billy's warning got his fellow fighters into their defensive positions.

Footfalls came through the dimness, careless and noisy. A knob creaking, a push open, and then shadows filled the doorway.

"Hold your fire, mistress."

The old woman's voice was followed by two young mutters.

"Cold, Grammie!"

"Hungry."

Alexa sighed. "Enter."

The old woman leaned on the boy as she made her way to the far corner of the wide room. As she sat down on a stone bench, she motioned toward the hearth. A bit wide, but not excessively so, wild white hair piled atop her head and spilled over her face, concealing most of it.

"No lights, no noise. And keep them quiet or I will."

The old woman gathered the kids and tried to feed them from her pockets. After a minute of watching her pull crumbs and moldy cookies from deep pockets, Alexa rolled her eyes. "Daniel."

Daniel handed the old woman a pouch with a two day meal kit. The kids rifled through it furiously for anything they could eat cold.

The kids ruined some of it; the old woman ignored them as the fighters expressed their disapproval.

“Why are you out here with these kids?” Jacob tossed his last two biscuits toward the filthy urchins. “You can’t take care of them.”

Grammie shifted on the bench. “Their mother took off. Been gone for years. Got a letter last month saying she was in Lincoln and wanted ‘em.”

David frowned. *A dependable mother would have come for them herself once she had a new life built.*

Alexa raised a brow.

The Blacksmith shook his head. “Nothing wrong, just being judgmental.”

“Would you care to share your opinion with the rest of us?”

David didn’t pull any punches. “They’ll all be dead long before Lincoln.”

“Agreed.”

The old woman didn’t respond to either of them. It appeared that she’d already fallen asleep.

The kids crawled into a corner with the food and wolfed it down before falling into a pile of bruised limbs and huge yawns. Their snores soon filled the room. The old woman never budged.

Merrick and ten of his men gathered on the far side of the outpost, plotting. When they thought they were ready, Merrik led them back to Alexa's building.

"Around the rear." Merrik pointed at his men. "You, cover the window. You two, front door!"

Three soldiers dashed around the back as two others kicked the wooden front door open.

"Behind you!"

They spun to find Alexa in the corn behind them. A few men darted for cover. One panicked soldier raised his gun.

Lined up on each side of her, Alexa's men didn't hesitate.

Merrick ducked the well-aimed bullets flying through his team of soldiers, darting toward safety with the sound of Alexa's Colts thundering in his cowardly ears.

Merrick slammed the door on his warehouse, panting nervously. He'd slipped to the side and made it here, but if Alexa came for him, he had little to stop her with. This station wasn't stocked at all.

He whirled around as the door opened, but it was three of his own men back from their rotating patrol. He barely stopped himself from firing.

"Boss! They're all dead!"

"Shit!" Merrik swore. "How many men are still out on patrol?"

“Five.” Corporal Scott’s eyes were still as crossed now as they had been at birth. “But there’s another problem.”

Merrick glowered, not ready for any more bad tidings. “What now?”

“We...uh...can’t find Brian.”

Merrick’s face flushed a dark red. “You lost him last night?! Damn you to hell!”

Merrick wrenched the door open and stomped toward Alexa’s shelter with hatred in his heart and betrayal in his thick mind.

Alexa and her men were still standing outside. She flashed a sickly grimace. “Feels bad, doesn’t it? Being out of control of someone’s life when they’re important.”

Merrick drew up, catching the warning, but he couldn’t stop the shout. “Where is he?!”

Alexa thumbed toward corn that surrounded them so menacingly. “Out there.”

“Why did you take him?!”

Alexa was quickly tiring of the noise. “To control you, of course.” She raised a brow. “Unless you want him dead now. Then I can save us all the trouble.”

Merrick realized that if he killed her, Brian would also die. “What do you want?”

“The same as everyone else here. To get through The Killing Fields to Lincoln and then go my own way.”

Merrick wasn’t able to hide his interest and chose to ask what he wanted to know. According to the

legends, her type didn't use lies. "What's your business in Lincoln?"

"Roscoe."

Merrick clearly wasn't expecting that. He started to warn her off.

Alexa began laying her trap. "I have something that belongs to him."

Now Merrik was more than interested. He thought quickly, trying to plan it to his advantage.

Alexa wasn't about to give him time to do that until after they had a deal in place. "Safe passage until we reach Lincoln and Roscoe. Agreed?"

Merrick had little choice since the wagons were going to Roscoe anyway. He gave a curt nod. "Fine. Bring him in."

Alexa laughed. "Not on my life, Captain. You'll get him when I reach Lincoln, so you can't try to steal what I have and give it to Roscoe yourself for the reward."

Merrick started to argue again.

Alexa flashed that cold, killer's gaze his way.

He paused. "...what reward are you claiming?"

Alexa laid the final bait. "A Port City pass, same as the bounty on your head. I'd imagine that if you made it to Port City with a pass, they'd have to rescind that bounty and clear your name."

"You'd give me your pass?"

Alexa nodded this time. "I would, but with something done for me after I hand it to you. You'll kill someone for me. Then we'll be even."

Merrick wasn't sure if it was a trick or not, but he figured he could always grab her after he got the pass. "Who am I killing?"

"I haven't met them yet."

Merrick didn't care either way. "Fine, but if you chicken out, I'll go AWOL and hunt you down."

"As much as I love a challenge, I'm already on a quest. That would interfere. I'll keep my word. You do the same."

Merrick left, taking his remaining men along. He left the bodies for Alexa to handle. He needed to spend some time thinking about how she might be tricking him and about how he could do the same to her. He wanted the pass, but he also wanted the government reward for bringing Alexa in. Between the two, the government bounty was far more generous. Brian, he didn't care for at all. The boy was a means to an end. What Roscoe wanted him for, Merrik didn't know or care.

3

Alexa and her men returned to the storeroom and found two more people there than when they'd slipped through the window to wait for Merrik.

"Very nice." Alexa sent a wave of pleasure.

Mark glowed at the praise.

Next to him, bound and gagged, Brian glared defensively.

Mark tossed a joke at her, grinning. "Now, my reward, if you please."

Alexa took him seriously. “What would you have?”

Suddenly nervous, Mark forced the words out. “Don’t sleep with Paul tonight.”

Paul moaned in protest, but Alexa was glad. “Done.” She hated the way he smelled. It would be a relief to be away from it.

Mark smiled, not expecting that; the other men favored him with their grateful looks.

Alexa sat in front of Brian, noting that Mark’s secondary ropes were on him. She removed the gag, but not the binds.

Face-to-face with her again, Brian’s choice became easier, but not the agony involved in reaching it. He wanted to rail at her, to scream and accuse. He also wanted to hug her.

Alexa leaned in and sent a powerful blast of her scent into his face. It would force him to tell the truth and save her the energy of blasting through his mental walls.

Brian recoiled from the super sweet odor, and then betrayed himself by inhaling repeatedly until the cloud had dissipated.

Behind them, her men exchanged glances of pity. They knew what an accidental gust of her scent could do. This was intentional.

“Who runs the government now?”

“No one knows.” Brian’s turned his face against the cool wall of the barn. “We haven’t seen him in a year.”

“You were given paper orders?”

“Always. Only the commanding officers of each unit have access to leadership.”

“How many bunkers are still holding?”

Brian growled at her, at the voices in his head and the feelings rushing through his body.

Alexa placed a comforting hand on his brow and froze.

Brian shuddered, trying to fight the invasion of his mind.

Alexa drew back. “Why are you so green?”

“I just got out!” He kept fighting the lure of her scent as it swirled over him. “I’m in training.”

“Where have you been since the war?”

“Underground until last year. I tried to leave a few times before. They didn’t want that.”

“I assume Merrik doesn’t trust his employers. Is that why he protects wagon trains of supplies for Roscoe?”

“Those aren’t supplies.” Brian snapped his mouth shut. Merrik would kill him for giving out that information. So would Roscoe.

Alexa already knew. “Weapons. Roscoe plans to fight the government.”

“I don’t know who he wants it for.” Brian sulked. “No one does.”

“Why would anyone want you?” Paul hated Brian on sight. The boy had gifts, Paul could feel it, and that meant Alexa knew it, as well.

Brian didn’t want to answer, but when Alexa stood up, he scrambled away, panicking. “I’m an assassin! No one suspects a green kid!”

Alexa jealously relished the moments when her instinct was proven right. This wasn't what she preferred, but if it would get the job done, in the end, that was what mattered. In this case, her intuition had provided them with a dangerous addition to their already formidable strength.

Brian stared, tone snotty. "Don't you want to know why they picked me?"

"I recognize my own kind!" Alexa gave back just as rudely.

Outside, rain began to fall.

With her scent swarming, Brian couldn't keep up the act. His shoulders slumped. "Got a smoke?"

Brian's filthy fatigues and dirt layered blond hair said he'd spent an uncomfortable night with Mark. Noting the slightly yellowed fingertips, she held out her pouch of tobacco. "Roll two."

"My bonds?"

"Handle them yourself." She watched, verifying his identity.

Brian burnt through the ropes again in seconds, not looking away from her.

Alexa's crew muttered. A couple of them immediately began to suspect who the boy really was.

Brian took the pouch slowly, being careful not to let their skin touch while Mark stomped out the smoldering ropes. It was hard to believe he'd found her. Hearing stories of Alexa and her infamous father were one thing. Being within a foot of her was

entirely different. All of his anger, his bitterness, seemed petty.

“You have a right to it.” Alexa settled onto her ass nearby as her men got busy on various projects. “Where will you go?”

Brian didn’t have an answer.

Alexa was forced to offer the only solution there was at the moment. “The base wants you. Roscoe wants you. Hire yourself out to someone who hates both of them. Buy your protection with power.”

Brian was shaking his head, but Alexa didn’t give him time to voice the protests she’d heard so many times. “You have a duty to survive, to remain honest and good. I know the lines we’re required to walk and it hasn’t changed. Find a good group to serve and love. That’s Adrian’s command and I give the same to you.” Alexa leaned in and placed a gentle kiss atop Brian’s head. “But you’ll stay my captive until I’ve gotten my time’s worth. Is that understood?”

Brian nodded.

Alexa gave him a short hug that warmed and healed him. When she rose, the lights of devotion flashed in his violet eyes.

“I’d give you my life! *You’re* the reason I came out.”

She sighed, heart hurting. “If you follow us, you’ll die. I’ve already dreamed of it. You *are* too weak.”

Those words hurt. Everyone turned away from the boy’s open pain. This world was hard.

“We’ve got a new issue.” Jacob pointed from the doorway. “There’s a storm racing in from the west.”

4

The buildings weren’t sturdy.

Some of the travelers knew to secure their shelter against what was coming, like Alexa’s group, but most only hunkered down and waited for it to be over. A few even scoffed at the preparing people with thoughts that called them fools to waste such energy on a place they would only remain in for a night.

Paul was among the latter. “I don’t get why she has us doing this.” His hands were covered in mud, stalks, and other debris.

Edward didn’t answer. He and Mark were slopping mud into the cracks and covering it with twigs, being sure to shove it in deep enough to keep it tight. It hurt their necks and ankles to keep their positions as they worked. All Paul had to do was put his hand in the bucket to mix the mud. Even Brian was working, though it was from the inside where Jacob could see him as he stood watch in the doorway.

“Yuck! This stinks.”

Mark let out an annoyed breath at Paul’s whining and pushed the leaves in further.

Only drizzling now, half the sky was pale green and the other was deep gray. It was intimidating; the

men worked continuously, prepping for the coming deluge. A nasty whine to the wind suggested a thunderstorm instead of a gentle rainfall.

Alexa directed a piece of scrap metal into place over the hole in the rear corner of the roof, using her hip and knee to bend it down and send the flow away. There wasn't much precipitation yet, but the way Alexa spared no time moving onto each task had begun to draw attention from the others.

The slavers were the first to follow suit. If they lost their wares, they would be bankrupt and have to start all over. These males were slotted for entertainment in Lincoln, where fresh slaves could be sold for a healthy profit. One of the Powder Protectors stayed inside with the snoozing males as the rest of that group copied Alexa's preparations.

Two of the families had been doing work already, and the two remaining homesteaders followed suit not long after the wind began to blow debris around.

The soldiers sat or leaned against wooden walls with holes and gaps, mocking the preppers. Merrik was still inside their warehouse. His men spent the time as if it were R & R.

Nearby, the hired gunmen had risen and were grudgingly following the mapmaker's instructions. Unlike Alexa, he wasn't getting his hands dirty. The mapmaker was the type to up the pay before breaking a sweat, especially when there was no imminent threat that he could spot. However, he'd

heard enough about Alexa to avoid the bad odds of surviving if he ignored her. He wasn't Merrik.

Apparently, the price was right; the hired hands were moving slowly, but they were moving.

Inside Alexa's hut, the old woman and kids remained a burden to be carried. Already suffering Paul, Alexa's men didn't complain. Their honor said protecting the weak was another plus in the good column when death finally caught up and ended their competition to fill hell.

"This is a settlement that the government tried to put in place not long after the war." The old woman came to the door slowly. "They didn't realize it was already claimed."

"Claimed by whom?" The old woman had kept to herself so far. Jacob was curious about her story and about her lies.

The old woman leaned heavily against the doorframe. "The corn's Master. Whoever it was, they didn't like the soldiers being here. All three hundred of their bodies were discovered by a supply team. They'd been slaughtered, but there were no traces of an enemy, only dead soldiers. After that, the reputation grew."

"I heard about the ghost girls who protect travelers here for a price." Paul shuddered. "Is that true?"

The old woman grinned, showing rotten teeth and gaps where a curled tongue poked through. "Yes, but you can't afford the price. You don't even belong with *her* kind."

Paul's mouth opened, hand dripping goop onto Edward's boots.

Edward elbowed him in the shoulder hard enough to topple him from his overturned bucket stool.

Snickers filled the courtyard as he landed with a hard thump.

Edward turned back to the old woman, wiping his muddy hands. "You were telling us about the price of protection?"

Grammie squinted to view his features more clearly.

Edward held himself in place at his post instead of moving closer to allow her a better view. There was something hinky about the old woman that her story of a wayward daughter didn't quite explain.

"The price is a life." The old woman was still staring at Edward. "Would you pay it?"

"No. I can defend myself."

The woman's cackle was chilling.

Edward didn't respond. That sound said he had no idea what he was talking about, and while his ego didn't care for the feeling, it also made him nervous. What if she was right?

Ping! Ping!

Alexa looked up as splatters hit the roof. "Get inside. We're out of time."

The storm was frightening. It rolled in silent as the grave, flashing multicolored lightning in the distance as the only warning. Moans came from the corn as the wind shoved through the stalks in eerie, spirit-dampening groans and howls that left silence as everyone stopped talking to listen.

“Demon rain.” The old woman went to her pile of furs and blankets in the corner.

Alexa wasn’t wary of their guests, but she didn’t like the old lady. “And ghosts. You know how to handle them?”

The old woman shifted into a comfortable position. “I’m not bothered by such things. The children have their own protections. Don’t concern yourself with us.”

Next to the old woman, Brian was already huddled beneath the blanket that Alexa had given him, determined not to come out for anything unless Alexa was in danger.

The storm didn’t remain silent. Deep rumbling rolled through the ground as the storm drew closer, shaking the buildings and sending vibrations of ill tidings into feet and ears. Instinct said this was going to get ugly. Inside each shelter on the outer edges was someone who now wished they’d taken cover with Alexa and her fighters.

The rain fell in thick, noisy drops that pinged off the roofs and sheds like a musical instrument tuned to an evil radio station; the wind howled harder in response. Together, it was enough to muffle all

other noise except when the thunder rolled toward them.

Lightning flared brightly through covered windows. Everyone braced for the hit.

Bamm!

The strike was near enough to shake the buildings, causing more low mutters of concern. They didn't like the new weather. For Alexa, it was a comfort. The rain would not only wash away their scent, it would thin the herd again and give them fewer problems to handle tomorrow. If they survived the night, which she had no doubts about in her shelter. The others were not going to be so lucky. She cleared the doorway for any more that might come. Even those who didn't know of her family and hadn't heard of Safe Haven were drawn to her light.

As if to prove her thought, the door opened to reveal the traders, who herded their valuable stock inside before coming to Alexa to negotiate.

Alexa directed them to the corner by the old woman, refusing to discuss such things right now. The need came first.

The slavers took the place gratefully, pressing coins into the palms of Alexa's men. These women knew better than to let a debt stand in this world. It often came back to haunt you.

Lightning flared again. The sound of a nearby building being hit echoed louder than the thunder. The shelter rattled, dirt dusting over all of them, and then the sound of a complete and total deluge came.

Thick and hard, the storm covered the station like a plague.

The roofs on every building had gaps that allowed drips and or rushing torrents inside. Even Alexa's shelter had this problem despite their repairs. She'd only had material and time to cover the largest holes. Rainwater slowly puddled on the floor. The drip became a constant noise that blended in with the howls and splatters hitting the roofs and ground, threatening the sanity of those inside after hours of the same. As soon as the men settled into a dry place, a new leak would spring and quickly soak them. Then the wind blew hard enough to rattle the doors and added a sharp chill. Nature was relentless.

In the misery and tension, it was easy to overlook a problem. Even when the puddles rippled with lines and thickened, no one noticed.

Alexa felt the chill of danger and waved her men away from the door, unsure when the storm would unleash the worst wrath. The stories told of travelers being lulled to sleep before death; she made sure her men were alert. She glanced around at them to confirm that, only to discover danger everywhere.

Shadowy ghosts with gleaming weapons and evil red eyes rose from nearly every puddle.

“Son of a bitch.” Filling with cold fury and concern, Alexa drew her gun.

Chapter Seven

What Devil Rains Be These?

1

“**D**o as I say!” Alexa saw a shadow demon rise like liquid steam from a puddle near the door. “Close your eyes!”

Her men obeyed quickly, but those who had come here for protection didn’t understand why Alexa wasn’t reacting.

“We do not believe in you! You’re not real.” Alexa repeated it until her men were also chanting it, barely audible over the screams and clashing of weapons as those nearest to the door were attacked by the shadows. She didn’t open her eyes, but she still tried to help them. “They are ghosts! Your belief gives them life! Shut your eyes.”

It sounded as if no one was listening. Alexa grunted unhappily. She couldn’t let them be slaughtered, not in here with her.

Alexa’s guns crashing brought her men into the fight and for a while, there was only the sound of gunfire and screams.

The door opened suddenly, letting in a blur of shapes and sizes.

Merrik recoiled when those Colts flashed his way. “Don’t shoot!”

“Get down and close your eyes!” Mark’s fury returned. They’d almost had it under control!

Merrik and his men were just as confused as the other travelers had been, causing the chaos to restart.

Alexa shoved two soldiers into a corner, smacking their cheeks against the wall. “Close your eyes!”

She ducked under the swing of a shadow fighter and nailed a soldier in his ankle. It dropped him in time to avoid the same warrior’s swipe.

Alexa shoved his face into the corner. “For our lives, stop looking at them!”

Alexa circled the room, grabbing fighters, directing them on what to do and slowly, the sounds of fighting eased. The shadow warriors almost immediately left these people alone to attack those still struggling.

When it was only Alexa and Merrik, she closed her own eyes and didn’t care if he did the same. The bodies of his men were strewn across the compound leading to here.

“Alexa!”

Paul’s shout was terrified.

She snapped around to find one of the shadow men bringing an arm down to kill him. The next instant, Edward rolled into Paul’s place, shoving the scientist into the wall. Paul slumped to the ground, knocked out.

Edward took the slice of the knife through his upper arm.

Alexa fired to draw the warrior to her. She gathered herself as they all rushed her way, sending out her wrath in a powerful spell. “You’re not real!”

The warriors screamed in rage as they burst into a million bits of sand and grit that covered the room and everything in it.

Alexa eyed Paul on the floor and shook her head when Edward would have checked on him. “Leave him alone. He’s being helpful right now.”

Her men laughed, much to the surprise of the others. Even the soldiers were shaken.

Alexa’s group was observed worriedly as they pulled bodies outside, chatting lightly. Death did not faze them unless it was extreme and this hadn’t been anywhere near that.

As if to mock, the rain picked up again and the smiles fell from their faces. In Afterworld, when nighttime fell over this dead land, time became slower somehow. This had only been round one.

It was the longest night that most of them had ever spent. Shadows swam in the puddles, tassels flew through opened doors, both drawing blood and screams. The wind moaned through hollow stalks and wolves pawed at the doors and windows in steady waves. Decay weakened wood couldn’t hold up against Nature’s fury, and the travelers realized it as their hastily chosen shelters collapsed. It wasn’t

long before everyone was with Alexa and her fighters, trying to copy her.

It was an odd style of fighting that none of them were familiar with, including Alexa's men. Shooting rats and wolves while ignoring the shadow warriors was unsettling, but there was no denying that it worked. The instant a fighter pretended the ghosts weren't there, the shadow demons faded, only to reform in the nearest puddle. Those who couldn't pretend were cut down where they stood. Their *belief* killed them.

The ghost knights returned each time the rain did, but Alexa had her group under control. They passed the time chanting about reality not being broken. At some moments it was hard to keep going, especially when the family in the next building over began to scream. The five people had gone there during the last break in the storm, despite warnings that it wasn't over yet, saying they needed privacy. No one had asked or argued, and now the family was too far out of Alexa's light to be saved.

The sounds didn't stop for a long time. Everyone knew it was a ploy to trick Alexa into coming out with her men. When she returned, it would be to all of these people being corpses.

The screaming grew louder. It was meant to torture her and it succeeded. By the time the dawn finally lightened their compound, tears had streaked a permanent path down Alexa's cheeks, but she

hadn't ventured into the trap. *I'm not meant to save them all.*

2

Everyone was glad when light finally seeped through the windows.

Merrick and his men had once again taken the greatest hit. The Drafted soldiers had spent the years since the war underground. They hadn't understood how sheltered they'd been, how betrayed they were, by the very government they now worked for and died for. Half of Merrick's men were now dead or injured, leaving him with only two dozen to complete this trek. Two of the slave traders had also succumbed, along with one of their precious males and one of the gunfighters, who wouldn't survive his wounds. They hadn't checked on the family yet, but there was little doubt they were also dead. They'd lost twenty people in one night. When she'd thought about the herd being thinned, she hadn't thought it would be this bad.

When Alexa waved her men into sleep and sentry shifts, the other camps followed without any argument, even the soldiers. They were all too relieved to be alive to protest.

Seeing her men had Brian covered, Alexa settled down between Edward and Paul, but she didn't take blood from one or comfort from the other. She fell into a thick sleep that worried those who knew her best. After a battle, Alexa was usually

wound up. She was worsening, and they still weren't sure what she needed to become healthy again. Over the months they'd traveled together, she'd shown signs of use and wear, but it had sped up since being bitten by the vampire baby.

Edward covered Alexa with his thickest blanket, being sure there were no drips falling on her. The storm had gone, leaving drizzle and puddles of blood that they wouldn't even try to clean. Once Alexa woke, they would go.

David had first watch, along with two of Merrik's men. He noticed the fog lifting, but didn't point it out. A debate about leaving now would wake Alexa.

David scanned the empty, half demolished buildings around them and then the corn. Nothing moved. He scanned the settling travelers. They were exhausted, but David noticed the old woman and two kids were relatively calm. He couldn't remember seeing or hearing them during the fight. He assumed they'd found a way to hide.

David subtly examined the two females who were with the soldiers. The tall blonde was clearly willing, but the younger girl flinched at loud noises and her haunted gaze darted nervously to the door, as if weighing the risks of running. Under her short dress was a thin body covered in bruises and other evidence of misuse.

David slowly moved away from the door to give her the chance if she wanted to run. As casually as Alexa might have, he dropped his smallest knife

into a pile of molded straw, positive that she was watching him.

Across the room, their wagon driver tossed a small pouch toward the old woman. The four drivers hadn't helped battle the shadow knights, but they hadn't gotten in the way either. It had angered David then, but they had just helped a stranger, an old woman with young children, so they were probably okay to travel with. That reduced the possible threats to Nature, the fields themselves, two healthy gunfighters, and Merrik. Everyone else was far below Alexa's group in skills.

David went to the side window to observe from that angle and froze. The corpse girl was standing beneath the filthy glass frame.

David picked out details, like the dirt in her hair and the bloody fingernails. Her torn clothing and vacant expression suggested she'd climbed from a grave...or had recently dug one.

David shivered.

The apparition eyed him adoringly, then sniggered.

Unsettled, David watched her fade away before returning to his post by the main door. Going outside wasn't a good idea right now. If the younger woman wanted to run, she would have to pick another time. Letting her go out there would be murder. However, he left the knife where it had fallen. Maybe she would kill Merrik the next time he tried to take her and save them all the headache later.

3

Fog came in through the afternoon, covering the corn and then the buildings until it was impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. The drizzle wasn't far behind.

When she woke, bleary and grumpy, Alexa immediately changed the travel plans. The horrors in this fog would be nearly impossible to fight. "I'm not leaving until that clears out. Set up a base site."

Alexa's men were relieved that they wouldn't be going into the fog, but they were also disappointed. If they survived that, they would feel like even bigger badassess than they already were. The constant improving and sharpening was a perk of being with her and they all craved it.

Jacob was on guard now. He leaned against the outside of the door, vaguely aware of people digging graves, of men laughing and telling jokes as they celebrated being alive, and of the corn waving in the breeze. The rain had gone when the fog came, but Jacob didn't think that would have been better to be out in. This part of The Killing Fields was designed to keep travelers around to face another night of horror. In their case, it had worked. Everyone was dreading nightfall. It didn't help their nerves to look around their shelter and see pile after pile of leaves and stalks that they'd brought in to cover and soak up the blood. It was a constant

reminder that they were still here and it was starting to rain again.

Jacob turned to scan the other side of the small station. The corpse child was standing between the rows, baring her teeth.

“This is getting old.” Jacob closed his eyes. “Not real, kid. Not real.”

When he looked, the child was still there, only now, blood was running from the corner of her mouth. Her hands came up with something bloody. She took a big bite, tearing away flesh and muscle. Jacob was almost sure it was a human arm.

He opened his mouth to call for his relief.

Alexa’s hand on his shoulder was a comfort.

“Someone is curious about you, I think.”

He was relieved to have her at his side for this. “Who?”

“The Master of the house in the corn. It knows that we’re here.”

Jacob signaled his relief over. “I’m off guard duty.”

“Yes. They’re watching you for something. Try to figure out what they want.”

Jacob wondered if it meant he was the weak link. “I won’t slow us up.”

Alexa didn’t answer. If the Master of the house decided to take Jacob, she would go in after him. When she left the corn, all of her men would be with her, including Paul.

Alexa glanced over to find that one sulking in the corner. He’d given up the minute she said he

wasn't going any further than Lincoln. It was a weakness that she simply didn't have the time or inclination to conquer. If he went further than Lincoln with them, he would die. She didn't want his blood on her hands. There was far too much of that already there.

4

As evening approached, the fog hadn't left, making the travelers antsy. People muttered and grunted about the cold chill hanging over the station. Soldiers snapped at each other; animals refused to sleep. By sunset, it had only gotten worse. All the groups took shelter before full darkness hit. Most of them stayed close to Alexa.

As night covered the corn, Alexa kept in mind that nerves were often the hardest part of a battle. She settled down near the fire to clean her guns.

When she motioned David to roll a smoke, her men gathered around, noting that she hadn't set a guard.

The others inside the barn with them observed curiously, but kept their distance. Except for the male slaves. They went to enjoy the fire when their owners said it was okay. The makeup and jewelry on the male slaves wasn't discussed, but Alexa's men were more confused by that than by women bulking up to have a male body. They needed the size to survive in the world. The male slaves had no excuse for such wallowing, was the consensus

among the fighters. Any of them would die before surrender and it was hard to understand males who were the opposite.

The old woman and her children were already sequestered in the far corner, but the trio was keeping track of things. Whenever things went crazy, the old woman and the kids had been no help, but it didn't stop Alexa's men from offering them bowls from their meal. Nor the old woman from accepting the gifts.

Alexa was aware of faint howls coming through the corn, of the battle trying to restart, but she started speaking, causing all other conversations to cease. Without Merrik and his men, who thought they now knew the secret and didn't need to bunk with Alexa, it was almost a peaceful moment. "The first time I saw my father, I was ten. I had spent a full year being freed of brainwashing before they would even let me near him. Too many of our kind were traitors. It turned out that they were wise to keep us apart. I was angrier than I realized, but that part of my story will come later. For now, hear of our first meeting."

Then

Alexa, ten-years-old with long pigtails, sat on the stone stairs of the old ruins of the tower, watching the tiny town below. She'd spent hours here, staring at the sea, and at the running, laughing islanders. She never wanted to leave.

Footfalls behind her were a reminder of her captors, though she no longer viewed them exactly as such. A year in gentle hands had done well for her.

Alexa stood up, assuming it was time to go in, but the man standing behind her wasn't a guard.

“Hello, Lexie.”

The sound of his voice rang in her ears, called to her...

Alexa subtly searched for her protection. She spotted her guard studying their surroundings instead of her and understood this man had permission to be here. “Do I know you?”

“You don't, but you will.” The man smiled at her. “Walk with me?”

Alexa didn't consider refusing. She knew better than to challenge an Alpha like this one, but she was also curious. She'd only had teachers and shrinks since coming to this island. There hadn't been a new face in the entire year.

They strode toward the beach, toward the playing children there. Alexa worried, even though her guard was following at a distance. She wasn't allowed to have contact with the island people. They weren't even supposed to know she was here, though Alexa thought that ship had already sailed.

The blond man led them straight to the children who were throwing balls through a hoop set in the water. It required a few of them to be in the waves to fetch the ball before the ocean stole it. Alexa observed their fun in longing.

“Do you know how?”

She shook her head, but didn't speak, busy putting pieces into this newest puzzle. *Maybe I'm entering a new level of retraining.* Her spirits dampened further. She'd been perfectly happy surveying from a distance. She didn't get along with normal kids.

“Today, you'll learn how. If you do well and behave.”

“I always do well.” Her tone was a bit annoyed at the challenge. “As for behavior, I'll make my own choices.”

“Why bother?” The man raised a brow.

The familiarity of the gesture made her stammer. “I... I like it, living here. That's why I behave.”

Her mind was flying through clues, sorting the end pieces (eyes, hair, height, skin tone) and stacking the centerpieces (expression, stride, reactions) to come up with a possible answer. “You're family, right? A cousin or something?”

Before he could answer, the children on the beach spotted them.

“Adrian!”

“It's Adrian!”

“Over here! Come and play!”

Alexa gaped in shocked silence at her father.

Adrian smiled sadly as the children surrounded them, returning their hugs and greetings. “This is my daughter, Alexa. She wants to play with us. Is that okay?”

Before she could refuse, the children had tugged her into line and begun teaching her the basic rules. Alexa took her first swim in the ocean a short time later, with her father at her side.

Now

“It was the best day of my life up to that point.” Alexa didn’t look at the raptly listening travelers. “And only a few since have compared.”

Her audience had forgotten about everything except her story. Alexa obliged as the rain began to fall harder in protest.

“We spent the next year together. He took over my retraining and handled it personally. I learned new skills, strategy, new gifts. He was a wonderful teacher.”

Alexa let the power of her voice out as the fresh screams echoed outside, keeping her group together. “I was eleven when he gave me what he said was the root of life and death. For a long time, I simply called it my gun. Now, I understand the difference.”

Then

Alexa handed the target to her father, proud. When she’d first come here, she hadn’t known how to clean a gun or reload it, only how to shoot. At that, she’d already been good. Now, she handled a gun with ease and respect.

Adrian held out a small box. “When you master this, you get something more powerful. More useful.”

Alexa opened the box and giggled at the gift. “It’s a Derringer, right?”

“Yes. There’s also a shoulder holster. You’re to have it on wherever you go. Wear it at night and you’ll get more sleep.”

Alexa’s startled gaze flew to his.

Adrian ran a loving hand over his daughter’s brow. “I see the bags you try to cover with makeup. I know what it’s like to lie awake at night.”

Alexa slowly put on the holster and demonstrated that sharp Mitchell intelligence. “When are they coming?”

Now Adrian was the one a bit startled.

When he only stared, Alexa gave him his own words back. “The worry in your touch. And I recognize the tones. They’re coming for us.”

“Yes. Our time is limited.”

“I want to stay with you!”

Adrian hugged her tightly. “Find me when you’re of age. We’ll lead together.”

Alexa knew she had to be content with that and conquered the tears. She would hold onto the time they had left.

Six months later, the island was raided and Alexa was snuck away as the native residents were captured and killed or tortured for information they didn’t have. She watched her only happy home go

up in flames as she sailed away, disguised as a crying old woman.

Now

“It was years before I was with him again.” Alexa stood, glad the rain had let up, but it wasn’t done yet. “I’m finished for now. Perhaps someone else would like to tell a story?”

Her men were disappointed, but they understood she wanted out of the spotlight. Her tale of the past was enlightening to her fighters.

“I know one...”

It was the slave owner that all of them were already mentally calling Braids.

Alexa nodded agreement. “I’d hear.”

The woman smiled at the attention. “Right after the war, I was with a group of survivors who had formed a convoy store to trade as we traveled west. We’d heard there was safety there. We were in Oklahoma when we topped a hill and found a sea of tents inside fenced walls. It was your Safe Haven, only a woman was the boss. We traded and then kept going when we found out the soldiers were coming for them. We listened to our radios and heard the updates, some of the battles. It was an awful time.”

Alexa sympathized. “For everyone. Go on if you have more.”

“I was ill after that. I don’t know what happened to my group or Safe Haven. I was in a deep sleep

for a long time. I woke up with a tribe of Snake women who didn't have radios. I stayed with them until I earned enough cash to buy my first slave. Been with this lot since, but I never forgot that fenced camp. The people there were special."

She looked over at Daniel. "I'm Carol. I used to work security at a hockey rink. You ever skate?"

"Only on thin ice."

Carol didn't laugh at his joke. "That's all life is now. Black ice and bottomless sinkholes."

"Ain't that the truth." He noticed her braids had been freshly cared for. She looked good. He smiled back.

Alexa interrupted the moment. Romance was fine, but they needed a stronger distraction to keep away the ghosts. "Anyone else?"

The night passed with stories of Adrian and Safe Haven. It held the horrors away. The rest of the travelers who had returned to the buildings around them were not as fortunate. Their screams echoed like bait. Alexa felt every nasty jerk of the fishing line, but she resisted. If she went running out there, she would get her men killed.

A short time later, the patrol she'd advised against returned to the safety of her group, bloody and terrorized. Alexa was sorry to see Merrik among them, but she didn't turn him away. That wasn't how she handled problems like him. She had already seen his death, and warned him about it. There was nothing more she needed to do.

As soon as the dawn rain became drizzle and the wind faded, Alexa collapsed on her bedroll, asleep almost instantly.

Her men exchanged looks that said she wouldn't be disturbed this time.

9

“Don't do that.”

Merrick's man stopped at the ugly tone. Upon seeing the corpse girl in the corn, he'd frozen for a second, then drawn his gun. He'd been about to open the door and go out.

Mark was ready to handle the man if he had to. Alexa had only been resting for a few hours and the noise was sure to wake her.

“You're not the boss.”

“I am until she gets up.” Mark flashed an ugly glower. “Don't push me. I don't like you.”

Private Peters, who had threatened to starve himself when they'd been ordered to leave the shelter of base and then hadn't been strong enough to follow through, caved immediately. He was used to following orders.

Mark turned back to the corn to find the corpse girl now standing at his side in the doorway of the barn. This time, *he* drew his gun.

Richards reacted accordingly. The deep echo of a gunshot in tight quarters woke Alexa and everyone else.

Mark knocked the gun from the man's hand, grimacing as the force of Alexa's disapproval smacked him from behind.

Instead of delaying, Mark turned around to look at her. He replayed the entire scene in his mind for her, hoping it would ease her ire. He wasn't worried over whatever punishment she would give, only her disappointment.

Alexa sighed as soldiers panicked and Merrik shouted for someone to cover the goddamn door. "It's clearly time to go."

Mark viciously shoved the Private out of his way.

Richards banged into the barn door and slid to the ground, knocked out.

Alexa motioned Daniel to cook and for Edward to watch after Paul and Brian. "Keep them alive."

Edward resented the tone—he hadn't screwed up—but he understood she needed to be an asshole to get everyone to follow her. Merrik would argue with every sentence that came out of her mouth if he thought he could get away with it.

Alexa took a spot outside the door, glaring. Everyone gave her clear berth as they got ready to leave. Jacob and David packed their things. Billy delivered a bowl to Alexa where she stood, then retreated. No words were exchanged. They knew to do their chores and get ready, but they also knew she wasn't nearly as upset as the other travelers thought she was. Alexa understood they were rookies.

Twenty minutes after waking, Alexa's group was ready to go. The others, not so much. Unless she wanted to take over each camp, she had no choice but to wait for them to get ready.

An hour into the morning, the wagon train still hadn't left and Alexa went back into the storeroom. Her fighters followed. They'd already caused this particular punishment during their own training and knew what to expect.

"Where's she going?" Merrik hated not being the only boss. "We're set to go."

Alexa settled into her spot and unloaded her gear. When she leaned back, preparing to sleep, the mutters increased. A few of the travelers gathered around her, waiting for an explanation.

When she was satisfied with the number of people waiting, her unflinching gaze swept the entire group as she spoke. "I'll leave right after dawn. If you expect our protection, be ready before the sun hits the sky. I will leave you behind and so will they. Don't doubt it."

A few of them protested lightly, but Alexa wasn't having any of it. She crossed her arms over her chest.

Her crew got set to spend a day catching up on things like sewing and washing and scavenging for small, needed items.

The other travelers reluctantly also got set to stay. Except for the soldiers. Merrik ordered them and the wagons to roll out. Alexa's men shared

smirks as the wagon drivers refused to make the run with so few people for protection. Merrik tried to insist, but was told to drive them himself if he wanted to go that badly.

Unable to make them leave, Merrik chose a far building at first, but when the black-eyed, filthy Private reminded him of the previous evening, Merrik sullenly agreed on the building next to Alexa.

When Alexa fell into another deep sleep, her men assumed she would need her strength later. So far, that had been the pattern, though this time she did seem to be recovering much slower. By now, she was usually bright and chipper.

She hasn't fed in a while, was a common thought among the six of them. Paul, who wasn't very observant unless it concerned his own needs, hadn't noticed yet. When he did, they all expected him to make a fuss. They also weren't looking forward to the actual leaving of Paul even though they wanted him gone. They expected him to cry and argue until Alexa was forced to be cruel.

Outside, noises of men working and muttering stayed at a muted level. The occasional animal call echoed softly as a light breeze dripping with that delicious scent roamed the station. It was a quiet, peaceful transition to evening.

Mark didn't like it. The noise earlier should have at least drawn the wolves to them. They should be under attack again.

Mark swept the town and the snoozing, working people. They'd been at that first station for a long time. They'd gotten used to following and doing what they were told. He didn't expect to have trouble with any of them except for the soldiers and the two remaining gunfighters. Their injured man had died. That trio was busy digging the grave. Even the mapmaker was taking part, suit rumpled, face sorrowful. The two gunfighters exhibited signs of stress and grieving, but the mapmaker's cold glares toward the thief had gotten stronger.

Mark didn't think the mapmaker looked like what his profession was. Instead of suspenders and glasses, the man wore a gunfighter's long coat and two machetes. He was also toting a handgun on his hip and a rifle on his back.

Mark slowly became aware of an icy chill running almost casually up his arm. He looked down with dread.

The corpse girl from the corn was at his side. Her hand, ghostly and faded with disease, was wrapped around his.

Mark tried to think, but it was almost impossible with her red orbs glowering at him in adoring hatred.

"If you wander off, you're mine."

Mark flinched as the girl bared her fangs at him. Blood and drool rolled down the corner of her chin in a long line.

Mark felt the adrenaline kick in.

David was right behind them. "Don't react."

That helped Mark regain control. “You see her?”

David swallowed, partly from nervous tension, partly from revulsion. “In a way that you can’t, I think. She’s walking. *Dead.*”

Mark watched as the child caressed his tattooed knuckles lovingly. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Any ideas?”

David motioned Billy over, but the rookie couldn’t pick anything out even when they pointed to the shadow and dripping blood. Billy saw none of it.

During all this the girl stayed, giggling softly. It was clear that she liked to torment her prey.

Mark felt the wind shift and shivered at the cold wave swarming him.

The little girl looked up at them with disappointment. “I have to go now. Master’s tired.”

The girl flashed her fangs one last time and slowly faded from view.

For a moment neither man spoke, just let their thoughts go where they wanted to. It was a long few seconds where they both resolved not to say anything. Alexa knew evil was following this wagon train.

David met Mark’s wide gaze with a face that was devoid of all expression. “Interesting world we live in.”

“Yes. On levels these people can’t begin to understand.”

David took a place on the other side of the door; the two men returned to watching without another word on what had happened. Mentally, it was often hard to be with Alexa. Her men handled things as best they could, but their minds didn't stop dwelling on the child until they were relieved and able to join their mistress in slumber.

10

Come dawn, the other groups were ready to go. There hadn't been another night of rain and therefore, no attack. The unbroken sleep had been good for all of them.

Alexa waved two of her men into place on either side of the convoy, where the men spaced themselves out to create a front line. Edward and Billy took Paul to the rear. They tensed when Merrik sent soldiers to walk near them, but the men didn't look as if they would follow an attack order, so the fighters let it slide.

Alexa's men defiantly swept the corn and the variety of shadows that mocked them. They were used to walking with their mistress, but this was a spread out formation that none of them cared for. The sooner out of these slaughter conditions, the better.

Alexa marched at a brisk pace as the travelers trailed her sullenly. Few of them were used to being up so early, let alone already being on the road. The bleary behavior and stiff bodies caused too much

noise, but Alexa didn't offer reprimands that would be ignored. These people only learned the hard way. That was the response of most people since the war. It was amazing that any of them had survived the apocalypse.

As the morning faded into early afternoon and Alexa didn't stop for lunch, there was a bit of grumbling but no one openly complained. Between the tempting smell and the shadows following them, darting out of view when spotted, it wasn't a path that any of them wanted to linger on.

Alexa increased their pace a short time later, sweat dripping down her sides in a familiar, almost comforting pattern. She didn't care for the damp air or the blue of the sky, but it was the peaceful sense of sleepy contentment stealing over them that caused true concern. Nothing was this calm in Afterworld.

The corn lining each side of the dusty, weed dotted dirt path began to look better as they traveled. The black mold faded and the yellow of the ears became visible again. The dirt at the base of the corn also changed from black and brittle to warm and inviting. The travelers noticed, sending fresh mutters around the convoy.

"It's better here."

"Yeah, but why?"

"Can we eat that if we boil it?"

"Maybe the wolves don't come in this area."

Alexa kept marching and so did her men. When Edward and Paul caught up to the slowing rear of the train, they stepped around it and continued after Alexa. She hadn't given an order to stop or reduce speed, so they didn't. In a matter of minutes, most of the wagon train was out of their protection.

No longer as concerned since the area didn't appear as dangerous, the travelers didn't worry about catching up.

Alexa stopped when the screams began, but she didn't send her men back. She waited, hands resting lightly on the butts of her deadly guns.

The chaos died down quickly; the travelers caught up with one fatality and one serious wolf injury. The soldiers weren't doing well.

Instead of listening to their complaints about the lack of protection, Alexa taught them a lesson. "Stay with us or fend for yourself. We don't break ranks for people who don't obey my rules."

She started walking again and this time, the travelers stayed much closer. Despite the feel, this wasn't a good area and she'd reminded them of that by doing nothing.

The soldiers hated her for it. The brief wolf attack gave hope to some of the train, though. If that little hit was all Nature had left, then humans were finally making a dent in the predators. In time, these might not be killing fields anymore.

The group settled back into walking and searching the corn, but the previous laughter and conversation was missing. The mood said not to get

distracted by emotions when death could be only a row away.

Alexa approved. It was the attitude that she had rolled through life with, and then carried into an apocalypse. Without it, she wouldn't have survived and neither would these travelers. Life held no sympathy for the weak.

Chapter Eight
Undead Egos

1

The hut was pristine. That made it something to be leery of. Alexa passed it with only a short glance. She sensed the trouble inside.

The convoy had been walking since dawn. It was now approaching evening and nearly everyone was moaning and muttering, whining for Alexa to call it a night. As the shadows lengthened and bladders stretched, the complaints grew louder.

Alexa's men kept pace easily, waiting for their mistress to deliver the news. Whenever she kept going after dark, she continued until dawn and then camped for a full day. They'd spent weeks' worth of hours on the road with Alexa before they started traveling at night. It had begun right after she'd overheard the rookie say they never explored after nightfall. Jacob had been listing it as a pro, but Alexa had viewed it as a con and informed them their lessons were being expanded.

"Hey!" Merrik's shout drew attention, but no one stopped. "Yo, warrior woman!"

The second taunt was met by Edward moving toward him from the rear.

“Leave him be.” Alexa had turned, sure of how her men would react.

Edward pulled the punch, bumping violently into Merrik instead as he stormed around and went back to his post.

Merrik wisely didn’t follow. He strode to Alexa instead. “Where we stopping at, *Lady?*”

It was an insult disguised as respect. Edward growled from his place on the line.

Paul, who already hated Merrik, snickered. “I can give him a headache.”

Edward’s head snapped down as if jerked by a string. His eyes narrowed into approving slits against the glare of carelessly held flashlights. “Do it.”

Paul concentrated on Merrik. “Corbin didn’t know I could do things, too. I’ve hidden it all my life.”

Edward saw Merrik rub his temples and felt a reluctant respect for Paul. “What else can you do?”

Paul shrugged, trying not to trip now that it had gotten darker. “I don’t know you well enough to answer that.”

“And you won’t!” Edward shot back. “You heard her. No amount of headaches or pencil pushing will change it.”

Edward motioned Paul to go in front of him, refusing when Paul would have protested. “Save it for your fit at the end.”

Paul, face red, flipped Edward the finger, but did as he was told.

In the front of the train Merrik was raising hell and being ignored, but as the hut came into view, everyone listened to his angry words.

“We’ve been on the road for twelve hours. We need a break!”

Alexa didn’t answer.

Merrik stepped in front of her, forcing her to halt. “That hut is fine. We’re stopping.”

Alexa sighed, stepping around him. “Only death waits in there.”

Merrik reached out for her arm.

Alexa spun around and dropped low, kicking the Captain’s legs out from under him.

Merrik smacked into the ground with the side of his face, drawing blood.

Paul snickered quietly. “She gave him a nosebleed.”

Merrik jumped to his feet and scampered after her.

Mark stepped in his way, slamming their chests together.

Merrik fell backward and smacked his head on the ground this time.

“You heard her, same as everyone else! Keep going or be left here alone.”

Most of the wagon train stayed inside Alexa’s perimeter. The soldiers, however, had no choice but to follow the leader who climbed to his feet with more ego than brains.

“Clear that hut!” Merrik waved three of his men forward. “We’re making camp right here!”

The men muttered, but didn't protest. Merrik was ready to shoot someone.

The hut was small, with a bamboo roof that should have blown away in the weather years ago. Small iron rails led to the doorway that was covered in a fine layer of yellow cloth that shimmered in the wind.

The trio of soldiers stepped into the hut reluctantly, one holding the curtain back for the others to pass. They advanced together, lights on their guns illuminating the small, round building. Piles of graying bones near their boots were the only thing to see. The rest of the room was bare and dusty, without a single stick of furniture. Only old remnants of the dead remained.

"Over here." The taller soldier had spotted a doorway.

The men went into the rear area, finding only a broom and mop next to a rusted bucket. They returned to the round room, relaxing.

"Tell the Captain we're clear."

Before the Private could do as he'd been told, the third man pointed. "What's that?"

The men turned to find a yellowish light behind them, glowing from the same closet area they'd just cleared.

"Did we miss that?"

"No way." The tallest soldier nervously brought his gun back up.

The three men moved toward the light, staring in fascination at the orb. Hovering in the center of

the room, it spun slowly, rainbow color fading and brightening each time it dipped and rose.

“What is it?”

The tall soldier had lowered his gun.
“*Beautiful...*”

The orb lit up brilliantly, blinding them.

As arms rose to shield eyes, a long, clawed hand shot from the orb. It raked clothes and skin from bones, spraying blood and screams.

Gunfire lit the room this time, hitting the walls, the orb, and the other soldiers.

That long claw raked out again and took the last soldier’s head from his tall body. It thumped to the floor, face frozen in agony.

A soft mewling echoed and then there was silent darkness again.

Merrick waved two more soldiers forward.

Both men shook their heads.

“Do it yourself, *sir*.”

Merrick drew his gun. “Do it!”

“No, *sir*.”

“You will.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll kill you.”

The men exchanged quick glances, choosing their fates. They took off running.

Merrick shot both of them in the back while his remaining men stared in disbelieving shock.

“I want that hut cleared!”

This time when he motioned men forward, they went.

The screams and gunfire had halted many of the travelers in the convoy, but not Alexa and her men. When she kept walking, the other travelers nervously caught up. When Merrik and his few men joined the rear, Alexa didn't say anything and neither did anyone else. It was a hard lesson, but they'd all learned it. Merrik was going to get them killed.

2

The fog found the group again a few hours before dawn and surrounded them. It was an ugly feeling. The shadows in the dampness twirled and danced, making them all uncomfortable, but it bothered their animals the most. The mules tugged restlessly against their harnesses, occasionally letting out a soft bellow of concern. The horses whinnied, prancing sideways even under the easiest grips; chickens gurgled in alarm. It all combined to create an atmosphere of near panic.

Alexa didn't stop, though she was aware of the unrest. The first days of control had to set rules and limits. If she calmed them and explained her ways every time they got scared, she would always have to do it, but there was never enough time for that when things exploded. They had to follow her without question or take their chances on their own.

She'd given her men some basic knowledge, however. They'd earned it.

Edward traded places with Daniel, eager to use his calming skills on the livestock. Alexa had told them there would be a short time of safety. Edward was assuming this was it by the way she wasn't tightening their guard or checking her weapons. The rest of the group didn't know anything except that they were terrified. It made for a long transition to dawn.

Alexa's fighters didn't like the limited view, but they always felt that way during moments like these. Other than that, they didn't have complaints. They were well fed and well rested. It was all they needed, unlike the rest of the convoy that still twitched at the wind even though many of them had been here for a long time. If they hadn't adjusted in those weeks or months, it meant something had kept that from happening.

Jacob drew leather as a cold chill came over him. He spun around to see a large shadow swooping down.

“Grab it!”

Jacob stared in surprise as one of the family's hogs was lifted into the air and taken away by a creature with an eight-foot wingspan and irises as bright as the sun. He grunted tiredly, rubbing at his face scars. “What is this place?!”

“Hell.” The family slave walking nearby kept his head down. “Endless roads of eternal hell.”

Jacob holstered, resuming his place in line as he scanned the sky for the big flyer. “Yeah, I get that feeling, too.”

3

As the sky finally lightened, Alexa increased their pace. She wanted to be camped, fed, and sleeping. She steered them around a narrow curve in the corn and raised her hand. Behind her, the wagons slowed and stopped. Each driver waited for the call to stay or go on.

Alexa’s tilted head worried Edward. She was trying to figure something out. Anything she didn’t know was trouble for everyone. He switched with David and joined her.

Alexa felt Edward come up beside her, but she didn’t react. A light vibration on the wind suggested problems were coming. She was trying to determine what type.

Alexa’s fingers tapping the side of her holsters snagged Edward. She didn’t stop the restless tell and he recognized the feeling. He spun a hand in the air to alert the other men and then began checking his gear. It was time to survive.

“This way.” Alexa led them into the corn, hoping for cover.

The convoy was quickly surrounded by the tall stalks. She directed them into a quick trot as the others noticed the vibration that quickly became a flutter of panicked hunger.

“What the hell is that?!”

“Look out!”

The butterflies were large, with glowing wings shaped like puzzle pieces. Their black eyes glared insanely at the sight of the travelers.

The animals in the convoy sensed the coming chaos and saved time by acting up right then. A lead horse bucked violently, a mule pulled the reins from an unsuspecting hand, and three chickens ran into the side of their cages, popping open all the doors on the entire rickety coop. All hell had already broken loose before the butterfly swarm hit the travelers full blast from the left side and smothered them under darkness. The sky vanished under black and white wings and tiny, razor sharp teeth. Screams filled the air.

“This way!” Alexa slapped at the worst of the insects around her face.

One of the soldiers rushed by her in panic, blindly stumbling through the corn. His face was covered in blood.

The butterflies were vicious. Blood came in trickles and rivulets as the larger insects swarmed together around the throats of animals that couldn't swat them away.

“Help!”

The rear wagon had stopped as the mule pulling it fell. Two of Alexa's men grabbed the driver on their way by and rushed after the group, dragging the older man between them. No one cared about the wagon.

The butterflies, hungry and angry, were effective. They evaded swats and swipes and dove in to take a drink of blood or slice open a source with knife-like wings. Impossible to avoid, the flying menace would take a toll if Alexa didn't do something.

Everyone expected to hear her guns, but bullets were useless against so small a foe. Alexa led them through the deepest part of the corn, following her instincts. "A little further!"

"We're almost there!"

"Keep coming!"

The travelers tried to keep up with Alexa, forcing panicking animals to obey, but it wasn't enough to keep them together. Three soldiers were cut off by a fleeing wagon and flailed blindly into the corn as they were swarmed. Daniel veered off after them and grabbed their arms, shoving them back in line. "Run!"

Loud screams broke out in front of them. One of the slaves had fallen from their cart when the horse reared up. Jacob was there to scoop the cart onto its wheels, saving the others, but the fallen slave fled into the stalks. A large wolf immediately lunged. Snarls and screams said they couldn't help the man. Jacob kept going.

Alexa stepped aside as she hit the clearing. "Get down!"

She repeated the order to each person that came through behind her, regarding the specks in the distance. "It won't be long."

The butterflies, now in the open, attacked with renewed energy. The sky darkened with the enormous swarm swooping down to cover people and animals.

“All here!” Edward tried not to think about the people that they’d lost as he herded Paul. He’d seen another of the gunfighters go down under the huge horse that the man hadn’t been able to control when it reared up.

“Get them under cover!” Alexa ran to the nearest animals. She used the wagon covers to drape over the bleeding, moaning mules, then moved on to the horse beside them.

Edward understood what she wanted and waved the others into caring for the livestock first, and the screaming, bloody people second. In the chaos, several travelers were overwhelmed and fell. The insects hadn’t had fresh blood in a while and the travelers didn’t help each other.

“Stay down!”

Everyone stared in shock as the sky faded from dark to pitch black.

The cranes, resting during their yearly migration, had spotted the coming swarm of butterflies in delight. Wide creatures with long legs and double rows of mutated wings rose into the dim sky to feast.

The butterflies, unable to leave the scent of so much needed blood, didn’t stand a chance against the flock of cranes. The huge birds swooped in between the shocked travelers and covered animals

without hesitation, eating, squawking, and flapping in happy abandon. A buffet like this one was rare in Afterworld. They enjoyed it.

Alexa and her men stood to the far side of the bloody field, waiting for it to be over. They visually assessed damage and injuries, counted survivors, and tried not to be revolted by the gorging fowls' mutated features. It was only an extra set of wings, but watching them attack the butterflies was a vicious carnage that flipped their stomachs.

Alexa motioned toward the area where the cranes had been resting. "We'll set up camp there. Find a clear spot, but don't bother the birds. They probably have chicks."

None of her men argued, but Merrik sneered at the order. "Tell you what I'm gonna do, *Lady*. Shoot five of them cranes and have the best meal any of us has had in a year."

"No, you're not. They saved your life and you will respect that by sparing theirs."

"I will not! We need food!"

Alexa waved at the birds now gorging themselves from the layers of butterflies on the ground. "The rest of us would rather have a good night's sleep. You're outvoted, *Captain*."

Merrik opened his mouth to argue.

Travis, his best friend, frowned. "Let it go, man. We've got jerky and beans. And we're all tired."

Travis wore civilian clothes and carried a Glock, giving the impression that he wasn't regular

Army. The quiet way he handled himself was another sign that he was an independent contractor.

Alexa remembered the storeroom they'd burnt. *He's probably an explosives expert.*

Merrick was smart enough to let his friend lead him off. The way they continued to whisper drew concern from Alexa's rookie.

"That's a coming issue."

"Soon, I hope." Alexa gave Jacob the ghost of a smile. "His voice makes my brain bleed."

Her men snickering seemed to be the cue for everyone to settle down. They followed the men to the new campsite and set things up or tended injuries. Those who were missing weren't searched for, but it didn't feel out of place. These fields were littered with bones. Now there were a few more.

4

Edward took first watch without being told. After their long walk, he wasn't ready for sleep.

Nearby, the old woman and kids were digging beneath the layers of dead and decaying stalks, pulling up small handfuls of something that they stuffed into grimy pouches. They hunkered along the ground for almost an hour before they finally returned to the wide center fire that Alexa had directed Paul through making. Edward swept the two kids for injuries from the wolf attack, but didn't view any.

The boy disappeared into the tent behind the old woman, but the girl approached Edward and held out a hand.

Edward looked at the pile of bug corpses with revulsion. “What?”

The child motioned to his injury. She crumbled one of the beetles between her fingers and quickly smeared it over the wound.

Edward jerked away, grossed out.

Alexa looked over at them. “Leave it. The antibiotic properties will prevent infection. It’s what they use here.”

“It heals?” He controlled his stomach at the gory smell.

“Yes.”

Edward forced himself to leave it alone, but he couldn’t stop a light shudder of disgust. He hated bugs.

“How did it happen?” Edward had been worrying over it. “The wolves in our tent, I mean. We never fall asleep on watch.”

Alexa had been studying the same question. “These fields have their own type of magic, I assume. I’ll take part of the night sentry chore until we’re out of here.”

That satisfied him, but the unanswered question didn’t lend comfort to the mood. Neither did listening to the cranes clean the ground of butterfly bodies. The constant crunching and cooing was irritating, but it was worse when Merrik and his men returned from going back for the wagon. They’d

attached it to two of their horses and were beating the overwhelmed animals to keep it moving.

Edward rose in anger.

Alexa reluctantly stopped him. “That’s not our problem. Or our target to remove.”

Edward tossed himself back to the ground, not speaking.

Alexa understood. She wanted Merrik’s blood on her hands, too.

5

Two hours after the attack, the travelers were all sitting or lying around the fire, their carts, wagons and gear between them and the corn. Alexa had four of her men, and two of Merrik’s, defending the convoy from atop the sturdiest vehicles. As the sky faded to black, weariness settled over the group. It was a perfect time for a new problem to rise.

Alexa spotted a shadow fleeing into the corn.

Unfortunately, so did Merrik. “Get her!”

Merrick ran after the woman and quickly gained ground.

Only ahead by a little, Tabitha spun and threw her knife.

Merrick hurled himself to the ground, barely missing being impaled in the throat as the woman took off again. Her checkered red dress twirled around her as she spun for the cover of the stalks.

Merrick wanted to go after her, but Peters and Travis were there to take his arm and whisper lowly.

No one could hear the conversation, but it seemed to be going well until one of the soldiers picked up the knife she had thrown.

“That’s mine. If she’s done with it, I’d like it back.”

Everyone stared at David in surprise.

“You gave her a knife?!” Merrik moved toward him.

David grinned coldly. “I’d have given more than that if she asked for it.”

The suggestive tone was enough to cause Merrik to leap at him, swinging.

David ducked and punched. The stomach shot was brutal.

Merrik slid to his knees, gasping for air.

“Stay down.” The big armed Blacksmith grinned again. “The next one will hurt.”

Merrik didn’t hear. He was still trying to get his breath back.

David held a hand out to Peters.

Those bushy brows drew together as Peters placed the knife in David’s palm. He didn’t like Merrik, but he really disliked these arrogant assholes.

David waited to be scolded as he returned to her hearth, but Alexa didn’t react except for a tired sigh.

He frowned and went to make her a cup of hot tea.

Merrik slowly returned to his place on the opposite side of the fire from Alexa, glowering in hatred.

Once the cranes settled down into a group huddle, the night became quiet. Those enjoying the fire began to slip into their bedrolls, worn out after a day with Alexa leading. Even the blond female, along with the soldiers, went into their tent early, showing only exhaustion. It was odd, considering that her cousin had run off. Peters had confided to the other travelers that Merrik had forced them into slavery to get them safely through the corn. While rare, women as slaves still sometimes happened.

The only reason slavery was possible at all was the Drafts that had taken place around the world. Many of the women who'd been left alone had gathered and taken control of their lives. Then they'd refused to hand it back over to the few males who'd survived the bombs, riots, and starvation.

Alexa's men took the next shift, with Daniel and David up high. Most of the travelers drifted to sleep, reasonably sure they would see dawn. A few of them stayed awake for personal pleasure or morning preparations, and then they too joined the others in sleep.

After an hour, the guards were the only ones still moving.

Daniel spotted a shadow creeping toward where Alexa lay dogpiled among Billy, Jacob, and Mark, and waved at David to handle it.

David moved silently to intercept as Daniel waited to see if he needed to wake everyone.

David ducked behind a wagon and grabbed the shadow around the neck as it tried to sneak by.

“Hush.” David’s arms locked tighter around the offender’s throat as he recognized Merrik. “Guess you need some help getting to sleep.”

David carefully strangled the would-be assassin until he sagged. He made sure Merrik was still alive and then hefted him over one shoulder. He took Merrik’s unconscious form to the wagons and placed him underneath the middle one. He would be reasonably safe, but if he sat up too fast, he might knock himself right back out.

Snickering at the thought, David climbed up and rejoined Daniel on the top of the first wagon.

“You’d think he would learn quicker.” Daniel had enjoyed the show.

“Didn’t hurt to remind him.” David made sure Alexa was fine before giving his attention to the corn.

Both men continued to protect the travelers until an ugly dawn broke. Listening for Merrik’s thud upon waking kept them alert and amused. It was an easy duty this time.

6

Dawn brought a dim sun and bright gunfire.

Bang! Bang!

Alexa’s Colts crashing woke the entire camp.

Thud! “Son of a...”

Daniel and David, still atop the wagon, heard Merrik's expletive as he jerked upward and hit his head. The two fighters broke into laughter.

Edward and Mark had jumped to their feet, but upon spotting Alexa, they realized what was happening and let the ignorant travelers mutter. They took longer to understand that she had killed four of the cranes with her two shots and was now cutting their heads off with her knife.

Daniel yawned, still chuckling as he stretched. His much enjoyed movement brought him instant attention from the nearby slavers. Need and greed flashed in equal measures.

"Breakfast is from Alexa." Daniel's big arms came down to rest on his guns. "I serve something else."

The women weren't sure if he meant that suggestively or not. Braids found her courage. "How much for a sample? In case what you're serving doesn't suit me."

Daniel ran hot eyes over her, from dirt layered boots to well-placed curves, and locked their gazes. He wasn't usually shy or forward. It was a nice moment for his ego when she flushed and giggled like a girl under his regard. "Samples are free."

Braids immediately came toward him.

David smirked as the Biker paled. Daniel hadn't thought the woman would rise to his challenge.

Daniel held still, lust, concern, and guilt warring in his mind. He was supposed to be on watch.

Braids sensed his withdrawal and stopped at the edge of the wagon. “You sure? Lookin’ a little green for a big, bad legend.”

Daniel thought of how he’d died and how Alexa had brought him back. He snorted, confidence returned. “See me when I’m off duty. I don’t slack.”

Braids liked his answer, sauntering back to her surprised partner without promising it. But they both knew she would. It was in the air and the sharp, sweet looks they would exchange for the rest of this shift.

“She said we couldn’t eat them!” Peters had begun to get loud, unaware of the moment he’d interrupted or Merrik being missing. “Why is it okay for her to do it?”

“We wanted to sleep in peace.” Daniel sneered, angry at the disruption. “Sleeping is over.”

Realizing they’d been made fun of, the soldiers proceeded to disturb the morning with round after round of gunfire that took down the cranes that were too slow to take flight. Feathers, shit, and squawks of terror filled the air.

Alexa didn’t reprimand them, but she did toss her birds to Jacob, wipe her hands, and begin checking her guns.

The soldiers noticed, realizing they’d made yet another mistake, but they didn’t stop the noise.

Billy took over the watch, leaving Brian with Edward.

Alexa waited for Daniel to get close enough to speak privately. “Where’s Merrik?”

She followed Daniel's line of sight to the wagons and spotted a slumped form under one of them. She was able to see that Merrik wasn't bound and was still breathing. She didn't need to know anything more. He'd gotten out of line and her men had handled him. That was their job. "We leave twenty minutes after we've eaten. You can crash for at least half a shift in a wagon." Alexa had caught all of his exchange with Braids. She grinned. "Doesn't have to be alone, as long as there's sleep at some point."

Blushing at the teasing, Daniel went to get coffee. He saw the male slaves gather the dead cranes that the soldiers had shot. They began to clean them for trading with the old woman, who would be paid well by the other travelers for providing a meal with fresh meat. The soldiers wouldn't have to pay since they'd shot them, but they wouldn't have had to anyway, since all government workers got everything free. It was one of the benefits of being government staff.

Breakfast was quick but peaceful, with biscuits covered in gravy for a side to the fried crane. Without Merrik's negativity, it was enjoyed by all of them. The group chatted lightly, the kids played, and the tension was absent for the first time on this trip.

"Who the hell snuck up on me? Someone hit me!"

Alexa sighed as Merrik's ugly shout shattered the peace. "Time to go. Load it up."

Chapter Nine
Then and Now

1

They reached the river around noon. The cloudy green water wasn't a welcome sight. The grass and straggly corn lining the muddy bank waved in the light breeze like normal foliage, but underneath, the same layer of bugs waited. Immediate grumbles broke out when people realized there was no bridge. No one wanted to enter the water.

Alexa paralleled the bank for a while, picking a good place to cross. Her caution once again caused impatience in the soldiers.

“Where is she going?” Peters motioned Travis to watch over their other woman while he went to Merrik. He handed over the leash without noticing Edward's eyes narrow in anger. The Horseman didn't like slavery on either side.

“No clue.” Brian had always hated lying, but lack of common sense was something he didn't tolerate well, either.

“It's shallow here.” Merrik motioned two men forward. The purple bruises on his neck and forehead glared in the daylight. “Cross over and throw a rope. We'll tie it off.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

Alexa’s warning was heeded by the two soldiers. They backed away from the bank.

“Stay out of this! You’re not the leader!” Merrik was still wound up over being strangled. He had conveniently forgotten that he’d been trying to sneak close enough to kill Alexa when he was caught.

Alexa’s tone didn’t change, but her air became cold. “Fine.”

She continued down the faint path; the convoy went with her.

Merrick glared at the two soldiers he’d chosen.

The two men slowly inched down into the knee deep water, feeling their way across the lightly rushing creek. They made it to the other side with relief.

“Let’s go.” Merrik waved the others forward. His boots sank into the mud, icy water covering the tops.

Merrick looked down to see that the creek had turned red. He lunged back onto the safety of the bank, gawking in shock at the bleeding men on the opposite bank.

“Help me!”

“It hurts!”

Merrick saw streams of blood running from the legs of both men. It flowed steadily to the ground and back into the water where small air bubbles told him something was alive in there. “What is it?”

The screams faded quickly as both soldiers slumped to the ground and slid into the water. They went under and didn't come back up.

"Damn it!" Merrik glanced to where Alexa was almost out of sight and angrily stomped that way.

Alexa heard his heavier stomp rejoin the group and didn't say anything. Inside, she was growing more and more upset with the way Merrik was sacrificing his men. He was acting as if he had an inexhaustible supply. He should already know that every set of hands was a blessing to be protected.

Birds fled ahead of them, disturbed by their noises. The travelers braced for more butterflies. When none came, they continued in nervous apprehension.

2

Alexa marched them through the corn without a break. They were in another bad area. The stalks had gone to solid black and the dirt under them was sunken in, like something very heavy had been here for a long time. That tempting smell was also gone, replaced with a mildewed odor.

"We're nearing the center of the fields now." The mapmaker stared at her from his place on the cart.

The two grieving gunfighters sauntered around him in tense silence.

A slave owner in the wagon next to them looked over. "What's in the center?"

The mapmaker shuddered. “Giants, I heard, but who knows for sure? Something bad.”

“That why you brought such strong help?” The slaver eyed the nearest gunman’s big arms and wide shoulders.

The mapmaker flushed, face folding into itself. “Don’t mind my help and I won’t mind your slaves.”

The slaver felt the sting of his refusal to talk to her. “In a few more years, your kind won’t be free either!”

The mapmaker straightened his shoulders. “Well, until then, I am, so slam you!”

The woman angrily slapped her whip across her horse to get ahead as the two gunfighters shared smirks. The brothers didn’t usually befriend those they escorted across this broken country, but Jim had been the exception. They’d already stayed with the map man for double the amount of time that they’d spent on their longest job. They liked his boldness in a world that was now mostly female. They also wanted the reward he had sworn to deliver.

Jim, a former bank executive and rock climber, was aware of having their loyalty because of more than a promised payment. He was careful to maintain the image they expected to see. After escorting their prisoner to Lincoln, he hoped to stay with them. Waiting on enough travelers to gather had been hard on Jim. He’d grown more bitter every

day that the thief had been in his custody. He no longer dreamed of rebuilding his old life.

Alexa motioned Edward, with Paul in tow, to the Point position. He would hold the current speed unless she told him otherwise.

When Edward was in place, Alexa dropped to where the mapmaker was now flipping through old sketches of this area. She stayed next to him, ignoring the gunfighters that moved closer for his protection.

Jim became aware of the tension and finally looked up. He was a bit startled to find the leader of their wagon train by his cart. He glanced forward and found one of her men leading them. He watched in nervous fascination as Alexa dug out a meal. He swallowed a sharp remark.

Alexa held out a slice of pumpkin bread that Billy had made half a week ago. The old bakery they'd found had revealed a single can of pumpkin pie filling under the cabinet. After declaring it still good, the Driver had treated them all to warm pumpkin bread and strong coffee from his personal stock. It had been a wonderful evening.

“Are you sure?”

Alexa nodded, mouth full.

Jim slowly reached over to take the smallest corner. He was leery of anything pulled from someone's pocket like a tissue.

He nibbled a corner of the bread and immediately grinned. “Hey! That's good.”

Alexa took a swig from her canteen. “One of my men has cooking skills.” She delivered a stunning, rare grin to the mapmaker. “Maybe we can trade?”

Jim, now starving for his wife’s pumpkin bread, didn’t answer right away. He’d missed Elaine every day she’d been gone, but it was always the tiniest things that triggered that awful moment of heartache and frustration.

Aware that he was drifting, Jim looked over to tell Alexa yes and found her gone. A generous slice of the bread was lying on a foil square by his leg.

Jim ate it slowly, uncaring that tears were occasionally rolling down his cheeks. The flashes were very vivid, painful. He wouldn’t have stopped them even if he could have.

“What did she do to him?” Peters was next to Merrik.

Merrik shrugged. “Beats me. Got ammo left?”

“Just two mags.” Peters stepped over a deep rut, not about to give up his supply of bullets. “Why? You out?”

Merrik snorted. “Me? Out?” He lowered his voice. “Just making plans. You ready?”

“No. I’ve talked to the boys, but they won’t help until we’re on the boat.”

Merrik spat into the corn, nearly tripping over another of those deep, scratched ruts. “Figures. You tell them if they don’t support me, we can’t finish this job and that means we don’t get back on the inside.”

Neck and face bruised, occasionally rubbing his shoulder and head, Merrik now looked rougher than everyone else in their convoy.

Peters grunted. "I'll tell 'em."

"You don't sound like they'll care."

The Private wasn't going to be drawn into betraying confidences. "Let me talk to them and then I can answer that."

Always angry and unable to do anything about it, Merrik spotted Alexa walking nearby and verbally attacked her again. "Where are you taking us? We should be at the dock by now!"

Alexa, in the middle of enjoying a slice of her bread, gave him a glower as she finished chewing and swallowed. "No pumpkin bread for you. Asshat."

She dropped back to the wagon and hopped onto the seat next to the driver before Merrik recovered.

The driver sped them up a bit, so she didn't have to be there when he finally came up with a response.

Listening from behind them, Mark snickered. He loved being with Alexa. She knew how to put someone in their place in such a way that they had almost no defense against it.

Mark scanned the corn to his right and slowly rotated, making sure he met the gaze of every member of his team. It was an alertness that all of them had learned from Alexa and it was effective under these circumstances. Every few minutes required eye contact. Mark often did his early, as did Edward. Jacob and David still forgot

sometimes. To remind them and teach them at the same time, the other men would pepper their backs with small stones until they turned for the check in. It was taking time, but they were getting it.

Paul, however, had interrupted their lessons. Alexa wasn't teaching them right now, though escorting these people certainly was. Often unexpected, Mark already missed their special session where Alexa revealed something they hadn't known existed or gave them a new skill to add to their already impressive resumes. It had now been weeks since they'd shared a moment like that.

Mark watched Alexa slowly slide from the wagon to walk alongside the prisoner's cell. She showed a small foil square to his guards to get their approval before holding it through the narrow bars.

The man took it gratefully and wolfed it down as if he was starving. The prisoner stared at Alexa with a slick gaze. "Some more?"

Alexa rewarded the begging with a second foil.

The man grinned through dark teeth. "What chu need, Lady?"

Alexa raised a brow. "How do you know I need something?"

He laughed cruelly. "Don't nobody talk to me unless it's an order. A gift like this? Never."

Alexa shrugged. "You have nothing on you that I want."

Sly, the man settled back into his cage and enjoyed small bites of the bread. Between swallows, they chatted lightly.

“If you make it to where you’re going, you’ll be hung?” The thief’s name hadn’t been brought up, so Alexa didn’t know what to call the sly man who peered at her through the bars.

“Knifed on arrival is more like it.” The thief shrugged shamelessly. “I ain’t got no friends in Lincoln.”

Alexa let that stew and started a new pot. “Are you sorry for your life of crime?”

“Nope. Got rich stealin’. Also got caught, though, so maybe it ain’t even. Hard to say at this point.”

“And why is that?”

He grinned. “‘Cause I ain’t there yet, of course. There’s always hope ‘til I hit the rope.”

“Papers some people carry might still give hope, as well.”

“Things from the old days? Sure.”

Seeing she had his full attention now, Alexa flicked her eyes to the messengers, to their chests. The three hunting buddies had signed up to be mail carriers for the excitement, but once out here, they’d realized how dangerous the job was. They stayed twitchy, hands always ready to pull the switches to the explosives strapped to their chests.

Alexa didn’t say anything else to the thief, just stayed there until Edward sent Paul to tell her there was a silo and the outline of a barn ahead of their convoy.

As she left the prisoner, Alexa gave him a quick glance and got the single nod she expected.

She paused by Mark. “Is he guilty, my pet?”

“As sin, Lady.” Mark snorted harshly. “Shoot him now and save your headache.”

“In due time.” Alexa eased his concern. She continued forward to join Edward in the lead. The challenge she’d given the thief was one that he wouldn’t be able to refuse, not if he was as good as she thought. Very few pickpockets were worth the trouble of a barred wagon and guards. If a man was so violent as to need all that, he was usually just shot and his body taken back. Life in America had changed drastically. Courts and cops were things of the past. Lead was now the law of this land.

3

Alexa sat down near the single center fire and eased off her boots, as she did most evenings. Taking care of their feet was a priority for a group who traveled on them.

The other fighters, seeing things were okay for the moment, gathered around her. They ate, cared for themselves, and waited in longing.

Alexa was aware that evenings had become story time. She didn’t mind that, but chores would be finished first. “Two senior soldiers on sentry duty—up high. Three on a constant patrol.”

The soldiers reluctantly followed her directions when Merrik remained silent. He and his female slave were sitting as far from Alexa as he could get, glowering while the tall slaver woman took care of

his multiple injuries. He'd suffered scrapes and bruises from dealing with Alexa's men, but he'd also gotten a gash on his cheek from the wagon. The tall slave owner was as close as they had to a doctor on this trip.

Edward and Daniel quickly organized the sentry posts, while Billy watched Brian and Paul. All of the soldiers were glad that there was little wind to distort or muffle their hearing. They had also been looking forward to hearing more of Alexa's past. Little of it mattered now, but it was still fascinating.

Alexa took her time, being sure they were all on edge before beginning. She knew how to help a legend flourish. "When they came for us, my father and I were in the bunker, using the range. We'd finished shooting and he was telling me about controlling my reactions. To this day, I still regard it as one of the most important things I was ever taught. That entire day was a guide for the rest of my life."

Then

"Pay attention." Adrian's thumb was gentle as he swiped a tear from his only daughter's soft cheek. "I'm going to teach you control."

"Will that help me shoot better?" She was disappointed that she hadn't matched him.

Adrian smiled, flashing love and understanding. "Yes, but you need it for more than that. Control, when used correctly, can move mountains."

Alexa tried to concentrate, to understand what he meant. Some of their conversations were easy, like hunting and evading, but sometimes they were so deep that he had to explain it to her in a few different ways before she was satisfied. He said her brain required a complete picture, that he'd been the same way about some subjects.

“One example is a man trapped in a burning building. If he controls his emotions and thinks, he may be able to find a way out. If he panics, he'll die. A second definition would be when someone makes you angry. You are a killer. Never doubt it. With that comes responsibility. You can't kill someone, except when there is no other choice. Without being able to control yourself, you would kill no matter what.”

Alexa couldn't argue that point. She had been hard as a child, but training under her father had brought out the ruthless side. There had already been times when she couldn't stop herself from reacting to one of his goads during a defense lesson. She hated it when anyone got a hit on her and the fact that the men were only tagging her like a goal post made it worse.

“A more complicated form of control is over other people. You already have a good deal of experience with that one, so I know you're clear.”

“I've only ever used it to help other kids like me. I don't know the rules on that.”

“That’s an area we’ll have to get into another time. It has a lot of little details that we’ll miss if we try to fit it in here.”

Alexa suddenly shivered with dread and sadness. “What about when you leave? How will I know these things?”

Adrian opened a kit near their chairs and handed her a thick notebook. “I have hundreds of these. You’ll read my words when you can’t hear my voice.”

Alexa grabbed him for a hug that Adrian allowed himself to enjoy. She was so much like him. Being the oldest, he had expected that up to a point, but her gifts were stronger than his were. He had chosen to start her training early. Normally, they wouldn’t have had much contact before she was of age, but the world was changing. There wasn’t time to let her grow up.

Adrian started to push her into the chair and pulled her onto his lap instead. “Your mom wanted me to wait until you were safe before I told you anything about her. She was afraid you wouldn’t be able to control yourself.”

Alexa left her head on his shoulder, loving being with her dad. He was perfect. “What did she think I would do?”

“Cause the end of the world.”

Alexa stiffened, paling. “I dream about that. It’s coming. Soon.”

“Yes. And nothing you can do will stop it or cause it. Your mother assumed you would be our

weakest link because you were stolen from us so soon after birth, but even with five years at my side, your brother Elliot has that honor. Beware of him.”

“I will.” Alexa shivered again.

Adrian gently slid her into her own chair. “It’s in the notebooks. And there are copies, typed and sent out for all of you. Keep to our kind.”

Alexa paled further. “They’re here.”

Adrian sighed, now kneeling at her feet. “If I stay with you, they’ll keep coming and you won’t have time to learn this, to become what our country will need.”

Alexa held the tears, but threw her arms around his neck. “I love you, daddy!”

Adrian held onto the bittersweet moment with a mumble of powerful words that sent bright green light curling around their embrace. “You’ll always be a part of me!”

Alexa let him set her back so he could stand up. “Get your vest on. Take your safety off.”

Alexa hurried, suddenly furious that her time with her father was being interrupted. She wanted to spill blood.

“So do I. Got that vest on?”

Alexa let him tighten it, hearing heavy footfalls coming down the hall that didn’t belong to their light-footed guards.

Adrian slid the gas mask over her face and quickly donned his. He pulled the pin from his smoke grenade, then pitched it into the hall as the enemy neared. Shouts and coughing echoed.

Adrian waved Alexa into a far corner.

Alexa slid against the wall and went over her lessons while she waited to kill her first man. Before her father gave the order, she fired.

Bang!

Adrian stared in shocked admiration as the first soldier through the door fell to his knees, blood oozing from the wound in his forehead. Then he started firing, too, and neither of them stopped until nothing moved except smoke and small rivers of blood.

Now

Alexa stopped talking long enough to get a drink and a few hits from the smoke that Edward tossed to her from his place atop the lead supply wagon. She stretched, listening to the field around them, but it seemed like even that predatory threat wanted to hear the rest.

“When it was over, we’d won. My father’s men were still the best I’ve ever seen. They drove the government troops off the island.” She sighed. “But we had to leave. Burning it kept the enemy from finding clues, but it also drew more soldiers. They attacked who they could reach—the island residents. I forced myself to watch it. I controlled myself until I didn’t feel anything except the hate and vengeance I’ve nursed every day after that. The feeling of losing my father, of being robbed, has never faded.”

Paul broke the moment with his too-loud voice. “Did you see him again?”

“Once.” She stood. “It’s time to sleep. Dawn comes again soon.”

Alexa’s men were almost in shock. They’d never heard Alexa speak about emotions or show as much of herself to strangers as she had tonight. It was surprising to hear her talk of youthful insecurities and scarring events. It was also intriguing to have these newest pieces to her puzzle. It explained more and more for her men. No wonder they had always assumed she’d been doing this as a career before the war. It was worse than that. She’d been battling and surviving like this her entire life. It was all she’d ever known.

6

“Incoming! Everyone up!”

“Look out!”

Everyone in Alexa’s tent snapped awake instantly, grabbing for guns, except for Mark. He’d only been asleep for an hour. He rolled onto his feet with a bitter anger. “I’m getting really sick of this place.”

Alexa’s crew began shooting the bats and wolves as they spotted the chaos, and a few of the soldiers joined in, but it only took a couple minutes to understand that the colony had simply been going overhead, not attacking. Alexa had given the last shift to Paul and Edward. She faced them angrily.

“I couldn’t get my damn hand around his mouth quick enough.”

The growled words cleared Edward of the actual mistake, but he was in charge and he’d let this get out of control. Even the wolves still pacing their perimeter hadn’t been attacking, only investigating.

Paul cringed to the ground as Alexa moved toward him, but she kept going to Edward.

Edward waited tensely.

Alexa placed a hand on his arm, again shocking all of her men. “We’ll be shed of him soon. Keep trying.”

Edward managed a nod to confirm the order, feeling even more uneasy without the punishment. *Her illness must be worse than we thought.*

Chapter Ten
The Wrong Side

1

“Ten minute break!”

Alexa’s call was unexpected. It brought Merrik to her side.

“We are not stopping!”

“Then don’t.” Alexa pointed to the rough walls of a small town that had appeared. “I’ll be in there.”

She signaled for Edward to take charge and then headed for the stone barrier that clearly hadn’t defended its people. Skeletons were hanging over the guard towers like gruesome ornaments.

Paul followed, hoping she would allow him to come.

Mark only let the pair get a few feet away from him. He’d made a private vow to be her shield and he couldn’t do that if he remained with the wagon train.

Alexa didn’t care about the two males trailing her. She needed something that was inside these crumbling walls and she would have it.

Mark stopped Paul from going inside with a heavy hand to the shoulder that the scientist cringed away from in surprise.

Mark held a finger to his lips and pointed at Alexa, who was currently stomping on the skull of a skeleton with pale tatters of clothing and little else.

Alexa knelt down to fill her pouch with the small chunks of bone, then filled another with the dust. She repeated this step several times as she explored the town's small courtyard. There was no damage that Mark could see, only bodies, and it was eerie. It was as if something had swooped down and killed everyone, leaving only remains.

Mark gave Alexa space, keeping Paul in line. They stayed by the break in the two walls, a barrier between her and Merrik.

Recognizing her guards, Merrik marked the site as a place to check out after the rewards were claimed for Brian, Alexa, and the wagons. Alexa had the upper hand right now, but that would change.

Merrik spotted Brian talking with Billy, who'd had charge of him the entire time. With Alexa's men, Brian looked almost happy. It was salt in Merrik's open wounds. Brian had been a sullen soul the entire time he'd been with them.

That boy's a problem. Merrik didn't like the voice in his mind, but he listened to it. Right now, it said of the three required deliveries, Brian might be the most important.

Busy thinking, something he didn't do much of, Merrik didn't realize he was shorter on men than when they'd first stopped. He noticed it as Alexa

came from the walls with a pouch in her hand. It was dismissed as bad counting during the last chaos.

2

“Where are we?”

Peters shrugged. They’d seen a bloody little girl and gone to help her. Now, they were totally lost. They couldn’t even hear the wagon train. “Come on. They’re going due south now. We’ve got compasses.”

Private Nicholas eyed the corn and the shadows. “Did we really see her?”

Peters shrugged again. “No idea at this point. Let’s move. We’ll catch right up.”

But they didn’t.

Fifteen minutes of hard running still gave them no hint of where the wagon train was. Neither man pretended that there was an explanation. They slowed to a march with their guns out, trying to decide what to do.

Neither of the soldiers heard the feet shuffling toward them over their own heavy steps, nor the faint moans over their own conversation. When the hand came through the stalks, it was able to grab one of the men before they could react.

The undead were thin and runny, rotting with every shuffle forward, but they still had enough life left in them to chase a meal.

“What the... Shoot it!”

Nicholas screamed as the bony teeth sank into his arm.

Peters took off running in blind panic.

Alexa's lips tightened as the screams continued, sounding near enough for them to see the person shortly.

"That's one of my men!" Merrik stomped toward Alexa. "Help them!"

"What are they doing out there?"

"I don't care. Help them!"

"What will you give me?"

Merrick cursed and spun around. "I'll do it myself!"

Alexa didn't stop him, or didn't motion for her men to. The sooner Merrik was dead, the better.

Merrick reached the corn closest to the screaming, but before he could enter it, a bloody man came barreling out and slammed into him. Both males dropped in a heap of shouts and groans.

"It was dead! It got Nicholas, and it was dead!"

Merrick shoved the blabbering man toward Travis and turned to yell at Alexa, but she was already ahead, getting their convoy moving.

"Wait! I have a man out there!"

"Not if he was bit." Billy shrugged as he and Brian passed nearby. "Good as dead, and better for you if he were."

Merrick's tone became snotty. "What do you mean?"

“They haunt their old friends and family.” Billy sneered. “I’d guess that being soldiers together would make you like his brother, right?”

With that hanging in the air, Billy increased his pace and got away from Merrik. He didn’t like the man, but he also didn’t enjoy needling him. He still had a small hope that Merrik, like Paul, could learn and change.

Brian caught up with Billy, drawing Merrik’s attention.

“I want the boy now!”

Billy sighed. He’d given the man too much credit.

“I’m talking to you!”

Billy didn’t turn. “Talk to the boss. You get him when she says so. Not a second before.”

Merrick was stopped from chasing her by the gunfighter this time, the only one who had made it this far. He and the mapmaker were no longer smiling.

The remaining gunfighter glared. “Leave her be before you get all of us killed!”

Merrick wanted to argue, but he’d witnessed the brothers practicing their techniques on the wolves before Alexa arrived. He couldn’t match it.

“When it’s all over, I’ll remember!” Merrik jerked his slave’s leash away from Travis to march her toward the opposite side of their wagon train.

The gunfighter grimaced. “Me too, son. Me too.”

3

The steadily flowing river wasn't a welcome sight, not after the creek. Everyone surveyed the angry green liquid in apprehension.

Alexa led the convoy through the trees to where they would be able to board small boats that would carry them the rest of the way to Lincoln. Alexa stopped as the dock came into view, shoulders tensing.

That was a bad sign. It sent fresh tension through the waiting travelers.

"Wait here."

Alexa's order was obeyed by everyone except the soldiers and Mark. The man at Alexa's hip stayed close to her as Merrik and his goons hurried by.

"Oh, shit."

No one echoed Merrik's expletive, but they were all thinking it. The boats were there, as was the dock, but the men guarding it and those running it were in pieces. Blood washed over the dock with each wave that was tall enough to reach a body part.

Alexa cautiously began the short descent.

Travis pulled his bandana up to cover the smell. "What happened here?"

Merrik frowned. "Wolves?"

"No way, man. Their heads have been severed!"

The scene was gory enough to make the soldiers dread the dock. None of them wanted to set a foot there. Bodies, and pieces of them, littered the wood.

Merrik cupped his hand around his mouth to add volume. “Anyone here?!”

Alexa’s quick glare warned Merrik that if he made one more mistake, she would handle him.

Travis, reading the moment, stepped in front of his friend in an attempt at distraction. “What do we do now?”

Merrik scowled at Travis for asking her, but Alexa was encouraged. Merrik’s men weren’t all the fools that he obviously was. “Clean off the dock, load the boats, keep moving.” She didn’t say to burn the bodies or to bury them. Left, their skeletons might provide a bit of dust for future travelers, as well as a warning of the dangers that lurked here.

The wooden dock was lined in flatbottom boats that bobbed lightly on the water. The front two even had canopies over their center.

Alexa didn’t have them clean the large rear barges. There weren’t enough people to fill them now. “Let’s get going. My men will guard the wagons. Yours will work.”

Merrik thought to protest, but her men were harder, more likely to save the cargo waiting behind the corn. He gave in resentfully. “What’s first?”

“Make brooms, get cleaning detergent from the wagons, scrub when the water flows over.” Alexa moved toward the corn and began pulling long stalks that she would bind together to use as brooms.

When she stepped back onto the dock without hesitating and started sweeping at the blood, the soldiers joined her.

When they rolled bodies into the water without a thought, she didn't tell them to do anything differently, but inside, she protested. The loss of life, of any life, needed to be respected.

It took them two hours to clean the dock and boats enough to use. The wagon train enjoyed the break from Alexa's relentless pace through the corn. They ate and rested while surveying the water for signs of life. There were none, but everyone stayed clear of the bank anyway. When the call finally came to load the boats, sunset was nearly upon them.

Alexa supervised the loading of each boat, directing people, vehicles, and animals into the proper places for good balance. She didn't give anyone a choice. She just pointed and expected them to do as they were told. Eager to get on the water where he would have control again, Merrik didn't argue.

Their animals didn't like the smells of the new area, nor the water. They shied at being led across the narrow ramps. Edward ended up being the one to do that chore. Paul and Brian were now sheltered under Mark's annoyed protection.

The mules were the easiest to handle, as they'd been through rough places before. The injured mule driver was able to control his own wagon, but he was in the vulnerable rear, swaying in his seat. The loss of blood and lack of sleep was taking its toll.

The man would recover, if given time—something Afterworld didn't often do.

Edward allowed the other mule drivers to assist him with loading, aware that they were old soldiers with supply and animal experience. The fighters were relieved to have them. The wizened old men knew how to take care of things. The other travelers had animals that shied nervously and bucked against the hands that were trying to take them onto the water. Their natural instinct said they belonged on land. It was obvious they preferred to be there.

Tension thickened when the largest of the horses came across the bridge. The stallion had reared up when the saddle was removed, then nipped the gunfighter who had been riding it. Ten hands high, the horse was impressive. *And very nervous.* Edward waved Billy off as soon as he had the reins in his hand.

Edward stayed still for a moment, gently stroking the horse along its nose. “Easy, baby.”

Everyone stopped to stare. The tones of Edward's voice, the waves of peace he was emitting, were strong enough to have an effect on all of the travelers.

Alexa blinked. “Edward.”

He turned to discover the entire group yawning or rubbing at their eyes. They were all dazed.

Edward flushed. “Uh, yeah, sorry.”

He led the now docile horse onto the boat.

Loading resumed while the remaining slavers once more approached Alexa about buying her men.

The slave males weren't doing well. Of the five the slavers had started out with, only two were still alive. The men looked broken as they sat quietly, grieving for their comrades.

“No.”

Braids scowled. “But our stock has been mostly killed.”

“Then you're not very good owners, are you? Get loaded or stay here.”

The big females were angry and offended, but knew better than to delay, especially since there were only a few protectors still alive. When Alexa said they were leaving, she meant it, and no one wanted to be left behind at this horror scene. The flies and smells were awful, but it was worse to view the carnage. The bodies they'd dumped into the water were being stacked up along the far side of the bank by the current.

Alexa and David got the old woman and kids settled near the center and gave them vests. The orange life wear was incredibly filthy and ragged, but still functional. The kids wore them happily. Their own clothes were little more than rags, sporting more filth and rips than when Alexa had first met the trio.

David tried to confirm something that had been bothering him. “Are you looking forward to being reunited with your daughter?”

Grammie nodded slowly. “A bit afraid, too. She doesn't sound like she's changed.”

David handed the kids a food pouch and then took the time to cover them with a blanket from his kit. “It will get chilly tonight on the water.”

He didn’t receive verbal gratitude, which was a rudeness, but David let the insult slide. He continued with his questions, sure he had Alexa’s attention as she got the old woman’s tiny cooking stove lit. “How long has she been gone? Time will occasionally allow true change.”

“Years.” The woman settled back into the extra blanket that had been freed by David donating his. “And some days, it ain’t been long at all.”

The cryptic answer was one the Blacksmith found hard to argue with or work around without seeming too curious. He went on carefully. “I have...had a daughter go missing during the war. I’m glad for you, to know *yours* made it.”

The expression that flashed on the old woman’s face said she believed his tall tale. David gave her a small smile. “You look like my grandmother. Sorry if I’m bothering you.”

“David, enough chatting.” Alexa fed the impression that he was trying to send. “Missing your family isn’t an excuse for breaking my rules.”

David’s voice dropped into defensive adoration. “I’m sorry, Lady. Truly.”

“Yes, David. I hear your apology. Finish your chore and then the next.”

“Yes, Lady.”

Alexa left them.

David apologized to the old woman again. “I’m sorry. I’m a rookie.”

The old woman patted his hand comfortingly. “You’ve been a help. Worry about it no more.”

David felt the wrongness when she touched him, but without a reason for it, all he could do was nod and smile.

David finished settling the family in and then helped Edward with the livestock. The chickens he was chasing didn’t seem to like his way with animals. They knew they were being taken onto the water, but they wanted to get in it. The fact that it would kill them was hard to explain to livestock; the men spent a few humorous moments chasing the chickens around the boat dock, clucking like fools.

Nearby, the captain was trying to recover his Joe Cool look and attitude. Leather jacket tacky with blood, Merrik grumbled as he nervously dunked it into the river a few times. He hung it on a nearby tree to dry, then slicked his hair back with water from his canteen.

Feeling Alexa about to call him out for slacking, Merrik joined the workers. While he loaded his boat according to Alexa’s direction, someone knocked the jacket to the ground as they passed the branch. And then someone kicked it into the water, where it quickly sank.

Alexa’s men watched this in amusement and then shared laughter when Merrik started to get aboard without remembering he’d hung it up in the first place. It was a lot less than he deserved.

“Uncrate your woman.” Alexa glared at Merrik, voice like stone. “No one goes on the water in a box unless they’re dead.”

“What about the prisoner?” Paul’s question drew dark looks from her fighters.

Alexa wasn’t angry. “Not my choice. Criminals don’t have rights in Afterworld.”

When all the animals and gear were finally loaded, the rest of the people were brought on board the two wide boats. Merrik, his pale female, and his men claimed the largest vessel only to find themselves alone on it except for the wagon drivers, who had no choice. They went where their cargo did.

As the last of the soldiers boarded, a shadow came running from the corn.

“Hey, is that... Look out!”

Travis turned around as Private Nicholas, freshly undead, lunged for him.

Peters ran from the corn behind him, eager to rejoin the convoy.

Alexa fired twice from where she stood.

Merrik saw she had shot both Nicholas and Peters. “Why did you do that? He wasn’t undead!”

Alexa pointed toward the pile of bodies that Travis was now crawling out from under. “He would have been, as soon as the poison sank in. He was bitten.”

Merrik couldn’t argue with the teeth marks on Peters’ horrified face, nor the bullet in his brain.

“Let’s go.”

No one argued.

4

Being cut loose from the dock was an unsettling feeling. Curses echoed as gear slid and personal balance was challenged. The current tugged relentlessly at the boats, then jerked them into the center. They were underway.

Long and flat, the boats were much like the old barges used before the war, except their power was the current and poles strapped to the sides. Enough men could propel it, but for the most part, river riding was an adventure much like The Killing Fields themselves. Merrik didn't know that because he'd never been on one. Few of the travelers were surprised when he puked over the rail only fifteen minutes into the trip.

Alexa listened to him retching from the boat in front of hers, sighing. "We're about halfway through, my pet. Halfway through."

Mark, staying close now that they were back in confined quarters, heard the mutter and forced himself not to respond. He wanted to be out of here, too, but he had the feeling that the second half of this trek would be the worst.

"It will. The slaughter chute is about to narrow."

Mark took a short cigar from his pocket and lit it. The rare treat was given envious glances by most of the travelers around them. When he passed it around his group, those jealous tendencies

increased. Everything these people had witnessed said a life with Alexa was rewarding enough to be worth the risk, but more than that, she cared about her men and they were devoted to her. How many people could say that now and be telling the truth?

The water under them was smooth and calm to start their voyage. The exhausted travelers set up pallets and bedrolls almost immediately, eager to rest. The tugging of the water was soothing. It lulled the soldiers and the weaker of their wagon train into sleep.

Alexa's men didn't relax. Letting their guard down wasn't something they'd done much of. It felt wrong, unnatural to them. Alexa had spent too much of her life like this to be comfortable any other way. In time, the same would be true of her fighters. It wasn't what she wanted for them, but it was what had to happen for them to complete this quest. They were only months into the trek of a lifetime. She was toughening them up as quickly as she could.

"We have debris here." Daniel was enjoying his place in the front of Alexa's boat. "Logs and branches, a few bodies."

Alexa wasn't worried over what they could pick out. It was what they couldn't see that was likely to hurt them. "Let me know if it gets bad."

"You got it."

Mark watched as she took a rationed drink from the canteen. "Can we fill up around here?"

"Not until Lincoln."

“I’ve been wondering about the others. Shouldn’t they be getting low on food and water?”

“If we are, they should be.” Alexa swept the snoring people, the tensely settled animals, and felt the mental door open to the place where she was able to feel safe. This was as calm as it would get before hell restarted in new ways.

“Stay alert.” Alexa settled into her bedroll eagerly. She’d never felt so tired.

Aware of her discomfort, Mark curled behind his mistress and rubbed her arm and shoulder until she fell asleep.

Two hours later, Daniel was almost the lone pair of drowsy eyes on their boat. Everyone else was asleep. Daniel stood up to scan the shoreline and stared in shock, forgetting his duty for a moment. It wasn’t every day that he saw a raggedy band of women in loincloths with torches and spears.

Daniel shook his head and wiped at his eyes. “Must be getting slaphappy.” He fought the urge to look over his shoulder. “Seeing shit again.”

5

Billy was near the thief, who was now chained directly to the boat. He was aware of the prisoner giving him hard looks. Billy was becoming their planner, often working directly with Alexa on travel routes and rationing. They had come up with half a dozen new plans to evade surprise attacks in just the

last week. Because of that, Billy suspected Alexa needed this man freed. It was why she'd given care of Brian to someone else for the night, leaving Billy the only unassigned fighter. If he was supposed to go to sleep, she would have told him so. The break from their routine had reminded him of their talks, of the codes she wanted used whenever they were around other people. Mark had known to grab Brian without being told. Billy had picked up the same signal about this thief.

Once Billy struck up a conversation with the thief, it didn't take long to find out that Alexa had indeed hired the man to do something, though he wouldn't say what it was.

"Can I help in some way?" Billy was determined that if Alexa needed it, she would have it.

The thief shrugged. "Maybe. Can ya let me loose?"

"I could." Billy frowned.

The thief grinned, flashing neat teeth and a deep intelligence. "Don't go worryin', none. I got a date in Lincoln. I ain't runnin' off anywhere."

Billy waited for them to be unobserved before using his knife to cut the man's bonds. "I'll hunt you if you run."

The thief smiled bitterly. "Spent my life bein' hunted. Soon, it'll be the other way around."

Billy disliked the man. "Anything else?"

"Could use a distraction, but I reckon the river will provide that."

Billy snorted. “Yeah, I’d guess so.”

The two men continued to chat lightly as the wide boat sailed the slowly moving river like no one had been here before them. It was easy to forget that wasn’t true. The trees along the riverbank hadn’t been trimmed in years. They were now an intricately entwined canopy that protected the water like a wicker roof. Birds in that canopy saw the humans pass in outraged shock, many flying off in protest and anger. A few of them dropped loads onto the boats or pecked at the standing men. A quick flash of wings put them out of range of the soldier’s unthinkingly drawn guns.

Billy noticed that the debris continued to thicken as they sailed through the center of the wide channel, but his mind was on Grand Island. Things got narrow there in places, or so he’d heard from the few stragglers who’d made it west. What did Alexa have in mind for that?

He kept at the problem, hoping to be an asset at that moment. He missed the shadow at his side until boots entered his vision.

Billy stifled his reaction to look up coldly. The gunfighter had his piece out, aimed at Billy’s head. The remaining gunfighter’s red eyes and shaky hands said grief was driving his emotions, not logic.

“Get away from him.”

Billy sighed. “Don’t make me do this. I don’t want to.”

It was a clear warning, but the gunfighter, slowly breaking down from the loss of his brothers, shoved the gun into Billy's face. "Now!"

Billy brought his hands up. "Sure. Step back, I'll move. We're all good then."

The gunfighter retreated a step.

Billy rose up in a quick lunge. He wrapped his big hands around the gunfighter's legs and hefted him over his shoulder.

The toss from the boat drew only a light splash, but the screams of pain and horror woke everyone on their boat.

Alexa's bloodshot eyes focused on Billy's face.

He shrugged without regret. "Just dumping a bit of weight. Nothing we needed."

Alexa nodded and went right back to sleep.

Jim, now a mapmaker without any protection, didn't say a word. He understood his predicament.

So did the thief because he stood up and walked around the boat, trying to stretch his muscles. He'd been in that cage for a long time.

Jim glowered at Billy.

Billy could see the mapmaker wanted to go for one of his many weapons and was glad when the man didn't. Billy felt sorry for everything that the scribe had gone through, but that was no excuse for stupidity. "Why are you taking him to Roscoe?" Billy wanted to be clear on what the mapmaker had done.

"It was my wife he raped!" Jim's eyes filled with furious tears. "He's lucky he's not dead!"

Billy felt there was a lie in there somewhere, but wasn't sure which part bothered him. It was another horror story from this new world, one that wouldn't be investigated, filed, or tried by any court other than the one right here. Billy already doubted Alexa would allow the thief to be handed over to Roscoe. If she'd hired him for a job, he was hers now. That's how it worked with Alexa. If you pleased her once, you did it repeatedly. But Billy was curious. "Why didn't you kill him?"

"Roscoe's orders!" Jim spat to the side. "Anyone who knowingly kills this piece of shit will earn Roscoe's wrath. He wants to do it himself."

"Interesting."

"It's what's right!" Jim fought for control of the rage filled tears. "We have to try to repair this world. He'll stand trial. Roscoe promised."

The conversation was being followed by several people, but not Paul. He was already drowsing again despite the recent commotion. Edward's chortle shook him awake. He looked over, not caring that Edward was being snotty to someone other than him for a change. How he'd come to hate that man! The other fighters had moments where they were civil and showed signs of accepting him, but not Edward. He would do anything he could to stop Paul from being allowed to stay.

I'll do something about that. Paul was furious that he would be left in Lincoln. Alexa had said he would have a month to prove himself, but it hadn't been that long. "Not fair! Not fair at all."

6

The slow, quiet ride lasted for a while. The river, benefitting from the cleaning it was getting by the wide boats coming through, chose not to dispel the uninvited riders.

Wildlife swam alongside and behind the boats, devouring each other. It didn't draw attention from the travelers, but if it had, they would have only been glad that it wasn't them being torn to bits. Beneath the boats was another world, one littered with relics of the past. If the travelers had gone under, and survived, they would have recognized dishes and phones and hulks of boats from those who'd already tried to come this way and failed. They would have seen the bones and piles of debris that had been washed down over the years. The river was a foreign, forgotten landscape that held keys to the past and links to the future that would never see the light of day.

The travelers weren't immune to the effects of such relics being under them while they slept. Their dreams were haunted with memories of prewar days and the political ways that had destroyed them all.

Mark shoved Paul against the rail, tiring of his moans and mutters as they tried to sleep. "Shut up!" The Convict pushed himself away from the cringing, sleepy scientist. "You stink!"

Still refusing to clean himself daily, the scientist was now giving off a thick stench.

Mark got up to look for coffee, leaving Paul to glare in embarrassment and fresh hatred.

“All of you will go first! I’ll be the last one here.” Paul curled into a ball, wishing this nightmare was over.

Mark rejoined Billy on the watch, aware that a few things had changed. He’d joined Alexa not long after she’d crashed. They had both woken at the splash of something going overboard, but when Alexa hadn’t risen, neither had Mark.

“Current picked up.” Billy stretched his back, glad Mark had joined him. “Should we wake her?” Billy wasn’t sure.

That was reason enough for Mark. “I’ll do it.”

Both men paused as they caught shadows moving on the bank. They gaped at the sight of five black women, fishing. The boats passed within feet of the stunned females.

Mark automatically tipped his cover to them. “Ladies.”

When no alarm came, the two men understood there was no one awake to see them on Merrik’s boat.

“Figures.” Mark was concerned for the wagon drivers. “I’ll let her know that, too.”

The women on the bank stared at the boats until they were out of sight, positive they’d just seen the ghost wagon train from the Legend of Lincoln. It

was a common story during the nights they were trapped in their den because of the weather.

“Was they real?” One of the younger females scanned the shore. No one had moved yet.

“No. It’s just The Killin’ Fields reading our fears. Keep working.” The girl’s mother continued to stare, despite that declaration. For one brief second, she’d felt safe, protected...

The girl and her three sisters got back to their labor, but the mother remained motionless. Seeing a ghost convoy wasn’t the problem. The feeling of complete desolation that she now carried was. The second those glowing boats had gotten out of sight, she’d felt like all the light was gone from her soul. She was slowly recovering, but it was unsettling. Ghosts weren’t comforting, *guns* were.

Chuckling lightly at her mental joke, the mother joined her children in securing this week’s food. The night fish were only here once every seven days. If they missed this, they would go hungry. Filling a refrigerator was a lot harder now.

7

Mark put a gentle hand on Alexa’s arm, feeling the current of energy flowing around her in steady waves.

Alexa’s eyes opened slowly this time, unlike the normal way that she instantly flipped into awareness upon waking. Her head lolled.

Mark felt his already growing concern for her become dread. “Alexa?”

“Hmm?”

It took Mark long minutes to rouse her. The open sign of her illness was heavy in the silence.

Alexa sighed wearily, drawing on her determination as exhaustion threatened to pull her back under. “Get me up.”

Mark put an arm around her waist, using his big body to support her to the edge of the boat. She trembled under his hands.

“Tell me what to do for you and tell me right now.”

Alexa didn’t have the energy to scold him. She looked over the edge, fingers weak against his skin. “The current will continue to increase. Should be a problem around dawn.”

“Alexa.” Mark’s tone was ugly.

Alexa gave him what he thought he wanted, too tired to keep resisting. “It steals my energy, thins it. I crave meat...blood. I’m fighting the change, but in another week or two, I’ll become like them.”

“The vampires.”

Alexa’s lids shut, then fluttered open. “Doctor in Lincoln. Paul now.”

Mark helped Alexa to where Paul was dreaming again, laying her down.

Mark smirked as the Rabbit woke up screaming into his hand.

In the corner, Billy watched in concern. He hadn't realized that Alexa was ill. Could he help her? He knew legends, stories...

Dreading the emotions that would surface, Billy began to run through the people he'd met, the groups he'd traveled with since the war had destroyed his life. Maybe he'd heard or seen something that would save her. If he had, he would break the vow of silence on his past to tell Alexa everything. Saving her life was worth the banishment that might come when she discovered who he had been and how he had trained to hide his thoughts from her. He should have already shared the tale. She might never forgive him.

8

The predawn hour came with a light guard shift guiding the boats through the water that had begun to move faster. The men used mud-stiffened poles to keep the boats from drifting too close to the bank. The tough work made them respect the power of the water even more than they already had.

"She needs to eat." Edward came to take his shift on security. In the boat ahead of them, tired guards grumbled at the shorter shifts that Alexa had her men on. Merrik's remaining soldiers were on the edge of mutiny, but he wasn't smart enough to realize it.

"Sleep's good." Mark observed Alexa's rough breathing against Paul's back. He wasn't sure if

they should wake her until she finished with the current dream. It wasn't good to wake people from a nightmare. Answers never came until the end.

“Yeah. David has dinner. You need anything?”

Mark shook his head, now staring at the dark water. “Nope. I'm awake and not on the take.”

Edward snickered at the joke and went to make sure the others knew to let their boss sleep.

Mark saw the messengers slowly get up and start a cold meal in the far corner of the boat. He assumed the messengers were supposed to return to the government with information on Roscoe. The government wanted to know if he was stockpiling weapons to use against them. The messengers had chosen to ride with the soldiers at the last second, hopping over while the boats were tugged free of the dock.

Mark spotted the thief, who was now on the boat with the soldiers. How had that happened?

Mark saw the mapmaker and the thief exchange glares. *That explains it.* Mark was also aware that Alexa wanted something from the thief. *Billy let him go so that could happen.*

Mark put his back to that scene and studied the other waking travelers.

Of those who'd started out with them, less than half were here. Nearly everyone blamed Merrik for his lack of knowledge and refusals to listen to Alexa. If he hadn't gotten so many of his men killed, they would all have better protection right now. Mark agreed, up to a point. Merrik wasn't the kind

to listen to anyone without something to gain. His employers had to know that. They'd sent him on this mission hoping he wouldn't survive it. That meant he was either a liability or dead weight. Mark was betting on the latter. He doubted Merrik had enough intelligence to be special in any way.

Mark listened to the water grow louder. It felt as if they were going a lot faster now. He picked up a stiff pole to be ready in case steering was needed.

A few minutes later it was and Mark threw himself into his duty. The water wasn't something he would underestimate. Even those who could swim were at an extreme disadvantage.

Mark dipped the pole and shoved away a large log rolling by, then did the same for the biggest pieces of debris coming toward them. He hadn't heard anything from the boat to imply it was water-weakened, but that didn't mean they should encourage hits.

Mark was pleased when all of those on duty followed his lead and began clearing the debris around them. It got a bit exciting between the men, trying to shove logs and wood and thick, spongy piles of leaves far enough to keep them from being dragged back against the boat. Their small calls and moans woke the rest of the sleeping travelers.

The jokes and laughter were a nice change from the screaming they were all used to.

The old woman and her kids were the first to come from their box shelter near the slavers and the

mapmaker. Jim, clearly still angry that the thief had been let loose, ignored everyone except that small family. As the children looked through his books, he worked on a pot of tea to go with his hard bread. The slave owners, slipping further into depression with each wave, sat on their blankets with rolled smokes and vaguely bitter expressions as the other camps ate and performed morning rituals behind clumsily tied sheets.

Alexa allowed herself to stay still for a moment before rising. She felt better, stronger. There was a lot to do now that she understood what it was that she needed to recover. Paul's blood would hold it back and the doctor's skills might even cure it, but it was mostly her own heart eating away at her. Each time she delved into the past, it became harder to leave. If she wanted to heal, she had to remember what was at stake, what she had right here. Stepping backward would never get her to her father's side and that was unacceptable. It was fine to dream, but the time for it was before or after a quest, certainly not during. That was how she would get them all killed.

Alexa felt the boat shift into a faster speed and got up, handled her morning routines without a care for the way that her men surveyed her in happy surprise. She knew they'd been worried, but she would be fine as long as everyone, including her, did their duty.

Alexa's recovery was quick and impressive, leading to Mark ending his glares of jealousy. When Alexa had asked for Paul, he'd felt like killing the man. Knowing how badly she'd needed his blood eased it enough to allow Mark to kick a food pouch toward Paul after watching the scientist hungrily wolf down his last one. "Keep eating. She needs you strong."

Paul went red, but for once kept his mouth shut. He felt like he was starving.

It was almost dawn and the location Alexa had given them was fast approaching—literally. The current had them flying along at a speed that had even Daniel concerned.

David surveyed the narrowing river and the overgrown banks. At some point they were going to need to stop. "Is there a brake on this thing?"

Alexa waved a hand at a weathered structure coming up on their right. "Aim for a bumper."

Those who heard her words felt their stomachs drop. They hadn't thought about getting off, only getting going.

Billy kept packing their night gear. "How long until we reach our stop?"

"Half hour, maybe less. Secure the animals."

Unsure exactly how to do that, her men used David's blacksmithing knowledge to rearrange the animals and supplies. Alexa took pole duty and got busy shoving the larger piles of debris away from the boat. Every now and then she checked on their

progress and scanned the rushing water. Estimating, she was also keeping track of the soldiers. She didn't like the way they were whispering in a small group. She couldn't see what they were doing, either. Merrik had switched their boxes and wagons to the rear during the night, unbalancing them and blocking everyone's view. It screamed of trouble.

Alexa gave a noise of scorn. If Merrik thought she hadn't been expecting this, he had underestimated her yet again. This time, he wouldn't survive it.

The water continued to pick up speed and the debris piles in the churning mass thickened. It wasn't long before every member of the wagon train was awake, packed, and worrying over how they would land. The banks on either side of them were lined in thick corn, with nothing else visible as they rushed along.

The force of the current quickly became strong enough to jerk the boat through the water, attempting to spin it. The land blurring by was now a concern to the travelers. How hard would they hit it, and who would they lose this time?

Chapter Eleven
A Grand Island

1

“**G**et her over here!”

The narrow curve in the river drew Alexa to the stern of her boat instead of answering Merrik’s order. “Brace for a bump or two. We’ll be spun into the current and continue on our way as long as the bank doesn’t stick us too deep.”

Edward frowned, estimating. “Less than a minute.”

Paul panicked. “We’ll hit their boat! Tell them to turn!”

Daniel jerked a hand at the rushing water. “How? You can’t steer in this with only poles!”

The travelers watched in nervous fear as the boat ahead of them slammed into the bank, violently jarring those aboard.

Wagons tilted toward the shoreline, digging the soldiers further into the bank.

The boat came to a halt, groaning.

“Hang on!”

They hit Merrik’s boat hard enough to knock it loose. Their own vessel shuddered at the impact, nearly coming to a stop. Screaming people and gear scattered across both decks.

Tugged by the current, the two boats bobbed and bumped nauseatingly until they were dragged back into the center of the river. The travelers quickly grabbed for items and animals that had shifted toward the edges.

Alexa observed both boats as best she could, making sure people were there and alive, but her mind stayed on the glimpse of what she'd discovered as Merrik's boat spun. They had a large gun set up under an army tarp, with at least one man hiding with it. That would have to be handled, and soon, as the city of Grand Island was now approaching. The city looked dead from a distance, but as they began to pass small sheds and stores—an Auto Zone, a Radio Shack—there were shadows and forms that said life still existed there.

The closer they got to Grand Island, the faster the water drew them along and the narrower the banks became.

Alexa braced her feet near the rail. “This may get ugly. It looks like the bumper is missing.”

Thanks to years of mud and debris piling up, the narrowest part of the river was barely wide enough for the old boats. Merrik's shot through the gap without touching, but the larger vehicle in the rear was too wide. Alexa's barge hit both edges of the debris widened gap and came to a jarring halt that sent people and animals flying again. Wood cracked from the impact, spraying shrapnel as the entire boat dissolved.

“No!”

Merrick's protest was echoed by the wagon drivers as the other boat vanished beneath the waves. The current quickly carried them away from any survivors.

The wagon drivers were devastated to lose Alexa and her men. They had already come to care for her. Merrik and his men regretted the two bounties they'd just lost.

The sullen, grieving load of men slammed into the next rotting shore bumper a few minutes later and exited the crazy ride.

Three rapid explosions tore through the peaceful silence, sending flesh and water into the air, but it wasn't noticed by the travelers from Alexa's boat as they fought the swirling water. Thanks to Alexa and her fighters, most of them were saved. All seven of them were excellent swimmers, and the wild current and debris here discouraged marine predators.

Alexa and her men hauled themselves and their fellow survivors to the bank, shivering in cold, wet clothes that most of them would have to walk dry. If it had been much colder that wouldn't have been possible, but the day was surprisingly warm for this apocalyptic hell.

As they staggered to the bank with the last of the survivors, Alexa noted a waiting shadow and proceeded that way. Mark and Daniel were on her heels.

Alexa took the bag that the thief held out, not asking how he'd acquired it. He was as soaked as the rest of them, but there were also streaks of red in his hair. He'd obviously grabbed the bag and jumped while the messengers pulled the explosive cords. He had to be ghost-level good to have gotten it and survived.

The criminal laughed cruelly but didn't speak.

Alexa turned away. The stink of evil was all over him.

She took the case to a dry spot to break the lock with her knife. Her men kept the other travelers away as they swept the muddy corn. Everyone hoped Merrik's barge had hit the shore further down and sank.

"2013." Alexa scanned the faded papers. "A government order to destroy Lincoln."

Jacob frowned. "That makes no sense."

Billy nodded. "It does if Roscoe wanted weapons because he knew this was coming."

It made the fighters wonder if they'd been right to kill the men in River City.

Alexa put a fast stop to that. "Make no rewrites of history, my pets. We've only ever eliminated evil from our country. We are not the same as those we travel with."

It was something each of her fighters had already struggled with in their own way. They were all relieved to know that it wasn't a sin.

Alexa answered their thoughts with another frown. "I did not say there is no sin. There is always

a cost for killing, make no mistake about it. That is a stain that each of us will carry forever.”

Alexa glanced toward the lingering thief. “Say it now, so that our business may be closed.”

“We’re even.” The thief was edging toward the corn. “One message for one slice of bread.”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond. The thief darted into the corn and quickly vanished.

No order came to chase him down.

Her men were glad they didn’t have to go crashing through the nasty stalks again, but they didn’t like letting him roam free.

“We’ll run into that one again. Before that, we’ll see Merrik and his big gun. Get ready for it.”

2

“Send the wagons on and set us up.” Merrik was hopeful. They were in sight of both the river and the only road within miles. “Just in case she survived.”

“You saw what happened to our guys who tried to cross the creek.” Travis watched as the wagon drivers took off. They were all eager to be away from the destruction wrought by the blasts of the messengers blowing their packages. The three men had been conversing near the corn, with no threats in sight and they’d blown themselves up, taking Merrik’s big gun and two soldiers along for a hot ride. Those who weren’t hit by shrapnel had been lucky. Most of the men here were now bleeding, ears ringing, moaning, and ruining the day that Alexa

had strode from the corn. The body of the blond slave woman wasn't something to be concerned over.

"Alexa's gone." Travis scowled. "And we've lost half our remaining men in the blasts from the damn messengers! It's a wonder we still have the wagons."

"We'll look for her!" Merrik wasn't happy to have lost two of his mission objectives. Brian and Alexa would have paid the best rewards. All he could do now was hope she survived and brought Brian through it with her. If that happened, he had another chance. If not, he at least had the wagons. That would be enough to keep Roscoe from killing him. He hoped. Merrik planned to offer up the incompetence of his men as an excuse to provide Roscoe a target for his infamous temper.

"We've got company."

They all turned at Travis's call.

Merrick hoped to discover Alexa stumbling up the riverbank like a gentle, drowned kitten. The old woman and her two kids were unexpected. Dry from head to toe, the trio looked as if they'd come from a leisurely stroll.

"How did you get here?" Merrik paused. Was that blood on the little girl's hands?

"We flew!" The girl giggled, bringing her bloody hand up to tear a fresh bite from what she was holding. "It was fun!"

The little boy spoke for the first time, blue eyes glowing like sapphires in front of a light. “Never flew before. I was an orphan in my other life.”

Merrick and his men stared in shock, not moving even when the old woman stuck a gnarled hand into her waist pouch.

“What happens to them, Grammie?” The girl swallowed and peered up at the old woman. “Can we eat them now?”

The old woman cackled as the soldiers flinched in fear and revulsion. She tossed the handful of dust into the air, where it hung, suspended, until she blew.

Now the soldiers tried to duck and flee, but the dust dropped the males into a deep sleep with no thought for their resistance. Thuds and squelches of falling bodies echoed.

The old woman chuckled. “Ah, to be in the slaving ports. This lot would make us rich!” She cackled again.

“So would mine.”

The old woman scowled angrily at the sound of Alexa’s voice behind her. “Go away, warrior woman. Go on your doomed quest and leave us.”

The children bared their teeth, their fangs, at Alexa and her soaked fighters, but stayed behind the old woman as she turned to face Alexa’s determined countenance.

“You’ve earned passage with your deeds. Go on to your deaths in some other terrible land.”

Alexa's hands rested lightly on the butts of her Colts; those tapping fingers sent fresh tension through her men. It meant get ready, but none of them were. They didn't have a clue what was going on.

Alexa sighed heavily, sweeping the unconscious soldiers and animals. "You're responsible for us waking to the wolves."

The old woman didn't answer, but the little girl stuck out her tongue in confirmation.

Jacob was suddenly furious. "We've been protecting you! Why would you do that?"

The little boy suddenly reached over and grabbed the remaining piece of bloody meat from the girl's hand. He took off into the nearest field with it.

The little girl gave chase, screaming like she was being sliced open.

The fighters recoiled in disgust.

The old woman's cackle was becoming annoying.

To get the sound to stop, Alexa explained when she usually wouldn't have. "They needed to eat. No one counts bodies during a wolf attack or a shootout."

Jacob crossed himself. "I will fear no evil."

"Yes. It's an abomination to be eliminated, nothing more."

The old woman reached for her waist as Alexa pulled the trigger.

She missed.

Or the woman moved.

None of the men was sure, but the old lady seemed to have rolled aside and reappeared exactly where she'd been.

Grammie grabbed a handful of dust and tossed it high. "Nighty-night, my pets."

The dust was impossible to fight.

All of them fell to the damp ground.

The old woman went to where Alexa lay and knelt down long enough to cut a thick yellow curl from her crown. She lingered over those deadly Colts now lying useless by Alexa's hand, but she didn't take them.

"Can we eat now?" The girl rubbed her stomach as she and the boy returned from their game of chase.

"Not these. I won't give her father a real reason to come here. She provided aid along our trip. We will reward her with their lives. Someone else will rob them of that gift, have no doubt. Eat the soldiers instead."

"But you said I could have him!" The girl pointed to Jacob. "I want my Preacher!"

"Noooooooo!" The old woman's face changed to all teeth and black pits of hell.

The little girl fell to the ground, cowering while the boy screamed for mercy.

The travelers who had survived the boat crash also reacted to that shouted command of death. They immediately fled.

Alexa had left them behind for their safety, fearing Merrik would have a trap set up for her that might get them caught in the crossfire. Right or wrong, it now appeared there had been worse things waiting ahead. They had all chosen to give that side of the river a wide berth.

They used a rope and debris piles to run, jump, and fall across the river, counting on the strong current to wash away predators. It worked, allowing the survivors to continue to their destination without Alexa. They were a somber group that realized they were lucky to have gotten this far. That luck had come from Alexa's light. Now it was gone and the horrors of this hard new world were all around them once again.

3

Alexa and her men woke over a slow, nauseating space of ten minutes. Each of their reactions was nearly identical.

Jacob groaned, lids opening to scan for his crew.

The bodies next to him, half eaten, jerked the fighter to his feet and put his gun in hand.

"Easy." Alexa was standing a groggy watch a few feet away. Mark and Edward were next to her.

David and Billy were nearby, both emptying their guts. Daniel was the only one still unconscious.

Jacob stayed close to him, automatically taking over for Alexa as she went to retch. He would assist their final man when he woke. It was their usual chain, but she hadn't been first to recover. It was another confirmation that she was ill. They ate together, slept together, bled and killed together. With the new awareness that she'd given them all, if one of them hadn't noticed it by now, they didn't belong in this group.

Jacob studied the mess of tracks around his feet, trying to determine how long they'd been out when Daniel jerked awake. The Biker was in a low crouch an instant later, gun ready and eyes wild.

"Easy." Jacob didn't stare at the carnage. Merrik himself appeared to have only been snacked on lightly.

"Brian isn't here." Daniel controlled his guts. "Merrik's face is half gone. True?"

Must taste bad. Jacob had already noted the other bodies had bites and gouges all over them. "True. We were ambushed."

Alexa knelt down by Merrik and began to remove objects from the very dead Captain's body. "You've given me something that I needed. We're even."

She tucked the items into her pockets and then stood at the edge of the corn, away from the death

and insects. After stripping the rest of the soldiers of their guns and ammo, her fighters followed.

Alexa stared at the corn and the foggy landscape behind it, not speaking. They were able to see the edge of a house through the next massive field. Even with a limited view, her men didn't want to go there.

"Neither do I. Right now, we have no reason to. Let's go." Alexa turned them toward Lincoln, keeping to the bank of the river.

Her fighters were relieved. They'd had as much of the corn and its secrets as they could tolerate. Another two days in the fields and some of their sanity might go missing.

Alexa understood. She also knew they could take much more than what they'd been given so far. The going hadn't really gotten tough yet.

Alexa led them straight toward Lincoln, not searching for the other travelers. She mourned the wagons, but if luck led her quickly enough, the wagon contents might still be a part of the trade. Why they needed to be, she still wasn't sure, but instinct said whoever got the wagons and the boy to Roscoe first held a needed advantage.

Alexa wanted it. She didn't know what was going on in Lincoln, but if it were as populated as the rumors implied, then the secrets being kept there could be important—not to their quest, but to the recovery of the country. If Roscoe was dealing openly against the government, then the government had reared its head again and restarted

the old ways. Afterworld was hard, especially at night, but it was honest. You knew it was trying to kill you. The government did that with a glad hand. They could never be allowed to gather enough men to fight another war.

Alexa flashed to the conversation where her father had predicted this future for the world.

“There’ll be a space of time where the government isn’t heard from for a while and most people will believe they’re gone. Even if they aren’t hunting you anymore, don’t fall for it. They’re regrouping and planning how to come out in a way that returns control over us. When that happens, get people together and fight.”

“Fight the government?”

“Yes, as hard as you can, with every breath you have. If they come up and reassert their control unopposed, we’ve lost it all again.”

Alexa thought about the growing number of soldiers they’d been running into, how they’d been hunting her mercilessly and throwing away man after man while doing it. Like they had a new source of manpower.

It appeared that the time was nearing for their fellow Americans to make a new stand, but Alexa didn’t think there were enough true patriots left to handle such a battle. Even if there were, Adrian was the only one who could bring those people together.

He was the real Safe Haven. Without him, everyone was doomed.

4

“We’re being followed. Again.”

David’s observation was met with resigned sighs.

“It’s the thief.” Paul had been the second one to wake up. When he joined Mark on the watch without talking, the Convict had been surprised and glad. Mark didn’t like Paul and didn’t want him along, but when he’d woken to discover all the bodies and blood around him, he’d been eager for any of their group to wake, even the Rabbit. “Should I collect him? I’ll be gentle.”

Alexa waved him on.

Billy darted into the weeds alongside their faint dirt path and disappeared.

Edward scanned and found no one watching him. He quickly scraped off the bug goop the girl had smeared on and was astounded to find the deep slice almost healed. “Wow.”

“Yeah, the old world would have charged for that. Here, it’s free.”

Edward hadn’t heard Jacob come up behind him. He controlled the flinch that came from being sucker punched twice by the same fist in one trip. “Not really. Millions of dead Americans paid for it in blood.”

Jacob couldn’t argue.

Less than five minutes later, Billy reappeared with his prize, bound and gagged. The thief had picked up a black robe and boots that gave him the appearance of a monk when he was set on his feet.

Alexa motioned for the gag to be removed, but kept them rolling forward. She wanted to be in Lincoln ASAP. “Why are you following us?”

“I want to join you.”

“You’re joining Roscoe.”

The thief shook his head, tongue shooting out to run across his cracked lips. “You can’t give me to Roscoe.”

Alexa raised a brow. “No?”

“Please, he’ll kill me and I didn’t do none of it!”

The loudness of his protest drew an immediate reaction from Mark. He replaced the gag.

Alexa didn’t stop.

Her men made sure the thief stayed in the center where he was protected, but also under tight scrutiny. If Alexa decided to help the thief, they would be doing this anyway.

Paul scowled thickly at the new guy.

The thief made a face at him.

Paul spat toward the thief, wiping away the sloppy grin.

The thief muttered through his gag. Impossible to tell what he was saying, all of them quickly tuned him out.

“Why weren’t we killed too?”

Paul's question was one all of the men were wondering about. They waited instead of shushing the scientist.

"Did we have some sort of protection because of you?"

Alexa sighed. She'd done more talking on this trip than she'd done in years. "Partly because of my father, but mostly because of the unspoken rules. We protected them, fed them. A debt isn't something to leave unpaid."

"It felt like more than that." Paul was sure of it now. "Like we were protected."

Billy reminded them of the tracks they'd found at Merrik's slaughter. "The wagon drivers weren't killed. They didn't help the old woman."

"Our guy paid a fee." Edward now realized what it had meant. "A couple of us saw him give them a pouch. I thought he was being generous."

"They knew the whole time!" Billy was finally angry.

Alexa shrugged. "We didn't have a deal for anything more than a ride. It doesn't matter anyway. They're coming."

They all turned to discover the wagons slowly rounding the farthest bend behind them.

"How did you hear that?" Paul stared in wonder. "I still don't."

Alexa didn't answer. She'd felt them, not heard them. The driver in the lead had spotted her. His relief had been a loud mental shout of devoted joy.

“Don’t scold them for leaving when they woke.” Daniel looked at Paul. “They came back. It’s enough.”

Paul nodded. He didn’t feel like yelling anymore, only sleeping. The weariness had settled over him suddenly and he wasn’t sure how much more walking he could do despite being rested from their boat traveling. Fighting the water had worn him out.

The wagons stopped by Alexa. The lead man waved a hand at the seat next to him.

“Thank you.”

“My honor!”

Alexa climbed up and peered into the wagon. She spied Brian’s violet eyes lit with contentment as Mark and Edward greeted him like friends.

She turned around without ruining the good feeling now flooding her men. They thought the worst was over. *And I’d hoped the boy was gone again, off on his own where he might have a chance to live. At my side, he doesn’t.*

5

The ride through the nighttime wasn’t calm and pleasant, despite the better company. The thick fog hid small, chittering black forms that scurried between the feet of the mules to make them snort nervously. The drivers handled them as if they’d made this trip a hundred times. For all the others knew, maybe these tough old men had.

Alexa stayed in the driver's seat of the front wagon. When they needed a break, she and her men took over. The drivers had to have rest, but their mules were fine to keep going until daylight. Alexa wasn't stopping before that unless she had to. There was a feeling, a pull toward a peaceful place, and she planned to spend a few hours resting there.

As the night wore on, Alexa slowed their pace to give the mules a small break. When the shadows thickened and the huge animals twitched and snorted, she sang words and tunes from childhood memories. The mournful notes drifted over their convoy like a protective mist.

In the rear, Edward and Paul listened to the faint, haunting song with silent appreciation. In front of them, Billy and David shared grins and a smoke. Directly behind Alexa, Daniel and Mark listened with increasing worry. They were close enough to hear the song. It was about accepting death, not fighting it.

“When are we going to talk to her again?”

Mark loosened his hold on the reins as the mules began to calm. “Not sure. She isn't open to personal questions and observations, you know?”

Daniel snorted. “Yeah.”

They listened to the chorus in dismay.

*“We'll travel far, travel far
We'll reach a star, reach a star
We'll hold our guns and give our sons*

*We'll bleed and die
We'll touch the sky
Our quest undone...*

Mark sighed. "I'll try again."

"No. I'll take a go at it next."

Mark didn't argue with Daniel. He hated confronting Alexa on anything. It wasn't fear of her temper or even of being cast out. He'd just never respected anyone as much. It felt wrong to question her. He hadn't cared for anyone his entire life, until her, until these men. And now it looked like she was dying.

"Lights ahead."

Alexa sent the alert softly, sure that her men were listening. Dawn was still a couple hours off and they were all exhausted. Sometimes the sound of a voice after so much quiet could bring alertness as fast as a gunshot. Voices usually meant trouble.

Alexa didn't stop or consider steering around. She suspected whom those lights belonged to, but even if she were wrong, they had to stop. The sleep dust hadn't been restful. It felt like they'd been traveling for weeks without a real break.

The path they'd been on narrowed; the result was a once again limited view through the corn. Alexa was sick of it. She'd just as soon set it all ablaze and fight the flames instead.

The light ahead became brighter. Low mutters echoed over the clip-clop of the tired mules.

"Who is it?"

“Is it her?”

“I told you she’d come!”

The other travelers hadn’t fled far before stopping. They’d felt naked without Alexa’s protection, but they’d also felt a loyalty to her that had allowed them to agree to wait one day for her to catch up. They’d spent the time resting and listening for her Colts.

“It’s her!”

Alexa’s wagon was surrounded as she entered their small camp. She was pleased to find them all sharing one fire. The deaths had bonded them. They could fight together now if need be.

Alexa only counted two dozen here and hated herself for not saving more of her people. She tolerated the greetings and gentle touches, but inside, she cringed in shame. *I lost so many!*

Mark and Edward understood what she was feeling. They eased the people back, telling them she needed to sleep. Alexa let them lead her to a small but clean tent where she surrendered to the darkness that held no accusations.

6

“How long to Lincoln?” Jacob was standing guard outside Alexa’s tent with Jacob.

“If we leave at dawn, we’d be there by nightfall. But we’re not going at dawn even if she orders it. Tell the others.”

Jacob didn't argue with Billy. He went to where Edward was standing watch over the most vulnerable side of the small, long ago emptied orchard. Near them, the mules and drivers were settling down. The thief had been forced back into the mapmaker's wooden cell shortly after they'd arrived.

Alexa's men hadn't protested. They didn't trust the sleaze either, but they also assumed he had something else that Alexa wanted. They made sure he wasn't hurt.

"Billy says we're not leaving on time, no matter what the boss says."

Edward pulled a face. "And who gets to tell her that?"

Jacob shrugged. "All of us, I assume."

"It won't be enough to keep her here if she decides to go. You know that."

"I do, but Billy was pretty sure."

Edward ran a tired hand over his face. "Might as well nail her on the bite too, find out what we're in for."

Jacob gave his support eagerly. "Agreed. There's gotta be something we can do for her."

"I also think, if we're gonna do this, that we should do it all the way."

Jacob's brows drew together in confusion. "I'm not sure..."

He followed Edward's line of sight to where Paul was curling up in a bedroll under the wagon next to Alexa's tent. She'd gone out quickly. All six

of her men had denied Paul entrance to the canvas. She hadn't asked for him or anyone else, and unless she woke with a ni-

“Ahhhh! No, you won't!”

Alexa's roar disturbed the entire camp, bringing the people and animals to panicking alertness.

“Damn!” Edward cursed their oversight, grabbing a mule's lead as it tried to escape Alexa's hoarse shouts and screams. “Get someone in there!”

“I've got it!” Daniel ducked into the tent and used the method she'd taught them to wake her when she was dangerous. He talked to her, keeping his distance. “Alexa, Safe Haven waits for us.”

Alexa's shouts ceased; her lashes slowly opened.

Daniel sighed in relief and eased down onto the bedroll with her. “You were...”

“Screaming.”

When she shut her eyes, Daniel was horrified to watch tears roll from beneath her lashes.

“Alexa?” Daniel was lost. He hadn't thought she was capable of crying!

Alexa's tears were a waterfall. The Biker gathered her into his arms and held her. He couldn't think of anything else to do.

Daniel came from the tent a bit later and waved Paul inside.

Paul hurried. Her screams had been blood curdling. He never wanted to hear them again for as long as he lived.

Daniel joined the small group of shaken travelers around the fire, waving off their concern. “She had a nightmare. Who doesn’t have those in Afterworld?”

The travelers understood that all too well. They returned to their beds to wait for sleep’s second visit.

Daniel waited until they were the only ones awake, and then gestured to his teammates. When they were all gathered close enough to hear, he put them into Alexa’s back-to-back watch formation for the conversation. “She’s changing inside. She’s weaker during the day, stronger at night when she’s fed. She needs to have a transfusion, something only the government can provide now.”

“We could break into a bunker.” Billy thought about it for a moment. “Maybe find a scientist who knows how to get it done?”

Edward shook his head. “Too risky. And even if it succeeded, we’d never get her back out.”

“What about keeping her fed and accepting the fact that she’s now a fucking vampire!” Mark hissed lowly. “We can’t cure her and I’ll strangle any man who says we have to kill her.”

There was a thick silence for a long time as they stood watch and contemplated those awful words. They’d only had her to themselves for a short while and the effects of the quest were already interfering.

“There has to be something else.” Daniel was sure of it. “We just don’t know about it.”

David nodded. “We don’t. But we know someone who might.”

Edward frowned. “If you mean the troll, how would we contact him? We don’t have her...skills.”

“Do you suppose getting rid of the infant...killing it, would cure her?”

That question earned Billy five nasty glares that only resumed sweeping the landscape after he lowered his head in shame for suggesting it.

“Sorry.” Billy was. He didn’t like the idea either.

Edward forced out words around the need to strike his teammate. Alexa would leave them if she found out they’d thought of something like that, let alone discussed it. “I don’t know what to do yet, but I do know it’s not that. Who else has an idea?”

The six men stayed close as dawn slowly approached, coming up with ideas and then shooting them down until each of them was weary beyond words.

When daylight came, the mule drivers took up guard positions without being asked or told.

Alexa’s men all piled into the small tent with her for a few hours of much needed rest. They hadn’t settled on an idea. They didn’t have a clue what to do for her, other than to make sure she got the food she needed. Right now, that seemed to be Paul’s blood. Later, when she needed something harder, they would talk again. Leaving her side wasn’t discussed, despite the danger she would pose

to each of them. They'd been risking their lives with her all along. It was a part of the job and inside, each of them believed they would die on this quest anyway. She'd as much as told them so upon picking them, and yet, they were all here. It was fate. There was little point in fighting what each of them had secretly hoped for in the first place. Men without a death wish wouldn't have signed up for a quest like this.

Chapter Twelve

Lincoln

1

Lincoln, Nebraska was a welcome sight to only a couple of the travelers. The wind that had haunted them for the entire trek fell silent as they stared at the skyline. Grand Island had been something to view, but these towering buildings and deserted overpasses were impressive. The feats of the old world were easy to marvel at when facing structures that rose into the green haze. That technology no longer existed, but those tall, slowly eroding buildings were a symbol of a world gone, yet still longed for. Most of the group understood it was dangerous even after all this time and braced for trouble as they topped the last miniscule rise. The road that led into the city was long, allowing those in the city a clear view, a clear shot.

Alexa motioned her fighters into the same formation and cover that they'd used when she collected David and Jacob from River City. "Let's go."

The road was narrow dirt, kept clear of weeds and corn by being used as a garbage dump. Alexa waved at the drivers to walk alongside it instead of trying to force the mules to ignore all the rotting

scraps. It clearly drew a lot of wildlife. The scat was abundant.

Alexa admired the hunting grounds even as she hated it being so close to the city gates. Garbage encouraged diseases and there were few doctors left. “Bring him up.”

Mark brought the thief to the center of their formation, ignoring the mapmaker’s protests.

As the road wound down the tiny incline, it gradually widened and connected with two other small dirt and garbage roads. All three paths led into different areas of the city.

Alexa surveyed the thief as they reached the intersection. In the distance the city was still and silent, foreboding in its absence of expected chaos.

The thief answered her silent question. “Straight ahead for Roscoe. Right for black, left for white.”

Alexa and her men didn’t like those words, but race issues were still as ugly as they’d always been. Self-segregation was common.

Alexa led them straight, not ready to fight either side of that war. She had both black and white among these travelers, along with Chinese and Mexican. Her own group probably wasn’t welcome at all.

“We’ll get to Roscoe Street about half a mile in. You’ll know it when we get there.”

Edward and Mark tried to guess.

“Traps? Guards?”

“Soldiers?”

“No, to all three. Roscoe wants people to come into the city. He trades with everyone and then sends them on their way.”

“So, there will be soldiers?” Edward didn’t like their guide one bit.

“No. He makes them come in on foot, in pairs. They have to camp outside the city limits, like any other armed group he deems to be dangerous.”

Alexa and her men immediately began examining the terrain for the best vantage point to camp at when Roscoe declared them unsafe to bed down inside.

“So what’s the plan for me?” The thief moved to her side.

Daniel shoved him over and stayed between them.

“Where are my other messages?” Alexa slowed but didn’t stop.

The thief slowly took a roll of faded, wrinkled papers from his pocket. His thin face was covered in fear and mistrust. “You’ll save me from him?”

“Yes.” Alexa’s voice was cold. “Neither Roscoe, nor his men, will kill you.”

The thief was happy with that. Her kind wasn’t allowed to lie. “Here then and good luck. I don’t know that code.”

Alexa stopped to scan the papers, uncaring that they were in plain view of all three roads. She didn’t want to end anyone here except Roscoe, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t react if fired upon.

Paul knew the codes. A quick glance over Alexa's shoulder gave him inside information on the second letter that she opened as they walked. The third missive she tucked into her cloak, disappointing them all.

"Any idea what that means?" The thief studied it. "I've read a lot of codes, broken a lot too, but never saw one that used so many full words for each letter."

Alexa had recognized it immediately. It had taken her years to learn. "The government was making first contact with Lincoln. They wanted to know who had control, how things were being run. They were requesting a full city inventory. It's dated before the destruction order."

"Wait 'til he hears that!" The thief laughed harshly. "Just what he wanted."

Alexa understood the thief knew a lot more than he'd let on and chose his future right there. "He'll pay for you, and then lock you up. We'll get you out."

The thief frowned. "He might kill me as soon as he spots me."

Alexa didn't change her plans. "I'll handle Roscoe."

The thief didn't argue further, but it was obvious from his face that he didn't like her plan.

Alexa was counting on that, as she was counting on Roscoe not being what everyone said he was. She wasn't going to promise to kill a good man to save a thief and rapist, even if he was useful. Alexa

now held little doubt that the man was guilty of everything he was wanted for. She would always take something like that into account. He'd lied to her repeatedly. She wouldn't forget it.

When he didn't think it would be noticed, Edward took Paul's arm and slowed them a bit. "What was it?" He and the others were slowly learning the codes, but Alexa refused to let them write it down except for teaching moments in the dirt. It was taking them all longer than they were happy with.

Paul shook his head. "Bite me!"

Edward tightened his grip until the scientist's face turned red.

"Fine!" Paul jerked away to rub his newest bruise. "It's a bounty order for Alexa Mitchel, daughter of the most wanted fugitive on American soil!"

"But he isn't here anymore." Edward was confused.

"No shit! Now get us into place before the eyes in the back of her head open up and I get blamed for this, too."

Surprised, Edward did as he'd been told.

As they neared the signposts, it was easier to detect the racial divide that waited inside for them. The sign on the white side had a skeleton hanging from it. The black sign had the same, only there was another pile of old bones beneath it.

The sign for Roscoe Street was a simple wooden board with that exact title scratched across. It gave

a feeling of being neutral that only Alexa's men didn't fall for. The other travelers were murmuring and chatting softly in excitement at reaching their destination alive. Even their animals perked up.

Alexa drew one gun and let it hang along her hip. Her men did the same as the travelers behind them all tensed, scanning for the trouble.

"You won't need those." The thief was now out ahead of Alexa, swaggering cockily through the first decaying buildings. "I told you. He wants people here."

David concentrated. "All people?"

The thief nodded. "His crew is a mix. Everyone else stays to their side of the lines. We don't have problems."

"The bones back there say otherwise." Daniel didn't hide his sarcasm. "Keep lying, dead man. She sees right through you."

The thief flushed scarlet and turned to protest to Alexa.

Alexa's cold expression discouraged him.

"No eyes on us yet, Boss." Mark stayed close to her. He was the middle, right spoke on the wheel. He didn't intend to leave Alexa's side while they were in here.

Alexa didn't comment on his words or thoughts. She liked it that her men were protective. It was a result of their bond. They cared for each other, respected each other. She would do the same for them that they did for her and they knew it. She pitied any woman who fell in love with one of her

men. That female would never be able to live up to what these men needed. Only her kind would ever be enough for them now.

“How does he handle groups who cause trouble?” David watched garbage roll across the broken street ahead of them. The dirt was about to become concrete, but it was full of ruts and weeds.

The thief pointed to a small rise where a large prison sat in glorious abandon. “He has them locked in the prison until they agree to follow the rules.”

“Or he sends them on their way?” David continued to get details.

“No. He keeps them until they agree. A year in a cell will settle anyone down.”

None of Alexa’s men liked hearing that, but it was hard to argue with. As long as the people were fed, it wasn’t exactly right or wrong. And it was miles ahead of simply killing them.

Paul caught something the others had missed. “So, they can’t leave the city either, right?”

“No one wants to. Roscoe has a great setup here. You may not want to leave, either.”

“Tell us about it.” Alexa swept the tall buildings, dark alleyways, and dead streetlights. There were abandoned, rusting automobiles and all the other debris they’d come to associate with the apocalypse, including fading bloodstains, shell casings, and bones.

“He uses the river for power. His street even has running water.”

“Hot water?” Mark hadn’t had a hot shower in years. A used bath in grimy, tepid water was usually the best to be found in any town now.

“Yeah, it’s Heaven.” The thief turned around to examine them as he walked backward. “He serves a nightly buffet with steaks and burgers, and corn that you can eat without getting sick.”

Alexa’s men felt the draw, but they resisted asking any more questions.

Alexa also stayed silent, willing to let the man ramble on with his lies. Steaks and hot water were only memories in most of the places she’d been, and even the few who’d had them couldn’t sustain them for long. There was no wealthy class anymore.

Clop. Clop. Clop.

The sound of a horse echoed. Alexa motioned them to keep going. If Roscoe had a welcome party waiting, her men would handle it.

The fighters tensed at the sight of a large wagon rolling around the corner and into their path. It only took a few seconds to see that it was piled with fresh garbage.

The travelers made their way to the side of the cracked, weedy street.

The garbage wagon was being pulled by two oxen and driven by a heavily bearded old man who stared curiously at them as he passed. “Good day, folks.” The man’s eyes slid to Alexa’s Colts and then to her men.

“Good day to you, sir. Where can we find a town merchant?”

Almost by them, the driver had to swivel around to point. “Straight ahead to that old church and go left, Lady. Can’t miss it.”

“My thanks.” Alexa turned toward the downtown area. She didn’t look back and her men didn’t either. If she wasn’t worried over it, they needn’t be either, was a rule they were adjusting to.

“I told you where to go.” The thief stared at Alexa in reproach. “I’m not lying.”

“Then why do you mind if I verify that information?”

The thief glared at her dry tone. “It’s my honor, that’s why!”

“Do you have a lot of that?”

The thief flushed before taking a place by Paul.

Mark and Edward exchanged amused glances and then sent their attention back to the ominous landscape. The buildings above them implied they could crumble at the slightest vibration and while both men knew it was an illusion, it didn’t stop the worry. These old structures might have been built to last a lifetime, but they hadn’t been designed to withstand a war.

As if to prove the point, several roof tiles dropped heavily to the ground in front of them, throwing up clouds of dust and dirt.

The men stepped over the rubble, staying in formation. They’d been worse places while fighting with Alexa, but most of them had been in worse areas even before joining her quest.

“Questions, my pets. Everyone ready?”

It was fascinating to watch her men brighten as if suddenly filled with life. Their heads rose and strides became lighter, faces easing into eagerness like rain sweeping across a thirsting landscape.

“The best meeting place for a group that gets split up.”

The men searched their steel landscape, but no one spoke right away or tossed out clumsily given guesses. She wanted her men to think about their answers first. Even Paul remained silent.

The other travelers quieted to be able to hear the lesson, as Alexa had intended.

“The tower at two o’clock.” Edward pointed. “We’d be able to view the entire city from there, I’d bet.”

Mark, who’d been about to suggest the same place, nodded. “Exactly.”

“Then that is our spot.” Alexa shifted slightly to show Edward a different location by hand code. He would make sure the rest of their men knew, but not anyone else. “Name three items that can still be scavenged from a city even after thousands of survivors have come through.”

That one was harder. They all paced forward in thoughtful quiet as they swept buildings and signs for the answer. It wasn’t until the library came into view that anyone felt confident enough to try.

“Books, right? Information?”

“Yes.”

Billy grinned, but he knew it hadn’t been a full credit because the crumbling brick building they

were now passing had triggered the idea. He struggled to think. What else would people ignore? “Materials, like from the buildings?”

“Perhaps, but not on my list as useful in the same way that books are.” Alexa increased her own alertness while she had them distracted.

Daniel gave them the second answer. “Equipment, like medical machines and electronics. There’s so much of the computer stuff that it won’t ever all be looted or destroyed, and the medical stuff needs too much power and training to use.”

Alexa nodded. “One more.”

David gave the final response. “Cars? Vehicles?”

“Yes. They won’t have power or fuel, but cars and trucks will always be in these cities, usually right where their owners left them. And a few, my pets, will be useable.”

“After you charge the battery and add gas?” Paul liked knowing how to get a car rolling if he had to. Transportation was something he’d been thinking about a lot.

Edward answered his student reluctantly. He still didn’t want Paul with them and he was glad they were here, where the scientist would stay. “Yes, though luck will matter a great deal this long after. Internal parts erode. And you’d have to check other things, like having water in the radiator, no water in the engine, oil filled. It’s just basic mechanics.”

Paul didn't respond. He was trying to imagine himself doing all of that alone and failing badly.

Alexa sensed they were nearing a contact point. "Tell me what we should *not* do while we're here."

"Make noise." Mark glared at Paul.

Paul, still in his thoughts of vehicle hell, missed it.

Daniel also frowned at Paul. "Get split up."

Jacob gave the next answer. "Become distracted. We keep our eyes on you."

Alexa straightened her shoulders and the command of a leader flowed from her lips. "My rules, one through five."

The men recited them together.

"My life is your life to give. Mercy only goes to those who deserve it. Justice, the true law of the land, will always be honored."

Their voices in harmony were fascinating. The travelers listened studiously.

"There is no order that I am given that I won't follow. I will never quit this quest, even when I'm dead!"

They shouted the last, sending birds into the sky and snorts through their animals.

The men checked their weapons and silenced their gear.

The thief realized she'd gotten them set to fight. "What are you doing? Roscoe wants people here!"

They ignored him, making sure weapons they already knew were ready, were ready. It was a habit that Alexa had insisted they get into.

“Wait!” The thief stopped in front of Alexa in panic. “You can’t do this.”

Edward looked at Alexa with a raised brow.

She nodded. “Take care of that.”

All six of Alexa’s men rushed forward before the thief could react. As they marched his struggling body forward with Edward’s huge hand over his mouth, the other men tied his hands and secured the gag.

Mark jerked the thief’s arm out and swung him up over his shoulder so the others could tie his ankles. Now secured, Mark and Edward took the struggling thief to the rear of the first wagon and dumped him roughly inside. Daniel then climbed in next to him.

The shocked travelers put a bit of distance between them and the fighters, but the other men resumed their places by Alexa without glancing at anyone else. It was proof of their vow to follow any order given.

Their reputations increased with the fear. Those who had survived this trip now had stories that everyone they encountered would pay to hear.

“Final question.” Alexa saw the corner that proclaimed a change in scenery. The edges of bright green trees were waving gently in the breeze. “Where is the sniper they supposedly don’t have?”

Silence came.

Alexa glanced around pointedly. “Exactly. Our chosen meeting place would be an excellent spot for a sniper. Watch your six.”

It was an important detail that none of them had thought about, but now they knew to beware of that if they did have to meet somewhere. The travelers wouldn't be surprised when they fled there, and Alexa's group wouldn't be surprised when they tried to help the travelers escape the city. Alexa wouldn't allow these people to be held against their will.

The trees ahead of them became larger, clearer, revealing themselves as large plastic displays that were moldy and cracked throughout their length. It gave the trees a realistic appearance that caught attention. It would have been easy to miss the forms of people standing behind those trees. Alexa hadn't, but she waited to discover if her men had.

Daniel was eager for action now. "Want us to flush 'em out?"

Jacob wasn't. "I'll negotiate, if you want."

Alexa loved him for it. He valued all life and hated to shoot before talking.

"We'll let them come to us." Alexa said it as they neared the first person who had to know they were no longer hidden. "We'll talk, trade, stay a night, and be on our way."

A female voice came from behind the trees. "You'd have to cross the line to talk. We can't."

Alexa slowed her stride to allow the shadowy girl to keep pace. "Black or white?"

"Both, and therefore, outcasts. We stay on this side of the city and the others leave us alone."

Alexa spotted the welcoming party posted beyond the plastic trees and gave a quick promise. “I’ll stop by your area while I’m here. Find me then.”

“I’ll be at the ceremony seeing my dad off. Talk to Robert.”

The shadow ran away, leaving Alexa to frown as they reached the line of men waiting for them.

Behind the townsmen was an iron gate as tall as the nearest buildings. The ten men, two clusters of sagging shoulders and bearded faces, slowed the convoy, but not Alexa. She strode straight to them, talking.

“I have several deliveries and I’m only making them to Roscoe. His orders.”

The tallest man had a dusty clipboard. He rifled through the papers. “Sorry, ma’am, but he’s out in the neighborhoods right now. You can give me the ID numbers and I’ll send someone for him.”

Alexa was aware of the wagon train very slowly following her through the gap in the men, forcing them to retreat a few paces to make room for the mules and horses. “Tell him I have all three of his packages.”

The pen stopped and the thin, haggard face came up. Cliff shifted his glasses further onto his nose. “Really? All three?”

“We also met one of Roscoe’s scavengers on the Stairway of Hard to Reach Places. He won’t be making *his* delivery.”

“Rick, too?” Cliff groaned. “That’s sure to improve Roscoe’s mood. He’ll be here at lunch time—”

“I’m not waiting. Send someone out now.”

Cliff scowled at her. “Hey! Roscoe isn’t to be called to your side like some adoring lover. He’s the Mayor here, our leader and we don’t—”

“He has two hours. After that, I’m taking my three possessions back out into the wilderness. Maybe to Port City.”

Cliff motioned to one of the closest men, grunting. “Go get him.”

“Where do you want us to wait?” Alexa subtly drew every drop of energy from Cliff that she could without him noticing.

Cliff struggled to break the sudden lethargy sweeping over him. He was exhausted. “We have an area for new people. Nice hotel once upon a time.”

“And our animals? Supplies?”

Cliff surveyed the few wagons and families, and shrugged. “How about a warehouse next block over?”

“We’ll all take the warehouse. And my thanks.”

“Sure, sure.” Cliff wasn’t sure why he was so tired. “Go left at the next block and down Roscoe Street to the fencing. It borders the warehouse.”

“My thanks.”

Cliff watched them all pass in a daze. He needed a nap.

Alexa smirked once he couldn’t observe her face anymore.

It was soon clear why Roscoe made newcomers travel the length of his street. The citizens already here were lining their windows, porches, and doors to get a good view. There were even a few people taking pictures on old camera phones.

Alexa increased her pace a bit. There were dozens of people on both sides of the street, more than enough to overwhelm them. She wasn't worried over her men, only over those who might be hit in the crossfire. She nodded politely to several of the more curious people now approaching the street. Alexa was sure if there were problems, others would join in and she wasn't fooled by their civilized appearance. Suits and neat hairdos didn't mean much in comparison to the fact that these folks had apparently survived the fall of this city. Alexa was willing to bet that most of these gawking residents had lived here before the war.

The homes sheltering these residents drew her attention next. She admired the small gardens in front of each. She didn't care for their trash pile being in the middle of the street, though. There was so much garbage that her group had to move to the side again to get by it, but she understood that was where people would throw it anyway and so it saved a stage of collection. She wondered if they were using the same type of setup with human waste. Other than manure, she didn't smell much in the

way of bad odors, despite the landfill piles. She assumed they were dusting it with something. That implied organization.

The clothes caught the attention of her men—the clothes of the women. They hadn't been around females dressed for success since the war, and it was enough to keep them doing second takes. Alexa didn't scold them.

Many of the travelers were staring. There was a lot that they hadn't expected. There were vines of fresh fruits and vegetables that they hadn't had in years, livestock pens and meat hanging from eaves. There were butter churns and washboards, and on a few of the porches, camping stoves that replaced cooking fires. It was impressive, and yet, sad in some way that the fighters couldn't define. The faces of these residents were long and tired, like there was an invisible weight holding them down.

“No kids.” Edward had no hopes they would find a good man in charge here. He understood harshness was called for, but segregating a city was wrong. To function properly, a city needed everyone.

“No elderly, either.” Jacob tried to be hopeful. “Maybe they send both of those inside whenever new people come through?”

“Maybe.” Edward didn't believe that. There were rockers on these porches, but they were covered in cobwebs and while the gardens were growing, they had the look of sparse care. Elderly populations usually took care of gardens and

rocking chairs in ways that these hadn't experienced in a long time. Edward was sure if he sat in any of those chairs, they would collapse. "Nice show we're getting."

Alexa heard, but didn't comment. There was a lot going on in Lincoln. She wanted to know all of it. Her men would pick up much of it, and she would put the rest together to come up with an answer. She would have it shortly after meeting their leader to decide his fate. Unfortunately, she'd already discovered too much to simply shoot Roscoe and be on her way. He'd either put this city together or kept it together during the collapse. That type of person was rare, maybe even special.

Descendants had their own ways of doing things, including gathering dangerous objects to keep them out of the hands of others. If that was the case, then Roscoe might still be in charge here when they left. As for the segregation her men were having trouble with, Alexa thought it was a tolerable idea for so large of a city without a police force. In time, the race lines would blur on their own, like they always did. Letting people live with their own kind often made them more grateful to have other places to go. Surviving with family was rough, no matter who you were.

None of the people were armed and no one spoke to them. The silent staring was a bit unnerving. The travelers were glad when the chain link fence around the warehouse came into view. The number of people in the lavish homes on each

side of the street had only increased the further they got into the city, though it was clearly the less respected folks who lived this close to a holding area. The travelers could tell the difference in the gaunt bodies and absence of gardens. It looked as though they weren't given as much as those closer to the center of the street, where large homes rose into the sky.

The mini mansions had belonged to politicians before the war and still did now, Alexa guessed. One of them would belong to Roscoe, and the other two were likely his second and third in command's living quarters. She didn't care for a leader who set himself so far above his people, but she was willing to bet that was also intentional. She was detecting things that reminded her of clever, careful leadership. She motioned Edward and Mark to open the fence while she stood still and searched for more clues as to what they were heading into.

A painted sign, and then three more lined up next to it, grabbed their attention.

Be in by dusk. Gates shut at dark.

Respect the zones. Stay with your own.

All ages must be reported to the Lincoln Council.

Theft from gardens or livestock pens earns a grave.

Alexa saw no sentry posts, no way to control an unruly mob. She assumed Roscoe didn't feel the need for any. If he was evil, she would make him

sorry he hadn't done that. She and her men could turn this street into a gallery in seconds.

The Bayer warehouse was lined in a reinforced chain link fence with barbed wire on the top that had been bent down from years of bad weather and no maintenance. The front door was open, showing a main room that was dusty and devoid of everything except for a few cots and barrels to be used as chairs.

Alexa directed the animals and wagons through the loading doors after her men cleared the inside, then the travelers were allowed to enter. It wasn't plush, but after the trek they'd all just made, it was still nice. The group settled down gratefully. They'd made it to Lincoln. They were here.

Alexa's men cleared the rest of their lodgings, sharing deep frowns. Other than dust and basic provisions, the warehouse was a huge, completely empty set of rooms. The impression of a holding cell became stronger. This was a jail.

Alexa put two men on watch and sat down near the center of the room to roll a smoke. The others would relax, maybe even sleep a little, but she would stay alert and be ready when Roscoe came. She wanted no more surprises.

3

“Hi, I'm Roscoe.”

Alexa and everyone else stared at the boy in the doorway, shocked. He was short, thin, and dressed

like a dandy in a flowing blue robe over a once expensive suit.

“Welcome to Lincoln.”

Alexa advanced toward him slowly, studying. There was intelligence in that somber blue gaze, but not the type to have done everything they’d seen. “Where’s your father?”

The boy’s smile brightened. “In his place, of course. Come along now.”

Alexa’s men strode to her side, but the other travelers stayed where they were, even the mapmaker, who had realized he’d lost his reward but didn’t care so long as the thief was punished. The travelers had agreed it was safer to let Alexa meet Roscoe alone and miss any shooting that might occur. The wagon drivers, who’d made this stop once before, said they hadn’t dealt with Roscoe directly. They also stayed behind.

Edward carried the thief over one shoulder and kept watch on Paul, who had insisted on going to any leadership meetings that happened here. When Alexa hadn’t refused, none of her men could think of a good enough reason to deny the scientist. In fact, it was a good idea if they were leaving him here. The sooner he met the town, and vice versa, the better. Brian had also wanted to go along, but Alexa had denied him. She wasn’t going to deliver all three packages at once.

Alexa followed young Roscoe from the warehouse and out into the small crowd that was still lining the street. There was surprise and outrage

when they recognized the bound, struggling thief over Edward's broad shoulder.

Alexa's men exchanged wary glances and surrounded their mistress with their bodies in case the crowd grew hostile. A few dozen wasn't a match for them, but it would mean risking Alexa and Paul during the shooting, two lives they were sworn to protect.

A whispered call came from their right. "It's her! Safe Haven!"

The words spread through the crowd like a disease, lighting up faces in abject hatred and misery.

Alexa wasn't confused about the reaction, only about the cause. She took her hands away from the butts of her gun. "Easy, Eagles."

Her men followed her lead as much as their own instincts would allow, but each of them was ready to draw—even Edward with two charges to care for. The fact that she'd called them Eagles was stored for later personal enjoyment.

Paul, feeling the unrest, moved closer to Alexa so that Edward could do the same. Over his shoulder, the thief had stopped struggling and was now banging his head repeatedly against Edward's hip instead.

Edward delivered a jolting shake to end the bad behavior and then continued on his way.

Young Roscoe stopped outside the Lincoln State building to give Alexa that same fake smile. "He's waiting for you."

Alexa didn't hesitate, but when her hand revisited her guns, the fighters understood they weren't to trust young Roscoe.

Alexa felt like it might be an ambush. Thanks to her fighters learning to read her body language, she didn't need to say it. All of them expected to discover soldiers filling the hallways as Alexa opened both wide front doors.

The hall was dark and cold. Alexa's men stayed close as the doors shut behind them.

Like any other former State building, Lincoln's was marble, brick, and metal combined to create an atmosphere of authoritative tension that lingered even now. On the walls, paintings remained, along with notices not to smoke and court docket copies for families and lawyers. It looked recent, wrong. Everything was in place.

"This way." Young Roscoe led them toward a faint yellow light showing from an under a distant door.

Alexa stopped and waited for her men to be set. Her own orbs had adjusted immediately to reveal dark, dusty halls, stacks of books, and no people.

Jacob was usually last on this point. "I'm good."

He often tried to conquer that weakness by using his long distance sight at night while they were camped. He wasn't sure if it would help, but he figured there was little harm in picking out small, far away objects while on guard duty.

Jacob caught a glimpse of shadows moving under the tall door in front of them and felt his nerves coil into a tight wire.

Young Roscoe pulled the door open, holding it for them. “To the right.”

Alexa went in first. She immediately moved aside to allow her men through. She didn’t sense a threat yet, but it was how she trained them—by example.

Once they were all inside, she allowed their guide to hold a second door that led into a long, rectangular room with three men standing at the far end of an old, wide desk. David guessed it weighed as much as any nag that he’d ever shod.

“Welcome! Welcome to Lincoln!”

The greeting was sent with eagerness and affection that surprised Alexa’s men. Three heavily robed males, one black and two white, all with long, graying beards, were not what they’d expected. Nor had they thought to discover canes and slow, old feet. There was no threat here.

Alexa allowed the older men to touch her hands, to chatter at her in surprise. Her kind was often recognized by the elderly, but Alexa thought maybe these men had been hoping for someone like her, as well. It was in their careful, respectful words and loving caresses.

Paul wanted the same adoration, but before he could speak, Billy shoved a gag in his mouth and grabbed his hands so that David could secure them.

When they let go of him, Paul started to rip out the gag. He stopped when Billy raised a big fist.

Paul lowered his arm, glaring furiously.

“All set, Boss.” Billy grinned cheerfully.

Alexa studied the council as her men took up guarding posts around the large room. Through the windows, the fighters could see what they assumed was the black side of the city by the line of dark flags flapping in the wind. It reminded Edward of his first sight of Alexa.

“Stop.” Young Roscoe pushed his way through the trio. “Let her sit down.”

Alexa was ushered to the table and given a wooden goblet filled with a cool red liquid which she drank without stopping until it was gone.

Alexa let out a loud belch that drew impressed chuckles from the trio and eye rolls from her men. Those they met never respected how much she could drink until they were losing consciousness. She had a bottomless pit instead of guts.

When they were all seated, young Roscoe proceeded toward the door. “I’ll be back with father.”

He chuckled mirthlessly as he shut the door, leaving an awkward silence where Alexa’s fighters understood this was indeed some sort of trap.

Alexa made a sharp gesture. “Tell me and do it quickly.”

The trio was relieved. They whispered in low bursts of guilty outrage.

“He has to be stopped!”

“He’s insane, no question.”

“We need your help.”

Alexa held up a hand. “Tell me who you are.”

“We’re his counsel from each of the city zones. I’m Zachariah. This is Porter, from the white side, and Avery James from the outcasts.”

“Outcasts?” Alexa pretended she hadn’t known. “We were only told of the white and black zones.”

“Those who have mixed families or refuse to pick a side live beyond the race line.” Zachariah gestured. “They suffer without help from anyone.”

“We’re nomads in our own city.” The tiredness in Avery’s voice suggested he’d said as much too many times to believe it would ever matter. “Most of the children come from the outcasts.”

Alexa motioned Edward toward the door. “Start from the beginning.” Alexa didn’t want anyone to interrupt them.

Edward clicked the lock quietly before placing his back against the peeling paint. He scanned the gagged, sulking scientist and the bound, unconscious thief in satisfaction as he listened to the conversation.

“After the war, Roscoe was Mayor here. He tried to protect everyone at first, but the rioting was so bad! He lost control and then the war in the city began. Most people fled.” Zachariah wheezed.

Porter picked up the tale. “Those who stayed hid from each other, but Roscoe wanted all of the killing to stop. When he realized we were already

segregating ourselves, he suggested we draw up zones and stick to them to keep the peace.”

“It worked, for the most part.” Zachariah sighed sadly. “But then the corn began coming for our children and Roscoe made deals with the dead!”

“The corn?”

Zachariah wheezed. “The Master of the corn.”

“A demon.” Porter kept his voice down. “Tell her the rest and be done. He’ll be here soon!”

Avery leaned forward until he was almost resting on the table. “We need your help. Please save us!”

Alexa waited for more, but footfalls outside the door stilled their tongues and sent anguish over their faces. Alexa recognized their terror. She turned to view the door, gesturing for Edward to unlock it.

Everyone tensed as the door swung open.

Young Roscoe was first, followed by a hulking man that caused Alexa’s fighters to advance quickly. They formed a line of glowering flesh between her and the big man.

When the hulk only slid to the side, they understood he was security for the short, balding guy who stepped into the room last.

Roscoe Sr. beamed at his guests, a blue eye roving over their gear, while the brown one lay dead in its socket. “Welcome to Lincoln, my friends. Have they hired you to kill me yet?”

Silence and furiously flushed faces filled the room.

Roscoe laughed while his son cringed away from the arm he tried to throw over the teenager's shoulder.

The father seemed not to notice the slight. He strode lively to where Alexa now stood, waiting for him.

Roscoe didn't seem curious about the gagged man in the corner, but his gaze went over the thief with recognition and a promise of retribution. He extended a hand, moving by Alexa's fighters without fear.

Alexa met his hand in a firm shake that told both of them more than they'd asked for.

Alexa felt need and hunger run up her spine.

Roscoe felt a shudder of fear, of coming closure. He swallowed it to grin again. "Please, sit. Let's talk about the delivery you've made and where Merrik is. After that, we'll discuss my counter offer."

Roscoe settled Alexa into her chair and turned to glower at the three cowering representatives. "You have a ceremony to prepare for, do you not?"

All three of the men fled the room in terror and hatred. The waves were unmistakable.

Alexa's men wondered why Roscoe let them live at all if he knew they wanted him dead.

Roscoe stared at her.

Alexa stared back, marking his knowing eye and his confident posture, but also the erratic tick in his jaw and the knuckle grip under the table that he thought was out of her view. He was nervous about

her being here. He knew she could do the job if she chose to take it. He was dangerous.

“So, here we are.” Roscoe observed the thief snoozing uncomfortably on the small futon frame. “I see the first of three. I’m grateful to you for bringing these things where Merrik failed.”

The thief was unconscious, but Alexa could feel Roscoe’s loathing, his need to spill blood. The thief would be shot the second she was out of the room.

Roscoe turned to her. “And where is the missing Merrik?”

“Dead. The corn’s Master didn’t like him.”

“And the messages? The boy?”

Roscoe didn’t act as if he cared, but Alexa saw the anger behind the blind casualness.

“In the warehouse, as I’m sure you already know. I’ll have my rewards and be on my way. You and yours will not lure me into delaying here and protecting your city.”

Roscoe did pause this time, clearly confused. He covered himself with more questions.

“Are you sure we can’t convince you to stay? The outcasts of your group would even be considered for inclusion on my street if you and your...fighters will protect us.”

Alexa recognized snow when it was blowing over her, but she played along. Better to have an enemy think you were too stupid to know you were being mocked, than to have them know and account for it. “Maybe we could, if the price were right.”

Roscoe both glowed and paled at the same time.

Alexa leaned forward. “The others can’t afford us, but you can, Mayor. What are we worth to you?”

Roscoe frowned slightly, backpedaling a bit. “I’d have to clear it with the council of course. We have voting here, but there’s no reason why we—”

“I want my reward.” Alexa’s voice grew angry. “Now!”

Roscoe nodded, leaning away from her as his big guard moved a few paces closer. “Fine, fine. We’ll come by in the morning to collect the papers and boy, and pay you. Happy now?”

“Yes.” Alexa flashed a calming facade. “My apologies. It was a long trip here.”

Roscoe beamed again, giving that sickeningly fake smile that made Alexa long to shoot him in the throat.

“Good. Maybe we’ll convince you in the meantime.”

“Both sides are trying to hire me, but I haven’t evaluated the layout, the security, or expressed a single ounce of eagerness to get involved here.”

“Lady, please.” Roscoe’s lowered voice had dropped into a tone that was meant to be charming, but came off as creepy. “Tours are dangerous here if you’re on the wrong side of the line.”

“Don’t want a tour, only my money.”

Roscoe stood up, tiring of the charade. “I’ll have it brought to you.”

Alexa waved toward the thief.

Edward immediately collected the groaning man who was waking from the light clip that had knocked him out.

“Wait! What are you doing?”

“We’ll hold him until we’re paid. Just to keep you honest.”

Roscoe had little choice as she moved toward the door with a hand on her gun.

“We’ll be waiting for you.” Alexa let her men go first. “Come afternoon, we’ll bury both bodies and burn the papers on our way out.”

Roscoe stopped at that, scowling.

Alexa gently shut the door in his face.

As they jogged down the stairs of the Lincoln building, Paul tore the gag from his mouth. He threw it at Billy. “Asshole.”

“Worked, didn’t it?” Billy laughed, but made sure Paul stayed in front of him. He hadn’t forgotten what had happened to Zale.

They made the short trip back to the warehouse in the same curious, watchful crowd, but now there was twice as many people. Word had spread.

Alexa quickly got her team inside, where she motioned Edward to release his captive.

The thief, glad he hadn’t been left with Roscoe, wisely kept his mouth shut.

Alexa settled onto her bedroll again, thinking while her men got ready to bed down for the night.

Humiliated, Paul huddled in the corner away from everyone, mind still working on car engines and being out here alone. He couldn’t convince

Alexa to let him come along, but he wasn't staying here either. He intended to follow her. When she found Safe Haven, he would be there. He would still get his second chance.

The other travelers were happy to have Alexa and her men back with them.

Alexa put two men on watch and gave the others the time off to do as they pleased. They all needed personal time.

The warehouse had a double sink setup with gallons of water under it. The Eagles took turns cleaning themselves and some of their gear, as well as filling their water bottles and skins. A small room had been set up for washing, but the layers of rust in these areas told them few people had been here to use it.

Braids delivered cups of hobo soup to the fighters, lingering with Daniel, and there was a peaceful time as they all relaxed while they could.

Paul accepted a cup of the soup, too, but he knew the others with them didn't think of him the way that they did Alexa and her brutes. He hated them for it. He knew Alexa felt honor bound to help those who couldn't help themselves, but he also knew she liked doing it. That was the part he didn't understand. Heroes risked their lives to save people, but why did they like the danger?

Paul continued to stew long after the meal was over and most of the travelers had gone to sleep. *Why am I so different?*

Chapter Thirteen

Zones with Old Bones

1

Alexa rose from her bedroll without waking her sleeping companions or any of the other travelers. She pulled on the cloak that Braids had washed out for her and hung to dry, tugging the hood up.

She padded toward the window silently.

Edward materialized in the gloomy shadows ahead of her.

Mark appeared next to him.

Alexa sighed. They'd predicted her actions. Her voice sounded annoyed, but it masked her respect. "Either will do."

Mark drew his hood up as Edward faded back into the darkness. They'd already discussed it.

Alexa let Mark boost her up to the window; the pair snuck from their cell without drawing attention from the two sleepy townsmen sitting by a fire can in front of the warehouse. Alexa went straight to the fence behind their building and climbed up a spot where the barbed wire had been worn down. She dropped into the black side of the city, then strode toward the tallest building in view. It wasn't as high as where they'd chosen to meet the other travelers,

but it had a clear view of the entire city, minus a corner of the white zone.

Alexa took a piece of dried goat from her pocket and chewed contentedly while doing her reconnaissance.

It appeared that the residents of Lincoln were using nearby creek water, but they'd devised a system of long hoses to collect the precious liquid instead of going to the bank with buckets. They'd clearly learned that water was dangerous.

Alexa spotted the hoses that ran from the creek to a large cistern-type tank, but not to Roscoe's main street. Alexa was willing to bet that he still had clean, pure water left over from before the war. Water plants would be under his control, and that precious liquid stayed good forever. It only required a good stir or shake to aerate it.

Mark stayed close, enjoying being alone with the boss. He and Edward had covered it over a smoke, one of the last between them unless they found a new stash. They'd come up with what they had thought she would do upon waking, and it felt good to have the unanimous agreement validated. If they could accurately predict her actions and reactions, it meant they were learning what she was trying to teach them. Signs of progress that they could point out to each other were ones they held onto during the harder times.

Alexa led them onto a main street and continued toward the shiny building. She didn't remember what it was called, but she was sure it had some

ridiculous title. All the tall towers of the old world had been named—another of their problems that led to the fall, in her opinion. Buildings didn't need names unless they were important in ways that benefitted most people, not just the controlling few.

This side of the city was full of structures that had once been museums, art galleries, and high dollar apartments that would have had a front room view to the most cutting-edge entertainment the city had to offer. It was dark and spooky now, but that only enhanced the elegance somehow.

As they reached a main street, Mark moved closer. "We're being followed."

"Keep an ear out."

There was a small group of men behind them. Edward knew the longer she went without acknowledging them, the louder the group would become. He'd picked out no less than eight voices.

They turned the corner at the next dead intersection and stopped in front of the tall tower that had barely visible lights flickering in the upper windows. From a distance, it would look like moon glare or star shine. They were both impressed with the black netting over the window screens. It allowed secrecy and extra protection from determined insects, while still providing a view and fresh air.

Alexa sat down on the top stair, now facing the small group of men following them.

Mark placed himself between them and her, arms crossed over his wide chest.

The black people weren't dressed in suits and the fancy hairstyles of those on Roscoe Street. They wore layers of pants and shirts under thick worker's jackets and woolen stocking caps. They clearly weren't the type to have an hour to spend on picking out just the right clothes.

The ten males were large, with faces that held fascinated curiosity. Alexa motioned Mark to move from in front of her. She wasn't in danger.

He leaned against the nearest marble column with deceptive casualness.

Alexa waited for the quieting group to come to her, aware of footsteps also echoing from inside the building. In a moment they would be surrounded.

“Do not fire without an order.”

The men muttered as Mark nodded. “Never, Lady.”

“Aye. But if you feel that I'm in danger...”

“I'll kill them all.” Mark knew he could do it. He was already planning the order of fire that would account for those who were now approaching the door from the inside. Alexa wouldn't be harmed or taken captive, not by anyone here, and she'd made sure they knew it.

“Does anyone have something to discuss with me?”

The door opened. Three of the blackest men Mark had ever seen came to stand in front of her.

“Who are you? No one comes here anymore.”

“Adrian Mitchel is my father.”

As soon as she said that infamous last name, the mutters and hopeful comments started, but they were drowned out by the fear.

“She can’t be here!” A second man flanked the first. “You know what we were told!”

“It’s against the rules anyway. She’s white!”

“Shhh!”

Alexa waited calmly for them to get by this part. It would have to happen with each group she met if things were as she suspected. And all of them would want Roscoe killed. They would try to hire her or anyone they thought was strong enough to get the job done. Moreover, there was likely nothing she could do for them and deep inside, they knew it.

“What do you want?”

Alexa looked up at the first hostile tone they’d heard so far. “Ask me and be done with this act.”

Gregory, who had family in all three zones, responded with resentful anger. “Can you kill him?”

“No one can. He’s not real.”

Scoffs and fearful taunts came, but Alexa ignored them. She waited for the words that mattered.

“Can you kill his Master? Will that free us?” Gregory felt hope enter his heart when she didn’t immediately refuse.

Alexa stood up, surveying their pathetic faces without pity. “You’ll have to fight for it.”

Gregory blew out a tired breath. “We’ve got one more in us and after that, we’ll be gone.”

Alexa's hand dropped to the butts of her guns, making the crowd flinch.

Mark followed her lead, causing those closest to flee.

She glared around at all of them. "We kill. And violence spreads once unleashed. We'll not be responsible for innocent lives lost or destroyed."

"Just kill it!" One of the men gestured angrily. "We beg no miracles save that one! End our curse!"

Alexa turned toward the street. "I will."

She and Mark left much the same way they'd come, only this time the street was lined with black faces who had hidden from them the first time. Eyes peered from cracks in boarded windows and lifted sewer lids. Light chatter also followed as word spread of the conversation. It increased when Alexa went right at the last intersection, instead of left and back to the warehouse.

Mark hadn't expected anything else after watching her manipulate them into hiring her for her own ends. It was slick and also a bit irritating. *I hate how weak people are now!*

"As do I, my pet. We'll help them where we can, yes?"

"You know it." Mark nodded. "Whatever you need."

Alexa gestured toward a chicken wire fence running down the street at the next intersection. "I need a half hour in there, but they've already heard that I'm out. Town sentries are heading toward us."

Mark thoughtfully observed the debris. “Hasn’t rained much. How about a fire?”

Alexa pointed a finger at a nearby pile of molded papers and boxes that were apart from the other debris. She didn’t want to burn the city down... At least, she didn’t think so. That decision hadn’t been fully made yet.

Mark got the small fire going and then followed Alexa over the short fence with a neat leap that flared out his cloak.

Those watching murmured in appreciation and apprehension. Roscoe wouldn’t like anyone out roaming freely. His dusk curfew had held for years, and why not? He had support that couldn’t be argued with.

2

Unlike the black side of the city, the whites weren’t dressed properly. They had thin sweatpants and raincoats, with old gym shoes in place of winter boots. It was a glaring difference that made Alexa dread discovering what passed for clothes in the outcast zone. Other than that, it was identical to the black side. The same debris, depression, and lack of gear was everywhere. The only difference so far was between Roscoe Street, which was neat and clean, and the rest of the city he governed.

A clever trap for new visitors. Mark was glad his boss wasn’t the type to be fooled by something so awful. She felt the wrongness.

“Stopping it will be hard. I still have a small hope this isn’t what I’m planning for.”

Mark was almost afraid to ask. “What is it?”

Alexa swept the cornfields they could barely see. The fields lined the city like a huge trim. Or the walls of a cell.

Mark followed her line of sight and felt his heartbeat increase. “The House in the Corn.”

“Aye. She let us go because she knew what we’d discover here.”

“But if she’d killed us, she’d be safer. She had to know we would return.”

Alexa shrugged. “I don’t know why she let us come here. That worries me more than the thought of going back there.”

“Are we going to?”

“Help!”

The scream startled them both into drawing as they spun to find the threat.

“She’s gone! Help me!”

To their horror and shock, no one came to help the woman running down the street, screaming.

“They took her! My baby!”

Alexa put a hand on Mark’s arm when he would have followed. “Always study the people first.”

Those who had come to doors and windows were sad, but they didn’t react as if it was something new.

“It happens often, I’d guess. Missing kids. Ghosts in the corn. A possessed Mayor. This is an odd town we’ve come to, Convict.”

Alexa using that name told Mark she felt the loss of the woman's child even though she was acting as if she hadn't. *Probably feels all of them.* Mark felt the sense of loss and pain, too. He took the liberty of putting his arm around Alexa's sagging shoulders as the woman's screams faded. "We'll shut it down, Boss."

Alexa sighed miserably. "Yes, but not until we've experienced it all and taken it so deep into our hearts that we can never forget it." She shuddered under his arm.

Mark understood. This is who she was. She couldn't just storm into the corn and blast away. She had to follow traditions and she had to know that it was needed. Killing wasn't allowed any other way. It was the first of the rules she'd started them on and though her five rules were the guidelines they used regularly, that first one meant the most. Murder wasn't allowed. She said if they ever crossed that line, they would be unworthy to enter Safe Haven.

Alexa went to the parallel road closest to Roscoe Street, staying to the white side of the line.

Mark felt people from both sides staring at them as they cleared the corner.

The next street was cleaner than the rest. Alexa headed for the small community center. There was a small light coming from the first floor window.

Alexa knocked sharply on it before Mark could think to ask her if it was wise. Not that he would have.

The window opened immediately. The people inside were waiting for her.

“Back door!”

Alexa shook her head. “That’s for other than the likes of me. Come out and ask your question so that I can end this night’s waste of my time.”

She ignored their protests to plant herself on the top stair of the front porch.

In the other zones, there were nearly two dozen people lining the fences, ignoring each other to stare at Alexa and Mark as if they were aliens.

Mark took up another casual post nearby as the doors opened and a large group of white faces surrounded Alexa. Again, he had little doubt about clearing them from her if trouble started. They were all so thin! He didn’t think they’d had three square meals since the war. *This side is poorer than the black side. How are the outcasts living?*

Alexa listened to their arguing about her presence and the trouble it would cause for all of them, patiently remaining silent until Mark wanted to interrupt them just to have quiet for a minute or two. If he was feeling that way, she had to be. “Are we done here, Boss? Fire’s gonna be out soon.”

Alexa nodded at Mark and stood up. “We’ll be on our way since you don’t require anything. Good night.”

As they walked away, attitudes changed drastically, as they always did.

“No, don’t go!”

“Stop her!”

“Wait! Please, wait!”

Alexa stopped, voice cold. “Ask me.”

Melissa, the elected leader of the white side, stepped forward slowly. “I’m against it, so you know.” The older woman with her librarian’s hairdo pulled her ragged shawl closer. “It’ll only get more of us ejected.”

Mark frowned. “Ejected?”

“The troublemakers.” Melissa sighed tiredly. “Along with the elderly and the strong men.”

Alexa studied her, noting abusive natures that hadn’t subsided since the war. She was shaking as if she needed a fix. Alexa curled her nose. “Resign your place. You’re not fit to lead them.”

Melissa’s face paled, and then reddened as the chatter around them stopped. It was replaced with shock.

“You’re still using?”

“She’s drugging again!”

Alexa turned from the woman to face the angry residents. “What would you ask of me?”

“Kill him!” came the response, in many forms.

Alexa left them while they were still shouting out the things they wanted done to Roscoe’s body.

Mark wasn’t sure why these people hadn’t needed her to explain that it was really the Master of the House in the Corn as she had before, and realized word would spread. She didn’t need to keep repeating all of it. Mark was glad for that as the last zone came into view. The construction field was fenced and walled in a clear warning not to enter

unless you were able to handle whatever might be on the other side.

Alexa climbed the wall and dropped inside with a small leer of anticipation that curled Mark's stomach. She was pissed. She wanted blood and she would be free to spill it as soon as she received the same expected response from the outcast zone.

Mark grinned. "Roscoe's Master doesn't stand a chance."

Alexa didn't answer. She was too furious to make claims or boast. She was sure that this last zone would send her over the edge. There was no way the outcast's lives would be better.

3

"Someone started a fire. The townsmen are fighting it."

Those words caused every head in the underground room to swivel toward the door, as if to see Alexa and her fighters there.

Robert scanned them all. "You saw her?"

"Yes. She has one man with her. She'll be here next, I'd wager." Emmerson wheezed, out of breath from his run.

The room cleared within a minute, except for Robert and Emmerson.

Robert sighed resignedly and pushed himself to his feet with the aid of his cane. He wasn't old enough to need one, but the wasting sickness had crippled some parts of him and weakened the

others. Some days were good. This wasn't one of them. "Send for our council."

Since the war and being ostracized here, word of mouth was the only reliable communication. Even writing letters and notes had become things of the past. Paper was too easily ruined or stolen. What was in a man's mind was harder to get to. Robert gently shut the door for a quick moment of peace and quiet in which to reflect and make his choices. Leading the outcasts hadn't been easy since the war. Robert didn't lack for courage, but Alexa and her men were killers and he wouldn't forget that.

Robert knelt in the center of the room and bowed his head in prayer. "Oh Lord, hear my pitiful pleas and have mercy on my people." Robert's voice roughened with emotion. "There are so few of us left, but we still believe!"

A door opened behind him, but Robert didn't hear it. He was in that place where he was sure that his God was listening intently to every syllable and every tone, searching him for the worthiness that all helpless cases must carry.

"Please, don't let them be hurt. Take them under your wing and remove them from the path of these strangers and their guns. Let them continue in your light." Robert felt a tear roll down his cheek at the silence. "Amen."

He stayed where he was for another minute, getting himself under control. His people expected a leader and he would give that to them. He would

hand this fight over to Alexa and hope it was the correct choice.

Robert stood up slowly, feeling his sixty-eight years more than he had in a while. The sense of a bad storm coming was unmistakable in his joints and sinuses.

“Does he answer you?”

Robert turned too quickly and lost his balance. He sprawled at Roscoe’s boots, moaning heavily.

Soft, menacing laughter flowed through the dim, dusty hall.

“Easy, old man.”

Robert cringed away from the hand that would have helped him, instead rising on his own. “Be gone, Satan!”

Roscoe chuckled. “I’m nowhere near such perfection as that.”

“Only my God is perfect!”

Roscoe pointed a hand at Robert’s arm.

The man moaned in pain again.

“Be careful of your words.” Roscoe stared down in vague contempt. “Or I’ll kill them all the second she’s gone.”

Robert shut his lids. “Please, Lord. Please. I believe!”

When he opened his eyes, Roscoe was gone. The sound of voices came down the hall and through the open door.

Robert shoved himself up awkwardly. Alexa was their only hope, their one chance to be free. He was taking it no matter what the others here wanted.

It hadn't taken an eternity in Hell to break Robert. A world war, an insane Mayor, and four years had done irreversible damage. *Only my faith remains of the man I once was.*

4

The outcasts wore handsewn clothes and old shoes that had been stuffed with papers or wrapped with tape of every kind. It was obvious to Alexa that the stores in each zone were off-limits to those from the other sides. The faded neon of Emmerson's shoes lead the way through stacks of corroded cars and trucks that would never meet the shredder they had been intended for.

The main junkyard building was where Emmerson took them. Alexa motioned to Mark to be careful of the sharp, rusted metal edges that would encourage infections in even the smallest of injuries. They went down into the basement of the junkyard warehouse and then down another flight of stairs to a tunnel lined in stones and torches. At the end of it was a wooden door with deep gouges that said the wolves came this far into the city.

The earthen walls and floor of the single room had been covered in wood and sheet metal scavenged from the dead city above. In the center was the black and yellow hood of a car on a large crate. There were four people of mixed race sitting on the floor around the makeshift table. They stared

with all the desperation that Mark and his mistress had expected.

Alexa didn't waste any time; she took the only empty seat as Mark leaned against the door. She looked to Robert. "Tell me what happened here and why I'm being haunted to kill your leader."

Robert's face clouded over. "He stopped being our leader long ago."

"Tell me. Leave nothing out."

Mark considered himself ready to handle about any story that was told, keeping one eye on Alexa and the other on their company.

"After the war, Roscoe was the Mayor here. He and his family were in charge and he tried to do right by us. He had the gates erected, put out guards and curfews, and interviewed anyone who came in. He and his men were sometimes forced to kill rovers who wanted to take over the town, but for a while, we had a semblance of peace." Robert broke off in a fit of coughing. Those closest hurried to comfort him.

Emerson took over the tale. "It was then that Roscoe split the races. The infighting and gangs already here were taking their toll, always robbing, raping, killing to get to the few stashes of food left. Roscoe grew tired of it and arranged a radio broadcast. He gave orders to divide the city in half, black on one side, white on the other. He promised to send a fair share of all supplies each month to both sides of the line." The messenger looked back to Robert, who'd caught enough breath to resume.

“It had to be expanded shortly after that. Roscoe hadn’t counted on the other races wanting an area, or those who had family on both sides being kicked out by their own kind. The blacks didn’t want white sympathizers and spies on their side of the tape. The whites threatened to shoot any blacks found on their side. After a bit, Roscoe declared an outcasts area where everyone else could go, but when he wanted to give them a supply cut, too, both the white and black sides protested until he was forced to give up that idea.”

“That’s when he started changing.” Avery sighed sadly from the place of honor at the dirty stone table. “Then *HE* came.”

Robert frowned. “Hush now. You’re going out of order.”

Avery fell silent as Robert looked to Alexa. “There was a vote to kick those people out of the city. Everyone saw what the desperate survivors did after the war—the open murder, the violent thefts, the kidnappings—but Roscoe stepped to the front of the crowd and begged for their lives. He said he would build a security system here that nothing could get through. He promised us we’d be safe.”

“And you believed him.”

“Of course. We were those desperate people.” Robert had no shame in his tone or on his face. “He forgave us, let us stay. How could we not believe?”

The feel of extremism filled the room.

Alexa grunted. “Finish your story.”

Robert took up where he'd left off, not showing signs that the order bothered him, but Alexa knew it did.

“Three months after the war, a small group of survivors were let in. Among them was a woman with a purple stripe in her hair and a man who had the feel of trouble, though he said the right things. Your prisoner. Roscoe found out these two had come from the west, a direction we never heard from. He took them into his home. Once there, the man became fast friends with Roscoe's daughter.”

Mark knew what would come next and steeled himself against it, hating his own kind. Why couldn't men have been born differently? Why did they always have to take?

“He stole Roscoe's only daughter from her room and took her from the city. When her body was found, she'd been abused and strangled. The man was gone.”

Mark scanned. “And the purple haired woman?”

Robert waved angrily. “She escaped, though we heard she was shot and died. We hunted the entire city for her.”

“It was dark days.” Avery nodded. “The nights grew longer and the days shrank. Our leader, in his grief, no longer met new arrivals or cleared them. The gates were left open to wanderers who were as bad as the man who'd taken his child. We demanded protection, safety, but when he finally raised himself to listen, he gave us damnation instead.”

“He blames you. Because those people would have been put here, with the outcasts, if he hadn’t taken an interest in them.”

Robert nodded at her guess. “Yes, and there was nothing for us after that but vengeance. The passing ceremony was made a law and the limit on children came next. The food dwindled to near nothing. When strangers wandered in, the guards stayed with Roscoe, in the town hall.”

Robert had another coughing spell and Emmerson picked up the tale again. “We tried to leave after the fire, but it was too late. He owns us.”

Alexa was glad to be through the recap, but those details had connected several pieces and confirmed more. “You believe now that if he dies, you’ll be free?”

Robert shook his head gravely. “We are damned. We would save the future.”

Alexa rose at those words, satisfied. “As would I. You have a blessing for me, I think?”

Robert allowed the others to help him up. He chanted lowly while pulling a long knife with a golden handle from beneath his robe. “It has no mercy. Pick your targets well.”

“I always do.” Alexa slid the new knife into her main belt, moving her well used knife to the rear. “We’ll go now. Unless there’s anything else we should see or hear?”

“You should go quickly. Another ceremony is taking place tonight. You don’t want to be discovered by Roscoe or his men.”

Alexa agreed, though not for the same reasons. She wasn't afraid, but she did want to keep the element of surprise as long as she could.

Mark and Alexa slipped out the back door, able to feel their relief when the cellar shut and the lock turned. The entire town was frightened.

It also stank. Pigs, the new world's excess food, were used in all three zones, but again, not on Roscoe's road. The rest of the residents were lined in pens and reeked of shit.

Alexa was offended on their behalf.

5

When Alexa stopped near a line of bushes, Mark knew what she intended to do. It enabled him to be with her when she vanished behind the trees lining the bushes. No one noticed.

Mark kept his eyes on their rear as Alexa stayed facing the front of the street. They'd been on this signless road after leaving the black side of the city, but Alexa clearly wanted an unscripted view of what went on here.

The water rushing alongside the outcast zone was dark and held any number of threats, including the fish. The people here appeared to avoid the water, but from the damage and waterlines on buildings, Alexa was sure it was a battle that Roscoe had hoped would eliminate them. A flooded area was a place where accidents happened and were overlooked.

Mark wasn't sure what was coming, but he was fine with waiting for it. It was rare for her to have only one fighter with her and he savored the moment.

Alexa crouched lower as voices came from the west of them.

Mark did the same, hoping his big shoulders would blend in.

The voices grew loud enough to be recognized as low singing and humming. The two hidden fighters stayed still and silent as the small crowd came by. Nearly fifty townspeople were walking sedately toward the front gates of the city, some black, some white, some both.

The five people in front of this small crowd were older and dressed in long white robes that both fighters recognized, though Mark didn't make the final, gruesome connection yet. He saw the other people were also dressed up and realized this was a ceremony of some sort.

The singing and humming continued as the group went on. It was still audible even after they were out of sight. Slightly eerie but mostly sad, Mark liked the tune and tried to remember it for later.

Alexa rose and stayed to the tree line as she followed the group. She kept far enough back to avoid being seen by anyone in the parade, but the other residents that she passed gawked at seeing her moving down the street. Alexa didn't warn them to

silence or rush ahead. She concentrated on the big group.

Mark understood that's where she thought the threat would come from.

Alexa spent a minute lingering in the shadows of the alley by a long abandoned bakery to observe the group as they halted at the front gates of the city.

Roscoe appeared ahead of the group, carrying a small stack of books under one arm and a lantern in the other. His words didn't carry to them, however.

Alexa crept closer. She had suspicions to confirm.

The gates opened and from the corn beyond the garbage field, a harrowed hag floated toward them, angry red eyes glowing brightly.

The five elderly people were upset by whatever was going on. Alexa forced herself to stay put as Roscoe shoved the last woman outside the gate. His face was a blurry leer from this distance, and then gone as he strode away.

Mark wasn't surprised when Alexa crept closer.

The gates clanged closed as the hag reached the garbage field and the five people cowering along it began to scream for mercy, to be let back in. Alexa and Mark recognized Avery, then Zachariah and Porter.

The hag didn't attack them like was expected. She extended a long arm toward the corn. After a minute of useless pleading, all five elderly sacrifices began the long trek. The hag floated behind them, herding.

The townspeople watching from the gate cried silently at the loss of their loved ones. The others were already drifting away, eager to forget that the same fate waited for them when they reached the age limit.

Alexa didn't wait for the smaller crowd to dissipate. She took the middle of the street straight to the gate and shoved it open with a furious glare at the single sentry who stepped forward to stop her.

The guard looked around for him before shrugging, and stepping back. "It's your funeral with the hag awake."

Alexa spit at his boots before leaving the protection of the city with Mark's clenched fists right behind her.

The sentry quickly closed the gate, then went to tell Roscoe that the rules had been broken.

6

Alexa and Mark had to run. Despite the elderly people dragging their feet, the specter had them a clear mile from the city before Alexa caught up.

Mark expected her to attack, to rescue the people, but Alexa shook her head. "No."

Mark frowned, not sure how he felt about watching whatever the hag had planned for the older folks, but in the end, he had no time to answer the thoughts.

The specter screeched, coming to a stop, and the area flooded with activity. Undead, all dressed in

the same flowing white robes, ran toward the five people with hungry growls of eager delight.

Mark turned his head, unable to watch, but Alexa refused to look away. She'd chosen not to save them, not to give away her advantage yet. It was only fair that she had to wake screaming later from the view.

The transformation from live to undead was ugly. After being bitten repeatedly, the five people were then revived by the hag. She pointed at several small beetles on the ground. The bugs crawled up the bodies and scurried inside their mouths. A few seconds later, the corpses began to twitch, bodies cracking, shitting, pissing, farting—all the humiliating sounds and actions that only a medical professional used to hear. It was another insult added to what had already been done to them.

Alexa gestured to Mark, and the pair eased out of the area, neither of them waiting to see the people wake and start the hunt for flesh. What they'd already seen was too much.

“What happens to the kids?” Mark couldn't hide his emotions. “I mean, we know one was taken. Maybe we could—”

Alexa silenced him with a hard look, but it hurt her to do it. “If we can't kill the source, we don't pick the fight.”

Mark didn't argue. He didn't like the feeling of her displeasure, but more than that, if he couldn't help them, he didn't want to know about it. The guilt was simply too heavy to carry on this quest.

“Yes, it is.” Alexa led them back to the city.
“And we’ve really only just begun.”

7

As Alexa and Mark dropped back into the fenced lot that surrounded the warehouse, it lit up with men holding torches.

Alexa put a hand on Mark’s arm as Roscoe came through the glaring guards. “Not yet.”

What they’d seen and heard tonight had sent rage into both their hearts. They wanted Roscoe dead.

“I see you took a walk. And did some visiting. How nice.”

Alexa waited, arms hanging loosely.

Roscoe frowned lightly. “I suppose they’ve convinced you. Seeing all that poverty and dejection would be enough to sway anyone, right?” Roscoe barked a laugh. “Does my side of it matter to you?”

“I’m listening. Explain the missing kids and the elderly who sacrifice themselves as food for the monsters in the corn.”

Roscoe winced, but didn’t back down. “It’s the price we pay to keep our city. I don’t like it any more than they do.”

Mark was horrified. “Why would you ever agree to such a thing? What kind of a Mayor are you?”

“Dad?” Young Roscoe came through the crowd, eyes glassy. “Is everything okay?”

Roscoe looked at Alexa with abject terror. “Not a Mayor anymore, only a father.”

Alexa took the hint and put another piece into the puzzle. Whatever trance Young Roscoe was in held his father hostage.

Mark grunted angrily as he put it together, too. He scowled at young Roscoe, but the boy didn’t seem to notice.

“Dad?”

Roscoe put an arm around his son’s shoulders, again ignoring the flinch. “It’s fine. The new people went for a walk. We were about to go searching for them, but they’re here now.”

Young Roscoe nodded happily. “Good. Can we have hot chocolate in the morning with the biscuits?”

Hearing they ate the same thing as the people in the black and white zones helped Mark and Alexa to understand that though it looked better, Roscoe Street was really just the same trap in a different package.

Roscoe waved off the guards and took his son home without saying anything else to Alexa or to the travelers who had come from the warehouse to help kill him if it was needed.

Alexa and Mark waited until all the residents were gone before sharing what they’d discovered with their group. It took a while.

Paul listened from a distance, still plotting. He almost had a real plan now. What he needed was a little luck.

Chapter Fourteen

Betrayed and Repaid

1

The sound of struggling and curses brought the travelers awake as a squad of soldiers flooded into the warehouse, guns drawn and ready to die.

“Do not resist.” Alexa didn’t kill the soldier who grabbed her by the hair and forced her to her knees. This is why she hadn’t posted a guard. It was easier to handle some enemies when you made them think they had the upper hand. She gave the code for a distraction and gunfight to follow. “Plan C.”

“Shut up!” The soldier slapped her.

Mark, still at her side, lunged forward and bashed the soldier in the face with his head. Blood gushed.

The other soldiers rushed forward, beating him with their gun butts and boots until Alexa rolled in front of him and glowered with red orbs.

“That’s enough!”

Roscoe’s voice was whining, scared, and clearly not in control. Sensing weakness, the soldiers abused their authority by tripping bound people as they herded them outside, grabbing female asses, and slapping slowly moving men.

Alexa, enraged by the treatment, caught Mark's eye and directed him to where the mapmaker had his supplies spread out. He'd been working on a quick sketch of Lincoln last night. The smell of paint thinner was still in the air.

Alexa glanced to a pile of clothes next.

Mark took the hint. While he inched toward the materials, Alexa stuck her foot out and tripped the nearest soldier.

Those closest responded with kicks and hits that drew Alexa's other men and the travelers to her defense. It bought Mark time to get a small fire going behind his back.

Busy, none of the soldiers thought it odd that he was just standing there instead of trying to help his boss like the others were doing.

Mark rejoined Alexa as the soldiers retreated, helping her up as best he could with his hands bound. A few seconds later, the smell of smoke drew notice.

"Fire!"

Most of the soldiers rushed over to stomp out the flames that had quickly grown into a nice blaze.

Alexa muttered. Her ropes burst into flames that singed the hair on her hands as it burnt through. She quickly shed the remains and untied her men. She was leading them toward the cart with their gear stacked on it when they were noticed.

"How did you get—"

Alexa punched the man in the throat and darted by him to grab her Colts.

The travelers knew to get down and stay there as both sides began to fire at each other. In the chaos, Braids was hit in the stomach and fell, screaming.

Spotting a perfect opportunity, Alexa fired three fast shots and took out the three highest ranking men in the room as more slugs flew and more travelers fell. “Get out of here! No bounty today!”

The soldiers, outgunned in only minutes, fled.

Alexa waited until they were all out and Mark had locked the door before turning to evaluate the damage.

The slave owner was dying, sounding like a pig, and the mapmaker had no face left to speak of. Other than that, everyone was alive.

Alexa reloaded both guns and holstered before going to the door to call for help that wouldn't be able to save Braids.

2

Braids was dead by the time the town doctor arrived. The haggard looking physician was twenty pounds too light and thirty years too young to be in charge of an entire city, but he assured Alexa that he was the only legal doctor as they walked outside.

“There are hacks in each zone passing out herbs and such, but when Roscoe catches them, they're banished. We only want legal medical people here.”

Alexa didn't ask any of her questions. All sorts of crazy formulas had come with the war. She understood the strict rules, but it wouldn't help her.

"Was there something else you needed?" The doctor delivered a knowing scowl. "You're sick, right?"

Alexa held out the hand where she'd been bitten, tolerating the doctor's touch while he examined it. The fighters in the doorway watched tensely.

Alexa expected him to tell her a rabies shot would help, or that nothing would. She was surprised when he sighed and glanced to the east.

"They have better doctors, the government. Maybe you should let yourself be taken long enough to get a cure."

Alexa pulled her hand away, but not rudely. The doctor wasn't as bad as many of those she'd found since the war. "No, thank you." She handed him a small pouch of dust, which he put reluctantly into his pocket.

"I didn't earn it."

Alexa nodded toward the city, the outcast's side. "I saw some of your work. I assume you shouldn't let Roscoe know you've been slipping into the city to treat the people he wants dead."

Alexa returned to the warehouse and her men, aware of the doctor staring at her in fear. He was worried she would tell on him, but the only thing she planned to do about it was keep her mouth shut.

3

The entire city of Lincoln came to see them off.

Alexa's men kept their eyes on the road and their minds on their lessons. Embarrassing their leader right now wouldn't be good.

Alexa couldn't have cared less. All she was concerned with now was getting back to where they'd already been. She did not have patience for the speech that some of the residents wanted to make, nor for the gifts that a few of them tried to give her.

"We have it covered. Keep what's yours." Alexa led her men from the warehouse and toward the front gate, not surprised to find they now had no guards.

Roscoe was in front of them, waiting at the gate.

Mark moved to Alexa's side. "Now?"

"The house first."

Mark grunted agreement, though he wanted to open fire. Alexa was the boss, even if he didn't always understand her orders.

"I see you're leaving." Roscoe scanned on the thief and the boy still being held. "You've no plans to leave my property here?"

Alexa looked at Edward. "Cut him free."

"Hey, wait!" Roscoe stepped forward.

Mark stepped in front of him, smirking. "I can't shoot you, but I can deaden that other eye for you."

Roscoe had to complain from a distance.

Brian saw Alexa's look and sighed. He headed for the city gates.

"You can't do that! The Master needs him!"

"That's why I let him go." Alexa went to the thief. She opened the cell door and let him out. "You also need closure, Roscoe. I offer that to you now."

Roscoe viewed the thief with confused hatred, forgetting about Brian, who paused at the gate to watch.

"Why?" Roscoe's voice overflowed with a father's pain as he faced his daughter's killer. "How could you do it?"

The thief grinned, uncaring. "She was cute. She offered me her candy bar."

The crowd gasped in horror.

Alexa looked at the thief. "Do you have last words?"

"You can't hand me over!" The thief flew toward her with his true face finally showing. It was ugly. "I'll teach you, bitch!"

Before Alexa could raise a finger, three guns fired.

The thief flew backward, smacking harshly against the street.

Roscoe screamed again, this time in joyous delirium.

Two of her fighters holstered as everyone stared in shock at Brian. He'd stolen Edward's gun while Alexa and the soldiers were fighting.

Brian tipped the barrel toward Alexa in respect and then turned and walked calmly into the corn.

“Didn’t see that coming.” Edward liked Brian much more than he did Paul.

Alexa stepped to the gate during the chaos.

Confused, her men hurried after her.

So did Paul. He caught up to her side instead of falling in line with the other men as the gates clanged shut behind them. “Did you send him away because he’s a killer?”

Alexa sighed. Brian would add too much power to their enemy. “No. Now be quiet. We’re not done here.”

Any questions the men wanted to ask died on their lips at her warning. The group walked toward the corn in silence.

As they left Lincoln behind, a sense of doom settled over the fighters.

Paul also felt it. “We won’t see any of them again, will we?”

No one answered, but he didn’t repeat the question. That’s why Alexa hadn’t taken their supplies. Those people needed everything they had and it still wouldn’t be enough.

Am I like that? Are her men right? Once again not paying attention to where he was going, Paul tripped over his own feet and hit the ground.

“Yes, you are. That’s why you’ll stay.” Alexa pointed to a small shack they were passing. “There.”

Instead of the argument everyone expected, Paul turned that way with a curt tone. “I’ll be here.”

“We’ll stop by for you when we bring back their kids.” Jacob hoped he was right. It didn’t feel okay to leave the helpless scientist out here.

“Let’s make time.” Alexa increased their pace until she was almost running.

Paul was quickly out of their sight.

Paul stayed in the doorway of the decaying shelter for a long time. He watched Alexa and her chosen men as they faded from view and then kept watching. A small part of him believed she would at least glance over her shoulder to check on him.

She didn’t.

Paul stood there, mind a furious blur of thoughts and emotions. She had left him. He was supposed to wait here like a good boy. When she returned, he would be left again, this time in Lincoln.

“I won’t stand for it.” His hands clenched into fists. “She can’t leave me behind.”

Paul remained standing, fuming. The wind grew colder to suit his mood. He’d never felt so angry, so in need of revenge. And he would have it.

Paul finally turned to the shack that he now viewed as his temporary holding cell and evaluated it. The small shack had two rooms and a door, piles of rubble and dirt. Vines grew through holes in the roof and animal tracks littered the rotting floor. If he had to be here overnight, there were chores to be done. It was what Alexa would expect, what he needed to do to survive, but instead, he flopped down on the damp ground and continued fuming.

“Damn it!” Mark unsnapped his holster. “Those guys just won’t quit.”

The fighters came to a stop as Alexa did, all of them scowling at the newest squad of soldiers blocking their path. Positioned between the garbage road and the cornfield, all of the soldiers were pointing guns. The green men were dressed to impress, but Alexa didn’t give them a chance to show their virgin skills. When one of them moved toward her, cocky steps saying he wasn’t afraid, Alexa took personal offense.

“Kill them all!”

Alexa’s men weren’t surprised. They responded faster than the soldiers, drawing and firing with serious intent. Their mistress had given them license to kill and they were eager.

Alexa drew down on the now running Captain who’d thought she was an easy capture. She pulled the trigger.

The cocky man, Aaron, screamed as the first slug tore through his ear. He jerked down, hands coming up. Her second shot slammed into his hand and through it, taking a finger. Her third shot drilled the back of his ankle. Piercing shrieks split the chaos.

Alexa ignored the other soldiers who were stunned into submission by her brutality. She fired

again, hitting Aaron in the other ankle. He collapsed into a screaming, bleeding ball of remorse.

Alexa stopped with her boots against his face, feeling particularly evil. It was only the steps of her men as they quietly took the soldier's weapons without further violence that kept her from torturing him further.

Alexa stared down at Aaron, not caring that he'd only been doing his job. "You chose the wrong side." She pulled the trigger a final time.

Aaron slumped to the dirt with a hole in his head.

Alexa scanned the captives while reloading, noting that her men had killed half a dozen soldiers in the rush. One each wasn't nearly good enough for the situation, but she didn't let them know that. It took time to build the type of skill she needed.

Alexa picked out another Captain and stared at him. "Where were you going after grabbing me?"

Captain Wells swallowed nervously. "Into Lincoln, to resupply."

"And where was *I* headed?"

He clearly didn't want to say, but when Alexa lifted the Colt she'd reloaded, he changed his mind. "West. Three of us were supposed to keep you sedated for the trip to the base."

"And my men?" She used a deceptively civil tone. "Killed?"

Wells slowly nodded. "If they wouldn't join the government. We need men."

Alexa waved a hand. “Go to Lincoln and tell them what happened here.”

Not waiting to see if she was obeyed, Alexa headed for the corn. Her men followed, keeping an eye on the soldiers until they disappeared from sight.

5

Alexa ran them for the next hour, getting to the river in less than half the time it had taken to reach the city. Not having to care for anyone else made a huge difference.

Grand Island was small and clean compared to other places they’d been. They walked down Plaza Square where Alexa led them by the tall hospital that she was sure held people. What type of people, she didn’t know and wasn’t keen to find out, thus the reason for strolling down a main street. A good view of them would convince most people to stay hidden.

Alexa stopped in front of a decrepit old building with no readable signs. She waited, listening, letting her men catch their breath. They were much stronger now than when she’d first picked them up, but still not at her level. She didn’t expect them to be. She’d had decades of training for these moments.

Alexa put Mark and David on sentry duty. “We’ll be inside for five minutes. Any longer, come in.”

Alexa led the others around the back, to the broken window she'd spotted. She smashed out the rest of the dust-grimed glass and then hopped inside with four men on her heels.

The bike store smelled bad. Rubber, rot, and a hint of fish odor permeated the building. All of them pulled their bandanas up over their mouths and noses as they moved through the broken, fallen shelves and piles of molded items. It didn't appear that anyone had come through here since the war.

Alexa directed them to gather what she wanted in large bags that she took from under the register counter. Inner tubes, basic bikes, spare chains—they grabbed everything she told them to. The far wall of this building was lined with rusting hulks of bikes. Being on wheels would give them a slight advantage if they had to get away from something quietly.

Mark and David kept watch on the town and corn uneasily, both counting to that five-minute limit. Even though they knew she could handle most problems, it was always a relief when she rejoined them.

The team spent the next half hour replacing inner tubes and chains on the bikes. The other new supplies were divided and repacked into their kits later. All solid red, the mountain bikes were sleek and sweet even though they were dull from time.

Alexa tied up her cloak and swung a leg over, not asking them if they knew how. It was something she assumed everyone knew. "Let's go."

The bike ride was pleasant. If not for their mission, it could have been a fast ride on a cool morning. Alexa kept them rolling quickly, but it wasn't so fast that her men got the impression she was rushing in to save the kids. In her mind, those captives would have already been transformed. All she wanted to do was eliminate the Master of the house. Time would have to heal the rest of this area's ugly wounds.

Paralleling the swollen river made it easy to keep track of where they were, but the soggy ground made riding their bikes a challenge in some places.

Alexa led them around most of the worst areas, but she also forced them to roll through some of it so they would have that experience under their belts. She'd used bikes many times in her adventures, but she doubted the same was true of them. This would add another skill.

By the time the dim sun began to set, Alexa had them within hours of the house. They stopped to stash the bikes with fondness, each man hoping Alexa would let them use the quiet wheels for the return trip to Lincoln.

They left the bikes under an overturned dumpster in an alley of Grand Island, all hating the way their boots echoed on the cracked concrete. They'd gotten used to being on dirt and weed covered roads. This wasn't a welcome change.

The damaged and weathered stores they passed held no signs that people had been through recently.

Alexa made a mental note to make a stop here on the way back if it was convenient. There was a lot of gear she could take. Most of it would have to be prepared first, but she had a feeling that after handling the Master of the corn, she and her fighters would be ready for a break anyway.

Mark and David, still on sentry duty since they hadn't been verbally removed from it, stayed to each side of the walking team and kept their eyes on the dark doorways and shadowy alleys around them. There was only a little wind to disturb things, but each sound that echoed was one to worry over. The wolves could be lurking and so could the old woman and her evil kids. The tense men walked with hands on the butts of their weapons, ready to shoot the first thing that acted like a threat.

The fork they were coming up on veered to the left and right. One appeared to wind back the way they'd come; the other headed into the tall, moldy corn. Alexa stepped to the left, making her own way through. Her men did the same, widening the path with their wider, heavier bodies. The ground here was drier, harder, and jarred them with each step, as if warning them not to continue.

A gust of wind came from nowhere and pushed against them violently as another warning.

Alexa laughed harshly. "Is that all you've got left, old woman?"

An angry screech blasted through the sky and then there was stillness and silence again.

Alexa's taunting smirk remained as they topped a small hill. Tractor parts and long since mildewed buckets of corn ears lined this area. The fighters stayed clear of the shadows that likely held a predator of some kind.

"Smell that?" Billy brought his bandana up.

The others sniffed. Stomachs growled from the tempting odor of freshly roasted corn.

"Damn." Mark sighed. "It's thicker this time."

"We're closer to the source. Her manifestations, her minions, will have greater power here."

"What is she? Who was she?" Daniel shoved his spikes off his sweaty forehead. "We need to know how to kill her."

"Those are questions for later. The first two, anyway. As for how she can be killed, you're wearing it on your hip."

It was a relief to know that the monster could be stopped with bullets. Confidence rose to full levels again. Being knocked out had rattled them.

The house that appeared below as they reached the end of the massive cornfield was more than simply intimidating. It wasn't right. The layers of fog that surrounded it shouldn't have been there in these conditions. Nor should the second floor tilt or the third floor that appeared to be caving in. The columns holding up the three-story Victorian plantation home were too thin to support that much weight. Not to mention there was a solid black oak tree growing through an upstairs window. The entire property was like that. Fences were upside

down, roots of weeds were waving among the moldy stalks, and the grain silo was shaped like a horseshoe.

Alexa let out an annoyed sound. “Wait for the real house.”

Her men waited a bit impatiently for something to happen.

It came all at once in a thick cloud that obscured the entire property. It lifted just as fast to reveal a busy city hotel. People, happy and wealthy, roamed the expensive grounds, laughing and drinking. It was clearly from before the war.

The fighters didn’t move.

The next fade was to a pitiful home with a bamboo roof and a swampy landscape that didn’t fit in the middle of Nebraska.

“Here we go. The next one is how we get in to her. You six must stay together. She’ll split you up if she can.”

“If we do get split up?” Billy checked his guns like the others were doing.

“We meet at the very top.”

The males would have questioned further, but the mirage in front of them changed again, this time becoming a castle wall with a single door.

“Let’s roll.” Alexa took off at a fast clip, and her men tried to keep up. She was incredibly quick.

Alexa let a large gap widen between her and the men as two large wolves came from the corn in front of her. They charged with thick snarls.

Alexa struck them both with a vicious swipe of both long knives across leaping faces. The animals fell as she kept going. Her men would finish them off.

Alexa picked up speed as she spotted the next pair of angry animals, going into that place where only she and her men existed. Switching guns for knives, she fired twice, taking down both animals. She didn't slow as she saw the pack waiting ahead.

"Hurry up!" Mark pulled more speed from his body.

Alexa began shooting into the large pack, flying toward them as her men did the same. Rapid gunfire ruptured the air as Alexa cut straight through the center, killing six of the twenty-four. Three of the lunging animals were hurt when she ducked, letting them collide overtop of her. She rolled and was quickly back on her feet, reloading as she ran.

"Keep going!" David aimed. "We've got this!"

Alexa did, heading for the castle door.

The birds came from the corn next, forcing Alexa to battle her way through with hard swings of her guns, using the butts like hammers.

The large crows tore at her clothes, scratching her exposed skin, but she didn't stop. Alexa darted up the three stairs and yanked the door open.

Reloading on the move, Jacob thought of the massive flying creature with the vivid yellow eyes as he brought up the Drag position. The Preacher pushed it away. He wasn't a hog. He couldn't be carried off... As everything vanished, there was no

helping the pause in his steps, the unsteady stride. The crows, fog, and wolves disappeared, leaving only the castle wall, the open door, and the corn.

“It’s not a wall.”

David’s comment would have drawn argument, but the other men were too grossed out to respond. What they’d all mistaken for a high castle wall was actually a barrier of bodies, both gray and rotting. It was three bodies wide from what they could see; each peeling, gory face glowered at them in horrid warning.

“How many...” Billy trailed off, but it was already out.

Everyone tried to estimate it.

“Ten thousand.” Alexa almost choked. “About the population of elderly and kids that would have been taken from Lincoln in four years, plus a lot of travelers who tried to brave the corn.”

“That can’t...” Daniel spun around and threw up.

Mark and Edward flanked Alexa, who was still in the doorway. The other four men slowly drifted over, faces green.

Billy tightened his bandana. “Why don’t we smell it?”

“Glue. It holds the bodies together while nature melds it all into a wall. If it stank, it would draw predators and be torn down each time a hungry wolf dragged off a fresh body. The glue is stronger than the rot, sealing it.” Alexa was still looking through the door. Instead of the inside of a castle or the

courtyard of a palace, there was another wall with seven tall doors. Unlike the first wall, this one was made of brick and that, at least, was a relief. The path to each of these doors was dirt, lined in corn and ominous gray shadows.

“Rats?”

Everyone heard the revulsion in Billy’s tone.

Alexa took it into account. “Anyone else?”

He was the only one of them with a phobia of the rodents. Alexa made him go first. “Time to conquer that.”

Billy wished he’d kept his mouth shut, but he was also glad for the chance to do something good, big, or even perfect for her.

Edward was the last one through the door. He gently shut it behind him, sure that if they needed to leave it open, Alexa would have told him so. She’d been training them to close doors, windows, and other telltale signs of their presence.

As soon as the door shut, the rats rushed toward Billy, running up his legs, biting and scratching as he stomped to the closest door. When he made it to the stairs, the rats slowly faded into the ground as if they’d never been there.

“How does she keep doing that? She’d need a solid block of energy to be able to...” David’s face transformed into a rage that made Jacob retreat a step to be out of the danger path.

“The kids.”

Alexa, who’d already figured it out, nodded. “We’ll handle it.”

Alexa assigned each of them to a different door. “We go through each one at the same time. One of us will be missing. That’s the right entrance. Ready?”

When she dropped her hand, all of them turned the knobs and stepped through.

The sight of that wall of bodies said she’d been sent back to the beginning. Alexa glanced around for her missing man. “It’s Edward’s door. Let’s go.”

They were reunited with Edward a minute later, in the courtyard that they’d expected the first time.

The house hadn’t changed, though. It was as wrong as it had been on their first view.

Chapter Fifteen
The House in the Corn

1

To the far right of the old mausoleum was a large thicket of trees. The wide trunks in the front of the grove had branches that had almost grown together to effectively block the entrance. Edward and Billy were forced to veer to the left of these trees as three large wolves rushed them. Firing as they jumped, the men ran toward the nearest part of the house to them—the rear porch. Covered in thick green vines and crusty water spots, the wood shuddered as the fighters stomped up the short stairs and yanked the screen door open.

Billy slammed it shut behind Edward and fired through the filthy screen, hitting the wolf about to come straight through the flimsy mesh. He fired again, wounding the second snarling wolf.

The other animals turned tail toward the cover of the corn.

“I think we’re okay for a minute.” Billy tried to control his breathing as he reloaded.

“Um, Bill?”

Edward’s tone increased the speed of Billy’s fingers.

Edward grimaced as the wolf snarled, tensing for the leap. He was too close for a straight aim. He dropped to his knees as he fired.

Billy's shot went through the wolf's eye.

Edward's tore its throat open.

Blood rained onto the wooden slats like a flood.

Edward shoved the gory carcass off his legs and joined Billy at the door.

"I'm starting to get the feeling we're not wanted here."

"You too, huh?" Edward grinned back, preparing to kick the door open while Billy covered him. "I thought it was just me they didn't like."

Billy nodded once, indicating that he was set.

Edward kicked hard, shattering the lock on the door. It banged against the frame with a thick crack, then slowly swung back with a haunted screech that echoed to all corners of the huge house.

Edward sighed. "So much for the Master not knowing exactly where we are."

Billy shrugged, stepping into the old kitchen. "Won't matter in the end."

Edward now covered Billy as he moved farther into the wide room. "No, it won't."

The kitchen looked straight out of a history book or a painting. The old stove used the moldy wood stacked nearby and the sink was filled with buckets. The long tables were designed to hold massive amounts of food that would have been served to the partiers by dozens of maids. *Or slaves*, Edward had noticed a riding crop propped by the

double swinging doors. It was a harmless object until you asked what it was doing in the kitchen. Then the implications came.

“An old plantation?” Billy’s voice was barely audible. He almost expected to see ghosts of slave women come from the giant pantry that took up an entire wall. The cabinet should have held dishes and serving items, but Billy had already spotted dried red drops on the floor in front of it.

“Someone’s in there.” Edward noticed the same things as Billy, but also a dusty footprint.

Billy reached for the handle, confident that Edward had him covered. He opened the pantry, braced to see bodies.

“Don’t hit me no mo’!”

Billy jumped, startled.

Edward’s finger nearly pulled the trigger anyway.

The woman was old, short, and black, wearing a white cook’s uniform covered in bloody streaks. She peered up at them from the bottom of the pantry with one black eye and one brown eye. Her long gray hair was full of dirt. On her wrists and ankles were thick scars that revealed signs of her abuse.

Compassion overwhelmed the fighters.

Billy knelt down. “Are you okay?”

The cook shuddered, mouth opening to reveal missing and chipped teeth. “Y-yes, Master.”

Billy scowled. “I’m not your Master.”

Edward sensed Billy's revulsion and knelt down. "We're letting you go, helping you. Can you walk?"

They weren't sure for a minute if she was going to scream or cry. Her face changed emotions so many times that it made the two men a bit dizzy.

"I'll cook for you! To pay you! Master's gone. She won't know."

To their surprise, the little black woman climbed from the pantry as if she'd done it often and started pulling down pots and gathering utensils.

"Will cook you up big thanks!"

Her cackle caused the two fighters to eye her warily.

Billy flashed a question to Edward. *What should we do?*

Edward wasn't sure. Information was handy in an unfamiliar area. Alexa was teaching them to find the locals, and what would be more local than the cook of the house? "We'd be happy to eat a fast meal." Edward took a seat at the table. "But if we hear gunfire, we'll have to run, you understand?"

The cook shrugged. "Not upstairs. The dog guards it too well. Better to stay right here, my pets."

The woman's speech was slowly becoming something else, and the shade of her skin—that deep ebony—was lightening even as they watched.

"Is this real?" Billy suddenly felt very dizzy.

"Of course, my friends! All is real in the house in the corn."

Edward nodded thanks at the cup of tea the cook put in front of him. Billy already had one. Neither man was sure how she'd heated the water so fast, but it was steaming and stinking wonderfully. "What can you tell us about the Master of the house?"

"Oh, a hard one! Better to stay down here with me, my friends! I feed you well."

The table was now heaped with temptations—the ripe smelling kind that these men hadn't seen or scented in long years. Mashed potatoes with roasted chicken, pumpkin and apple pies, pudding, stuffing, greens. It was a holiday feast that brought all rational thought to a stop as hunger took control.

"Whoa." Billy fought to control his hands. They wanted to rip off that chicken leg, scoop up a handful of stuffing, and demonstrate that yes, men really were pigs.

Edward had skipped their last meal, mind on how to help Alexa once Paul was left behind. His guts growled noisily. "Yeah."

The cook viewed them with glittering, evil orbs, but neither man had attention for her. The sight of so much food was almost confusing.

"Can we take it with us?" Edward fought the spell. "We have friends we'd like to share it with."

"Sure! Sure!" The cook cracked an eager grin that now revealed a mouthful of sharp fangs. "But try it first, my friends! Just a bite."

Billy saw his hand go out and rip off the chicken leg. It slipped and burnt, like a real meal would. He laughed. "It's good, right?"

Edward had the pumpkin pie in one hand and a fork in the other, face flushed. "We should make sure."

Billy chuckled in agreement as both men brought the food to their mouths.

"Now!" Edward forced out around the smell that claimed to be the best taste he'd ever had.

Both men dropped the food to draw their guns. The plates hit the floor and burst into moldy corn that ran with weevils.

Edward opened fire before the cook could recover, shooting twice.

The woman was knocked against the stove in the impact. Her head landed in the flames, where the fire quickly spread. The smell was horrendous.

Edward's bullets had hit her in the chest, but all the men could see of them was a single dark round stain on her white uniform. The fire, however, killed her. She went down in the flames, screeching like a banshee.

They let her burn.

Wary of the noise and still feeling like he was under a spell, Edward motioned Billy to the blind side of the double doors before taking the opposite area for himself.

"It's wearing off." Billy now felt like he may never be hungry again. The table of holiday sustenance had become what it really had been all

along. The piles of body parts were sickening on every level. There were bowls of fingers, a platter of small legs, a tray of bloody cookies. It was revolting.

“What is this place?” Billy was sure he was about to be sick.

“A house of death.” Edward pulled his bandana up over his nose. Now that the glam was fading, the smells in this kitchen were that of a slaughterhouse. The smoldering cook didn’t help. “Let’s get—”

Gunshots split the air, echoing harshly inside the enormous house.

“Alexa!” She’d been at the front door... Full memory returned in a slap. “Come on!” Edward pushed through the doors.

Gagging, Billy went gratefully.

2

Alexa and Jacob kicked in the front doors.

David and Daniel shut them, using their weight to keep them that way as wolf after wolf tried to break through.

“Find something to block it!”

“The lock’s too broken to hold.”

Alexa grabbed a floor lamp from the lounge area and smacked it against the floor hard enough to break off the top end. She shoved it through the handles of the large front doors so that her fighters were able to let go.

The first thing all of them did was stay still and scan the room for trouble. There was a large, clean, tiled floor at the base of an enormous, winding staircase. On each side of the stairs were two dark shadowy places that hid doors to other rooms.

“Which way?” Daniel was eager to find their missing men.

Alexa pointed at the stairs. “The boss is always high.”

The men might have snickered at the video game reference if the situation hadn’t been so serious. They didn’t care for being sent against the boss without two of their fighters, but none of them hesitated to go up those gaudily decorated stairs.

Alexa sensed the trap right before it sprang, but they were already too far up to evade it. She holstered her gun and grabbed a rail as the ground rumbled. “Hang on. We’re going for a ride!”

The men barely had time to follow her lead before the stairs dropped out, leaving them dangling above a black void.

“Shit!” David tried not to panic. “Shit! Drop or climb?”

“Wait.” Daniel was studying Alexa. “Jump?”

David saw Alexa picking her falling position, and groaned. “Okay, great.”

Alexa let go of the cracking rail and sailed into the darkness without a word.

Her loyal men followed, leaving David to stare into the abyss with fear. But he wasn’t his own anymore. He belonged to Alexa now and there was

no going back. David closed his eyes, then let go of the railing.

It felt like he fell for a very long time. David heard the grand staircase replacing itself above him, but he couldn't see it. It was a fall through the blackness where he wasn't sure how he kept from screaming.

“Everyone here?”

Hearing Alexa's calm voice helped. David tried to master his true emotions before he landed. He peered downward, trying to get a glimpse of what he would hit, and felt himself come to a jarring, cold stop in water up to his waist.

David wiped away the splash, wondering why he hadn't heard the others. He let Daniel pull him to his feet. That crazy man was grinning from ear to ear, face alive with danger and mysteries revealed.

“I was too screwed up to enjoy the fall the first time.” Daniel also wiped at his face. “It was great.”

David hadn't known that was how Daniel had died, only that he had and Alexa had brought him back. David knew it hadn't been magic exactly, but an accelerated form of healing. He'd heard of it over a card game and hadn't been sure he truly believed the grifter telling him the story. They'd discussed many things that night. The rumors of a descendant of Adrian, and of a new group of safety coming through, had bent many ears in the bar after the sun had gone down. That tale had clearly been true.

David looked around to discover that he was almost alone again and hurried to catch up to his

group. This swampy area appeared to be exactly that, as if they'd left the ground floor and found the Florida Keys at night instead of a basement. It was spooky.

“Look out!”

Daniel's shout ahead of him still sounded excited.

David drew his gun, splashing faster through the muck.

3

“Ahh!” Alexa screamed in pain as the fire animal grabbed her, squeezing. “Hit the collar!”

The gigantic firedog was a full story tall and covered in constantly shifting flames. Five long arms swept out at the fighters.

“Shoot it!”

All four men opened fire on the legendary creature. They were too scared to do anything more than obey.

The animal was tall, wide, and covered in small, glowing red feathers that brushed over the collar like a protective shield, deflecting even the best shot.

“Reload!” Daniel heard the gunfire cease. It let Alexa's cries of pain echo as the firedog tried to crush her when the heat did no damage.

David and Jacob were last to finish reloading; the Blacksmith grabbed the Preacher's arm, pointing to a ledge. “Up there!”

Jacob took off for the platform while David fired at the creature's ankles, hoping their thinness meant they were a weak spot.

The creature roared in pain and anger as David emptied his mag.

Alexa fell into the muck, groaning and coughing.

Jacob swung onto the platform that had probably once been used as secondary stairs into this wasteland. He drew down on the creature as it lifted a wide foot to crush Alexa.

The shot was perfect, but Jacob followed it with five more, being sure the collar was shattered.

The fire dog cried out in horrible agony and then exploded into a million tiny red flames that sizzled angrily in the dampness before vanishing.

The stunned men rushed to Alexa's side, helping her to her feet. They kept a hand around her until she was steady enough to walk on her own.

Above them, familiar gunfire split the air.

The five muddy fighters moved toward the set of stone stairs that Alexa had spotted through the swirling fog and plant life. It wasn't over. They still had three levels to go.

4

Alexa and Edward met at the bottom of the grand stairs, each group relieved to see the other.

Alexa went to the side of the massive staircase. "Things okay?"

“We ran into a delay, but we handled it.” Edward noticed fresh bruises and blood on her skin.

“Good.” Alexa pointed to the second floor landing. “We’re going up there. But not by the expected route.”

“Yes, please.” Daniel’s joke was half grumble. “No damn stairs. The ones to get back up here lasted like, forever.”

David and Jacob nodded their agreement. Only Alexa and Mark hadn’t been gasping by the time they got to the stone door at the top.

Alexa found a place to climb. The seven of them scaled the sides of the staircase like the demon monkeys from OZ.

Alexa dropped onto the second floor landing but didn’t go anywhere yet. She evaluated the sudden sound of ballroom music that floated through the air around them. This house was ancient and held many ghosts. She’d expected that, but the song was the one that Adrian had used to teach her to dance during that perfect summer. She fought the urge to rail at fate for the cursed duty that had been placed on her family.

There were three doors on this floor. The voices and music were coming from the one at the far end. They had to pass by the other large doors to get there.

The men switched into that deadly V without being told. Alexa would want those rooms cleared to keep anyone from trapping them.

Mark and Edward kicked the first door open and rushed inside with the rest of the group on their heels. The instant they were in, the door swung shut, throwing them into total darkness.

Alexa struck a match and held it to the torch that Edward pulled from a cloak pocket. Their rear man, Daniel, also lit a torch from her flame. The wooden torches were standard gear that gave them a small circle of light to see by.

The fighters moved forward, trying to adjust to the darkness. They made it to the center of what appeared to be a large round room made of a glimmering stone and then a strong draft blew through hard enough to put out both torches.

Alexa sighed, understanding the house was reading their fears. “Think of amusing tales, my pets. We need no mental terrors here.”

Alexa wanted to give them an idea of what to expect, but was unable to. It was a part of her story that she hadn’t gotten to yet. Much of her information hadn’t come from actually doing things, only reading the notebooks. Instinct took over from there.

Alexa led them forward in the darkness, listening, sensing nothing but empty space.

“Whoa!” She twisted away from the hole in the floor just in time, lunging to the side to stop the domino effect from pushing her over anyway.

Mark, boots touching the edge of nothing, pulled on her arm.

A quick view by a match flame that was again blown out revealed a rope ladder leading down into the hole.

Alexa rose to her feet instead of lowering herself down. "If you want me, come and get me."

The answer was almost instant.

A blinding blue glow sped from the bottom of the hole, growing larger and more brilliant.

Alexa waved the men back.

There was no trouble seeing now as light flooded the stone and tile room. It bounced off the glittering rocks and took the shape of a vast man with a long staff that formed an arrow at the bottom.

Alexa stood still as the man pointed his staff at her.

The men ran to place themselves between the pair, not sure if bullets would help. They hadn't thought to ask about anyone other than the master of this haunted house.

"Who wakes me?" The wizard's odd voice echoed. His long white beard looked like every magician the fighters had seen in the movies, all combined into one. The result was a young, old man who stood twice as tall as Alexa. He glared down at them with vivid purple orbs.

Alexa placed her hands on her gun butts. "Alexa Mitchel."

The old man attacked, raising the staff to fire a brilliant beam, but Alexa's draw was incredibly fast. She fired, hitting the staff. It flew into the air.

"No!" The man scrambled for his power.

Alexa beat him to it, kicking the powerful object into the hole, where it clattered against the sides and snapped several times. The cracking noise was the loudest sound in the room as Alexa turned on the man, face glowing with anger. “Demand it of me now, I beg you!”

“Die!”

“You first!” She placed her gun to his temple and pulled the trigger as he cowered.

She was blasted across the room by the explosion of blinding light that quickly faded into the smoky air.

Edward helped Alexa to her feet, and motioned Billy to lead them out. “Clear.”

The chuckling group moved into the hall, closing the door behind them.

Alexa kept them right there for a few minutes, letting her men adjust. What they were going through was hard on both body and mind. She too should need recovery time, but despite the new injuries, she felt almost invincible.

As they waited, each of them was aware of the music and voices being louder, as if the party was just winding up.

A feeling of weariness spread among the men. It had already been a long day.

The second door burst open just before they reached it. The landing filled with undead guards who ran toward Alexa with snarls of rage.

Alexa swung her arm out. "I've got these."

Her fighters fell back to let her work.

Alexa was angry and she took it out on the zombie people who staggered toward her. She used her blade, putting them down quickly.

Edward and David didn't like being left out of the action and joined the fight, enjoying the ease with which the undead went down. Except, more of them were flooding through the narrow doorway now—a lot more than three of them could handle alone. The other fighters rushed forward to help.

Alexa was battling her way to the door, using anger to fuel her energy, but she was grateful when her men appeared at her side. They fought their way in the direction she pointed, finally reaching the door in relief. Until they peered through.

Jacob moaned. "That's not possible. That can't happen."

The room was too big to measure. There were no ends or edges, no walls or a ceiling, no doors or curtains even, just a harsh, desert landscape filled with undead. Thousands of them roamed the wastelands, many of those being drawn to the open door.

"Oh, my God!" David jerked on the heavy door. "Close it!"

Alexa's instinct whispered quietly. She shoved her way through as her men handled the next wave of undead to reach them.

Alexa saw the glowing sign of a portal and removed the golden knife given to her before she'd left Lincoln. She threw it as hard as she could and then ran, not waiting to see if it landed where she needed it to. The group of undead coming toward her numbered more than she could count as the first wave of the horde arrived. She hurtled herself back through the door as her men slammed it shut.

The undead crammed against the door. The wood bulged under the pressure, but because it opened inward, they were trapped.

Alexa turned toward the final door without taking a break this time, still catching her breath. There was no explosion or other sound to let her know if her blade had closed the portal. It hadn't appeared to be between worlds, but between continents. The possible effects it could have caused over four years was staggering.

Behind them, a loud bang echoed. The door shimmered as if it were going to melt, then it became a solid wall of stone instead of a door.

That one's closed now. She was grateful, but she didn't let her guard down. There was still one room left on this floor and she expected it to be the hardest to clear.

They opened the last door to find a spacious ballroom decorated in Civil War era furnishings. The wide drapes and the hooped skirts of the belles were a testament to the times. Even the blood dripping from painted faces seemed to complement the impression that the fighters had stepped back in time. The only difference that stood out at first was that these dancers and drinkers, these drunken daughters, were dead.

“Holy shit!” Jacob’s swear surprised the others into an uneasy snicker. It was rare for him to curse.

Jacob ignored them, staring at gaping sockets, the dangling limbs. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

“It’s the Dance of the Dead.” David observed it in awe. “I didn’t think it was real.”

Edward tensed as the ghosts started to turn toward them. “What is that?”

“A story about travelers who get trapped in a haunted house. They’re all killed horribly—disfigurement, impalement, fire, and then they become part of the vengeful ghosts. The dance happens every night. It’s a repeat of their death to provide entertainment for the royals of court.”

“The what?”

“What court?”

They didn’t understand exactly what it meant, but it didn’t matter as the ghosts flew toward them.

Alexa started shooting.

The slugs didn’t kill the ghosts, but it did cause them to disappear and have to regather themselves again to become visible, buying time.

“Coat room!” Alexa shot her way through as the mass of bodies converged upon them.

From the doorway it looked like a massive swarm of dead had the fighters surrounded in the middle, to their doom. The sound of gunfire was constant, unyielding. The clouds of dust from imploding and reappearing ghosts were like a sand storm flying across the ballroom. It allowed for tracking the progress of the crew as the cloud moved steadily toward the rear of the wide room.

With no chance to reload, all of the fighters were using their knives to get through long before they reached the small door that Alexa had spotted.

Billy yanked it open. He saw only coats and began pulling his fellow fighters inside. He didn't hesitate to grab Alexa's swinging arm either, though he did let her kill a rather gruesome woman in a serving frock first. It looked like a relative of the cook from downstairs. Billy wasn't sorry when her head blew apart.

They slammed the door behind Billy as he hurtled himself through. For a minute, the group stood there, reloading and panting.

“I'm almost out.” Mark popped a fresh magazine into his gun.

“Me, too.” Edward did the same. He wasn't worried over that as much as he was concerned about what help bullets would be against the Master of this horror house. They couldn't kill the ghosts on this floor. They were stuck in a coatroom. The odds weren't good.

“I think there’s another door here.” Jacob was in the far corner where the roof and the floor no longer met evenly due to time and weather. The result was a rut that made Jacob seem a full foot shorter.

“A door in the floor.” Jacob tugged on the handle as everyone came over. “Not normal.”

Billy broke more of the tension. “Normal is as normal does.”

Even Alexa gave him a small smile. Those great attitudes during the fights were part of why they’d been chosen. Not only reliable, her men were often a balm to fraying nerves.

The door sprung open with a loud snap, triggering fresh thuds and bangs on the main door that they’d simply locked by the handle.

Alexa waved Mark forward. “Shoot first...”

“Apologize later.” Mark agreed with every word. He slipped into the hole in the floor and found a wooden slat under his boots almost right away. “Feels like a staircase.”

“Right behind you.”

Mark headed into the darkness and the six others behind him waited for their turn, trying not to think about how long they might be in there.

Other than Edward, who preferred it, Alexa and her men didn’t like being in the dark. Mark was barely able to tolerate it. Alexa hoped this would cure him of the weakness. The sooner they had two solid darkness fighters, the better. Once freed, Mark would help Edward protect them during those times

that the panic became too much to ignore. She and the others would keep working on their fears of the dark. As it was, Mark would lead them and Edward would bring up the rear, where they would be the most vulnerable. It was a group effort, this questing, and even she still had a few flaws to be conquered.

The hardest task waited for them at the top of the stairs. They pushed open the final door to reveal a dingy attic space with covered furniture and peeling walls. On one side there were three large wolves, each tensely pointed toward the door. On the other side were three more of the lanky creatures that the fighters were tired of. Behind this second group of animals, a leader lurked in the shadows. Covered from top to bottom in a long, black shroud, the figure was tall and thin, but that was all the fighters could see.

Alexa used her boot to slam the door shut. Some leaders would have used this moment to instruct their team, but Alexa didn't know what was waiting any more than they did. She filled the scant seconds with what she thought mattered the most in that absence of information—the two basic rules. “Aim small, miss small. Watch your six.”

The shadowy form in the corner came to life at those words, as did the wolves. The fighters quickly found themselves in their first upper level battle where the reality they knew no longer existed.

“Kill them all!” The evil figure threw a cloud of flies that had appeared to be a part of her clothes.

The scaly hag rose to full size, stubby head sliding along the ceiling.

Alexa's men didn't wait for the wolves to reach them. They fired, aiming for heads and hearts while battling the flies that tried to blind them.

Alexa knew bullets wouldn't work on the crone, but the wolves were quickly taken down before they could do damage. While her men handled what they could, Alexa stepped forward to meet the hag.

Without her veil, the specter was mostly a skeleton. Alexa huffed a sigh of relief at it being this kind. The stronger, harder to kill specters were flesh-bodied. Only fire would end them.

Alexa shoved her knife through the crone's neck and stepped back as the body fell. She saw that all the wolves were down, her men reloading and sharing snickers. She shook her head. "Rookies."

All of the men turned toward her, brows drawing together in confusion and then warning as they saw the hag rising from the ground behind Alexa.

The wolves lunging for their boots an instant later was also unexpected.

The men scrambled back to clear room for shooting as the battle restarted.

With no time to do more than react, the six men spent an ugly minute putting the wolves back down. Jacob fell over his own feet, causing Edward to cover two wolves this time. They were glad when all of the animals were dead.

Alexa had already dispatched the hag and reloaded. She shook her head when her men would have questioned. “Not right now.”

That told them it wasn’t over yet. The fighters quickly got into better positions to handle the wolves that were already reviving.

Alexa used her knife for a third time, remembering to duck the swipe and then jump the falling corpse that tried to bite her.

Jacob didn’t trip, but Edward still covered his wolf and Jacob’s. He was slower to understand that the Preacher had adjusted.

Silence reigned for a moment, broken by reloading and faster breathing than when they’d come up here.

The hag cackled tauntingly as she stood up in full form and began the play all over.

Alexa’s knife, duck and jump was now followed by the knife again, across the skeleton’s neck this time, but Alexa knew she’d have to reset it soon. Remembering steps wasn’t easy in this situation.

Jacob, who’d come close to being bitten when Edward avoided his wolf to protect Jacob after he’d fallen, slammed his last mag home with a grunt. “New plan. Back up and stay shoulder to shoulder.”

Alexa sighed heavily as she put the hag down for the fifth time, feeling the daze of monotony trying to take over the adrenaline. If allowed, that would get them killed.

The men handled the wolves easier this time, but Jacob's words reminded them it was about to get harder. "I'm out."

Edward pulled his knife as the wolf by him stirred. "Straddle them; take them out as soon as you can."

It was a great idea that let the men keep the wolves down enough that they were able to watch Alexa's artful death strokes on the hag. As she tired, Alexa also straddled her target and simply slit the throat each time it tried to revive.

Alexa met Edward's eye as she added a neck snap. "Pace yourselves."

Edward groaned as the wolf under him snapped back to life with a thick growl. He plunged the blade into its thick body yet again. How long would this go on?

Alexa answered the unspoken question. "Until we've killed them enough times to draw attention. It may be a while. When it happens, you'll know this part is done. There won't be any mistaking it."

Those words were not a comfort to the already tired men who began to conserve their energy, using the less artful, more efficient moves to get the job done.

Above them in the room's only window, the sun sank, leaving a nightmarish darkness that stole over them like a second skin.

Edward plunged and pulled, knees locked down. Then he waited, hearing his own ragged gasps for air. The sets were reviving closer together now, like something was finally headed toward them, but at this moment, he had no will left to keep fighting.

“That’s what this is designed to do.” Alexa kept her knee-numbing hold on the wiggling hag. She plunged her knife in, pulled it out, and found Edward through the darkness. “Soon. Hold steady.”

Desire and determination came back to her men in small words like those. She felt their warmth around her as the next set started... Except the rumbling wasn’t coming from the body under her that now felt cold and heavy, with no life of any kind. “Stand and be true—Ahhhh!”

Alexa screamed as she was grabbed by a huge, clawed hand with a relentless grip. She got a fast view of the real specter—fiery, snotty, and seriously pissed—and then she was flying through the window and out into the open air.

“Alexa!” Edward and Mark shouted it together. Without a thought for anything else, the two men followed their leader by tossing themselves out the broken window.

The remaining four fighters faced the Master alone.

Paul snapped awake. The distant gunshots sped up his heart as they continued. Those were Alexa's Colts. She and the other men were now fighting to the death against whatever target Alexa had pointed out. They would shoot on command and she would smile at them in happiness.

“Should have been me.” He went to shut the rickety door of the shack. It was getting colder, and though he hadn't formed a plan, he would have to stay here for tonight. With anger in his mind, he covered the broken window with a tarp from the kit that he knew how to pack correctly now. He then leaned the half a cupboard against the door to hold it closed and keep out the draft. After he made a bed in the corner, gun in his lap, Paul dropped back into his mental prison. He didn't start a fire or even use his penlight—a gift from Billy for making the trip to Lincoln without getting any of them killed. He sat in cold darkness, occasionally fingering the gun. He didn't move again until dawn broke over the smoky landscape.

Chapter Sixteen
A Hag? Oh, Hell

1

Alexa landed in a tree branch that immediately felt different from the moldy trunks she was used to. She felt two thick thuds of her men hitting the branches behind her and gasped in pain as she tried to shout. At least three of her ribs were broken.

“Get that whore down here!” Alexa gasped out.

Mark grabbed her and hauled her into the fork where she could hold on.

Edward used his gun to get the attention of the hag. He shot the wolves under the trees, quickly using up the last of his bullets.

There was an astounded roar from inside the house and then their four men came hurtling through the window. Two had been thrown, two had jumped.

Alexa held on tightly as the small grove of trees shook and smacked into each other under the impacts.

The roaring got louder as it moved closer. The Master was furious at the deaths committed so boldly in her presence.

Alexa knew her timing had to be perfect; she couldn't spare even a minute of explanation for her scared, confused men.

The hag came from the windows on the second floor, bursting through with an evil wail spilling from a mouth that crawled with disease. It ran from her eyes in streams of virulent typhoid, proclaiming her identity as she tried to infect them through sight, touch, sound, and smell.

Alexa lifted herself up so that she could kick at the wood below her. Following as always, the men did the same without understanding why.

Power emanated from the specter as it rushed closer. All of the fighters felt a heavy weight settle onto their lungs and begin to steal their air. Even from a distance, it was a horrifyingly debilitating weapon.

David quickly found himself on the ground as he ran out of air and had to let go of the branch.

Daniel dropped down to help him, slowly choking.

Panic had sunk into David's mind. Doors there flew open as he began to grey out. A force shot from his mind like a bullet.

The hag coming toward them screeched again in blind rage.

Daniel felt the heaviness on his lungs ease. He hefted David to his feet.

David struggled to stay alert, climbing awkwardly as the other fighters grabbed at his arms to assist.

Furious, the hag rushed toward the small thicket of trees, but drew up again, wailing her outrage as the two trees closest to her lit up with a brilliant blue light.

Jacob brought a hand up to shield his eyes. “What is that?”

“They’re holly trees!” Alexa dropped to the ground, smothering a cry of pain. “Come on!”

Alexa ran forward and stabbed the hag with the sharp end of a thick branch, aiming for where a heart should have been. The light from the trees blinded the specter, disorienting her as Alexa’s men used their own branches to stab wherever they could reach.

The specter roared in pain this time, starting to retreat.

Alexa ran to the other side, gasping as she hunkered down with her branch lodged firmly against the ground. “Hey! Slam you!”

The crone turned too quickly and impaled herself on the tree branch. She poured blood that was as black as the mold on the other trees.

Her cries of agony summoned nearby living things and then things that weren’t alive. Rats and wolves came from the corn, eyes glowing with vengeance as the hag died, sagging on the branch. The corn around them rustled under undead forms struggling closer.

“Damn it! Get back to the house!” Alexa grabbed a pouch from the dead hag, recovering the lock of missing hair the others hadn’t noticed. She

was glad the hag hadn't thought to use it against her during the fight.

The fighters grabbed her and fled to the front porch, but they were surprised when Alexa only motioned them into a fighting stance in front of the doors. They flanked her, kicking and knifing the animals who were closest. The undead were also coming for them. More and more of the elderly sacrifices of Lincoln were being drawn toward the promise of blood.

Alexa pulled the last of her strength and raised her hands in ancient, powerful motions that sent flames shooting from her fingertips. They leapt eagerly onto the window frames, onto the wood railing of the porch, and the slats under their feet. In seconds, the porch was on fire, causing the vengeful creatures stalking them to pause in wary confusion.

Alexa spun around and kicked the doors open for the second time in the same day, nearly falling through. "To the rear!" She groaned roughly as Edward caught her.

The fighters ran through the kitchen, ignoring the withered corpse of the cook as they headed for the back door.

Alexa stopped them. "Not until it's almost gone."

Realizing they would have to stay inside the house while it burnt, the men began pulling up bandanas and wetting their sleeves. Alexa stayed in the chair that Edward placed her in, breathing in

heaving gasps as she tried to gather enough energy to finish this job.

Smoke poured into the kitchen from under the swinging doors, gathering in a thick layer along the ceiling.

Edward helped Alexa get her bandana up and motioned the others to stay down low. He took a place by the screened porch door, hoping to see nothing out there waiting for them. “Shit! There are more zombies.”

“Undead.” Jacob faked a cheerful tone. “Zombies are the things from movies.”

Edward snorted out annoyed amusement. “Looks like zombies from here.”

The house was old and brittle. It burnt quickly. The group in the kitchen listened to the front porch collapse and then the living room walls came alive, flooding the kitchen with thicker, black smoke.

“On the floor!” Alexa coughed so hard that she puked, moaning in agony between heaves.

Edward dragged her down and toward the back door. “We have to get out!”

Alexa nodded, unable to speak as Mark also came to help her.

Edward used his boot to open the door.

An undead face immediately loomed above them, growling hungrily.

Edward shouted in anger and fear. He kicked out, catching the zombie in the chin. She cartwheeled down the porch stairs, clearing a brief path.

“This way!” Edward led them down the stairs and into the corn, shoving zombies aside, jumping large rats. He had an arm under Alexa. Mark’s hand was entwined with his to keep her upright.

They fled the burning house without looking back. There was no need to. They could all hear the padding feet, the rustles of hastily moved cornstalks.

“Why did we burn the house?!” Billy came up to help drag Alexa forward. She was trying to run, but her feet mostly peddled after each step, a beat off.

Even as he spoke the words, a large wolf about to lunge in front of them burst into flames, yapping and howling. A rat by his feet also caught fire with no visible source.

Jacob shook a fist. “They die with the house! Yes! Take that!”

Alexa drew in smoky air through the agony. “Keep moving. Until dawn.”

Edward knew what was coming and gently swung her up into his arms before she could fall out completely. “We will. You rest, Boss.”

Alexa grunted, eyes closing. “Pass out, you mean.”

Edward forced a chuckle. “Yeah. We’ll have that idiot doctor in Lincoln examine you again when we get back.”

Mark took the lead. “Let’s move it!”

The men picked up speed, outdistancing the smaller animals and shoving through the undead

that were still being drawn to the noise and smoke. The farther from the house they got, the fewer obstacles there were to evade.

They actually felt it when the house gave. Alexa's body sagged as she also surrendered to the inevitable.

Edward motioned them into a fast walk as he turned to get a last view of the house, but all he could see was a bright glow and pillars of thick smoke billowing into the night sky. Around them, small spontaneous combustions crackled like fireworks as predators and rodents exploded in showers of flames that caught the corn afire.

"Son of a—"

"Yeah." Daniel interrupted Mark's curse. "I am so tired of this place."

"Where to?" David took Alexa's body as Edward turned to give that order. After their last adventure in the sewer tunnels, the men had this part of the quest down pat.

"There!" Billy pointed to a shadow. "I think that's a silo. We'll hole up there!"

The males ran despite the danger being gone. It didn't feel safe yet and Alexa had taught them not to let their guard down until it did.

"There's no door!" Mark ran ahead of the others. The frame of what had once been a large barn would offer them no shelter. The men crammed into the narrow silo stairway and began to climb.

“It’s concrete.” David pointed when Edward paused them halfway up. “If we climb into the bin, we’ll be covered on air for a while, maybe long enough for it to burn out around us.”

Outside the silo the burning corn made thick popping and crackling sounds, sometimes snapping against the silo as if in anger at their escape.

Edward and David settled Alexa into a bottom corner of the damp bin, laid across a sawhorse they created from rotting boards. It wouldn’t be comfortable, but none of them was willing to lay her in the muck that layered the bottom of the old silo. It obviously hadn’t been used for a while even before the war.

The men stayed by their mistress as thick smoke began to drift into the open silo.

Unlike inside the shut up house, the silo’s top had also been damaged, creating a vent that drew the smoke from the bottom, up the stairs, and then out. Only a bare layer entered the actual bin and it stayed near the top, searching for an exit. The fighters were relieved to have caught a break.

Billy checked his cloak even though he knew he was out. “Anyone got spare ammo?”

The fighters searched their gear for any bullets they may have overlooked.

“Damn.” David had them covered, though he hadn’t realized it earlier. “She said someone had to account for Paul’s bad aim when he started learning to shoot. I’ve been stashing boxes for two weeks.”

It gave them three full magazines worth of bullets to each man, and four to Alexa. Edward reloaded her weapons while Mark placed the extra mags in her belt. When she woke, she'd be glad to find them there.

Edward settled on the small shoveling ledge that was built into the wall of the silo, then leaned his head back. He let out a weary sigh.

The other men followed his example, eager to relax and be semi comfortable. They shared what room there was and kept eyes on Alexa, who had begun to snore.

Billy sank down with a grunt and shifted his kit until it was the pillow that Alexa always used hers as. He hadn't had a need to do it until now.

He found it comforting when the others did it as well. Alexa would be proud of them.

2

A scratching noise snapped the men awake just before the coming dawn, making their balls draw up and their stomachs drop. It was the sound of someone or something climbing into the silo with them.

Edward motioned David and Billy to stay by Alexa as he and the others slowly and quietly went to stand where they could see the hatch above.

The face that peered down at them was familiar.

“Uh-uh.” Jacob groaned, starting to shake.
“No...”

Daniel scowled. “Uh, no. I can’t.”

The little girl leered down at them, dripping blood and gore from her mouth. She swung a leg over the ledge to find the ladder, giggling.

David wanted to be strong enough to do it, but he’d looked into her eyes! There was still an innocent child in there.

Billy placed himself between the girl and Alexa, who hadn’t woken yet, but he wasn’t sure that he could use the gun that appeared in his hand.

Mark and Edward exchanged a glance that said it had to be done, and they could do it, but only if she attacked. It had to be in defense.

“My Preacher!” The little girl jumped from the ladder, clawed hands reaching for Jacob’s stunned face.

The two men pulled the trigger.

The child’s body splashed in the muck as it hit the bottom of the silo.

Mark promptly leaned over and vomited.

Edward holstered in disgust and waved toward the ladder. “A few hours have passed. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

He didn’t have to say it twice.

3

Paul heard the boots and felt his heart pound. Alexa and her brutes were back. He’d heard the vicious battle and seen the fire, but it hadn’t reached his shack. He’d hidden from the passing animals in

surprised fear, but now, in the light of day, he felt like a coward.

Alexa would expect him to fall in line for her triumphant walk back into Lincoln. He would have to suffer the feelings of pride and the boastful comments of the men who'd done the fighting, and he would have to tolerate their scornful glances at him for being too weak to join her. It was humiliating.

Paul didn't get up as the boots stopped, not sure if he would refuse to go with them. He'd almost made his choice. A bunker was looking better and better. Underground, he would at least be with his own kind. He understood now that he wasn't enough like Alexa to make it, but he wasn't sure about going to the bunker either. He had enough information to be let in, but there, he'd be a prisoner again.

"Maybe I'll go off on my own." He ignored the boots now stopping outside the door. "She doesn't need me and I can survive without her."

The front door was jerked open, causing the broken cupboard to crash over.

Paul glanced up angrily. "I'm not going."

The chuckle in response was unexpected, mostly because it wasn't who he had expected.

"Yes, you are. Right back to being the bait, where you belong."

Unlike the others, these soldiers were harder, meaner, older. They were a real threat.

Shane laughed maliciously as the others brought Paul out. His strawberry red hair gleamed in the dim sunlight. “Load that good luck pile into a truck and get set. She burnt the house down. It won’t be long now and she’ll be back here to collect her rabbit. We’ll get a double reward.”

Paul had once loved to stare at Shane’s smooth red curls and pretend they were his. It had gotten the soldier jobs and attention that he didn’t deserve. Paul had almost been friends with Shane. Upon killing his father, Paul had even missed Shane, but his time with Alexa had already changed him. He could now spot the evil, the madness.

Paul spun in the grip of the two men who’d expected a frightened rabbit, snatching his gun from his belt.

Before Shane could do more than put up a hand, Paul began to pull the trigger.

4

Alexa came to an hour after they climbed from the silo, snapping into alertness all at once.

Daniel immediately stopped to set her onto her feet.

Ribs throbbing, Alexa stared at the charred landscape, noting that the fire had run ahead of them. It would be stopped at the river, but the bikes they’d made would be nothing but charred piles of metal by now. Her men hadn’t bothered to go check, she noticed. They’d kept going toward Lincoln, and

were now within a few miles of it. From the look of the land, the stores she'd hoped to clean out had been destroyed. Fire was merciless. "You've done well."

Her praise was the topping on a fine dessert. All six men grinned happily.

Alexa resumed their walk toward Lincoln, stretching carefully to discover they had tightly bound her ribs with a cloth. It was helping her breathe and move without as much pain. She was also a faster healer.

She took the water and biscuit Jacob handed her, picking out signs that animals had tried to run ahead of the fire. Burnt corpses of all varieties littered the road. "You've done very well. We'll move to the next levels of training from here."

None of the men protested. Each of them had spent the last hour of walking considering their actions on this run, their reactions and deeds. Each of them had performed well, but if the next missions would be harder, more training was definitely in order. However, it was already somewhat amazing how well they'd adjusted to this lifestyle. It was as if they'd been born waiting for this time to arrive so that they could shine.

"We all have some questions. If there's to be a reward, we've agreed on that."

Alexa allowed Billy's boldness. After this, she may or may not crack down on their arrogance a bit, but for now, they could do little wrong in her eyes.

They'd come through the first real test. It was enough. "Such as?"

Billy grinned wider. "Sweet. Uh... The hag. Why did the two trees hold her back?"

"Holly trees have long been used to guard against foulness. They only glow when true evil is present."

Daniel had a question, too. "And the branches we stabbed her with?"

"Dogwood." Jacob had been thinking hard on that one. "With the religious associations, it makes sense."

Billy frowned. "Religious associations?"

"Supposedly that was the tree used to crucify Christ. It even has a discolored center that resembles the nails in the hands and feet."

Edward brought up something he'd noticed. "Did you notice those trees didn't have mold on them? Weird."

Daniel pulled up an old tidbit of information. "They were all fast-growing varieties that had to have been transplanted. Holly trees used to only grow in swampy areas."

David shrugged. "Well, if we ever meet the person who planted them, we owe a big thank you."

Alexa kept her thoughts to herself. Safe Haven had traveled this way. She couldn't help but wonder if those trees had been put there intentionally by someone who'd known they would need the material. Dogwood and Holly were both popular at Christmas time, which it had been when the war

came, so she wasn't sure what to assume. In the end, she settled for fate taking care of the descendants, as it always had. "Did you bring a few—"

Alexa stopped talking as the men held up small handfuls of the branches they'd used against the hag and then a small stack of others that would be divided as soon as they made their stop for the night.

Alexa smiled at them, full strength. "Excellent."

It was a moment before any of them could remember how to walk.

Billy waited until Edward filled her in on everything she'd missed. "What about the little girl? Why didn't she die with the house?"

"None of the undead was destroyed except by the natural spread of the fire." Alexa saw that they were now beyond the burn line. It hadn't come this far. "The undead aren't connected as strongly to their creator once they've had fresh blood."

"Then the other one could still be out there?" Daniel grimaced. "Attacking travelers?"

Alexa nodded. "Yes. Do you want to go back and hunt him down?"

"I thought he was only an extension of the master?" Jacob was confused again.

"He was during the changing process, but after a few days, each victim becomes their own master. Most stay with their creator simply because it's the life they know, but these children were taken from their families and brought here, so they'll roam."

Jacob smothered a chill. "Are there more of them?"

“Oh, yes. The Master of the house hadn’t been challenged since the conquest of Lincoln. Scores of townspeople and travelers fell prey.”

“And we’re going to leave them out there to hunt?” Mark was surprised by that.

Alexa shrugged, voice gentle. “Say the word, my pets, and we’ll turn around.”

As much as they wanted to, none of the men spoke.

Alexa kept walking. It would take them years to hunt down all the undead children that had been created here and it was hard, soul killing work, as they’d already found out.

Bang!

The gunshot echoed through the corn and sent birds fleeing toward the fighters. They were less than a mile from the shack where they’d left Paul.

Alexa took off running, and her fighters stayed on her heels. They’d all recognized the sound of his gun. Who had he killed this time?

Chapter Seventeen

Free Will

1

Alexa and her men stopped at the edge of the corn to scan the shack that was surrounded with soldiers. They recognized the men they'd spared yesterday, but the redheaded body on the ground nearby wasn't familiar to any of them.

"Come out, Rabbit! Or we'll burn it down with you inside."

"There's no reward if I'm dead!" Paul was clearly terrified.

Another man laughed. "Bodies still get a pass. You know that, *Rabbit*."

"I'm worth more alive!"

"You should have thought about that before you shot Shane! Now get out here, you little scum!"

Alexa's men waited for her orders, but she had none to give. She backed away from the shouting soldiers and their frightened prey.

Edward recognized the silence of a teaching moment. He assumed she wanted them to plan the rescue. "We use a decoy formation and take out the front row." The Horseman looked at the others.

“Sure.” Jacob was glad when the shouting at Paul stopped. “But maybe the sight of us will stop it. They might trade.”

Edward was tired of killing right now. “What do we have that they want?”

“Just me, pets.”

All six men frowned at her.

Alexa shrugged through the pain of her mending ribs. “I don’t know why you’re about to rescue a man you hate. Do you?”

Edward paused in his planning. “You don’t want him back?”

Alexa calmly walked away.

The confused men hurried after her, throwing anxious glances over their shoulders.

David hated feeling uneasy. “So, we just let them take him back to the labs?”

“Oh, he won’t make it to the bunker. The redhead was well-liked.”

Realizing what that meant, and that she was leaving Paul to die, drew a hard silence that brought her around to face them in annoyance. “You don’t want him along. You don’t want him around me. Why would you insist on this?”

“It isn’t right to leave him.” Jacob frowned. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“Interesting. How was it right for all of you to pick on him and try to drive him out?”

Silence.

Alexa started walking again. “I’m hard on you. I was hard on him, many times. You were cruel.”

Mark hated it that she was right. “You need him. We’ll go get him.”

Alexa drove in the final nail. “Why not let him die quickly at the hands of true enemies? A little dignity and honor is better than the abuse he’ll suffer with us.”

The guilt was crushing.

“The members of this team have to get along, to bond and be friends and brothers. If you can’t do that with the Rabbit, then let him die.” Alexa kept walking as her men stopped to share unsure, guilty glances. She didn’t stop even when she felt them fall out of her sight. This was their choice to make.

2

“Burn it!”

The call brought a handful of men with lighters and torches forward to set the shack on fire. It caught quickly; flames raced over the roof and walls like wind.

“In two minutes, you’ll be dead from the smoke!” The new leader was getting angry. He needed to hear Paul scream for what he’d done. As soon as Paul came running out, Raphe planned to beat him within an inch of his life. Then was going to skin the rabbit and have dinner. He’d loved Shane.

“Hey!”

The soldiers spun around to discover all six of Alexa’s men lined up in the road, out of range of

their sidearms. Two of the soldiers grabbed for their rifles.

Before anyone could take aim, the fighters dove into the cover of the corn and disappeared.

“Damn it!”

“Where did they go!”

“Get down!”

A long volley of gunshots echoed across the corn as Alexa’s men rushed through the tall stalks, firing. Behind the dying soldiers, the shack flamed up.

Paul started screaming.

Raphe hadn’t moved from his vigil on the door. He caught the smoking Rabbit who came barreling from the shack. He twisted Paul’s wrist to get rid of the gun and used his fist to beat the scientist into submission.

Paul quickly sagged under the onslaught.

Wanting him dead, Raphe hefted Paul up to throw him into the inferno. He didn’t have time to skin the little man, but he would die just the same.

“I have an offer!”

Raphe paused with Paul over his shoulders, face ugly in the strain. His eyes widened in betrayal as Edward’s slug smacked into his chest.

Raphe fell heavily with Paul mostly on top of him.

“Thank you for accepting my offer.” Edward saw the scientist had been hurt in several ways. His guilt grew.

Daniel helped him get Paul over a shoulder. Both men were glad he'd passed out.

They were joined by the others quickly. All the soldiers were dead. After the bad feelings they'd brought into this shootout, there was no way it could have ended any differently.

Alexa didn't speak as her men fell into their places. She also didn't look at them or their burden. They were learning well, but allowing them to see how pleased she was again by their actions wasn't a good idea. A year from now she could do that and it wouldn't leave wiggle room on the rules. Right now, she had to remain steady and hard, and she would.

3

“Stash your treasure there.”

Alexa's order surprised and pleased her men. They'd been unsure what would happen to Paul, but in his condition, the guilt wouldn't go away if they dumped him on Roscoe's mercy.

They put Paul down on the dusty bed in the center of the empty house and left a two-day kit, assuming his had been lost. The farmhouse was fully stocked for people, as if the family here had just left for an errand and never returned. It was an extremely lucky find, making the fighters feel better about leaving him there.

Alexa led the rest of the way to Lincoln in silence, refusing to give them the satisfaction they were hoping for. It would keep them on edge, where she needed them. Right before they topped the rise to Lincoln's garbage roads, Alexa slowed them long enough to give a cryptic instruction. "Things that pretend to be something they are not always give themselves away with an oddity."

Edward frowned. "We're not done."

"No." Alexa stopped, but motioned them forward. "Tell me what you see."

Mark and Edward peered over the rise as the others stood sentry, then switched out as they answered.

"Gates are shut, but the garbage wagon is heading that way."

"Roscoe has a welcome party behind the gate. Small arms, big bodies."

"The zone fences are lined with people. They're watching for us."

"They're scared. More than usual."

It was the last two men that Alexa studied as they took their turn.

"It's not the same." Jacob saw oddly shaped clouds that were the wrong color for Afterworld. "It's too..."

David sighed. "Serene."

Alexa drew them to her side and waved a tired hand in front of each face, repeating the same thing. "As it is, not as it seems."

When she finished, she led them over the rise.

Edward started to confirm a suspicion, but Lincoln came into view again and everyone halted, attention snared. “It’s gone!”

The city had been burnt to the ground, but it wasn’t smoking. It had happened years ago, and the clouds above the destruction was the white fog of ghosts.

Mark saw the corn covered roads they’d come down the first time, and the huge gates buried halfway in the mud outside the city entrance. “What the hell?”

“How can this... This isn’t...” Jacob fell silent as he noticed the shadowy forms among the ghosts. It wasn’t only the dead down there waiting for their return.

Alexa stared at the outcast side, noting Robert and Emmerson coming her way. They were transparent, like in any movie. It was shocking to learn that legend was also accurate. The notebooks had mentioned ghosts, but she hadn’t ever seen a live one.

Alexa snickered at her mental joke and headed down the first dirt path.

Edward caught up, forgetting the formation in his shock. “Were they real before? When did this happen?”

Alexa shrugged. “They were always real, thus having personalities, but no, they were not alive when we brought them through the corn.”

“When did you know?” Jacob hadn’t felt anything wrong spiritually at all and he tried to

listen for those things, even now that he'd become a killer.

“Know? Now, the same as you. Suspect? During the first fight when we found the bloody handprint but the kids weren't injured. It had to mean they were helping the wolves.”

As they got closer to the city that wasn't there anymore, they picked out more details. The ghosts swirling above the city were a blurry mass of white, but those on the ground still retained their human shape, appearing exactly as they had before. Except for the glow coming from them. It was as if each of them was in their own cloud.

Billy paused. “What is this? What's happening?”

“I've been able to remove the magic that keeps this trap camouflaged. It won't last long, but for us, it'll be more than enough.”

“None of this is possible.” Jacob tried to keep control of his sanity. “This isn't how it works.”

Alexa didn't argue; she let the evidence speak for itself. The crap they'd been fed most of their lives was just that—crap. Adrian had known and he'd left that dangerous information for her. She would honor it by teaching her fighters that death wasn't something to fear, only to avoid as long as possible, because with death, there could finally be peace. It was something they would long for in time.

The fighters walked straight to the city entrance without slowing or stopping, but their gazes were drawn repeatedly to the sky where the souls darted

and dipped dizzily. As they neared the charred street, they could see someone waited for them on the other side. It was the Roscoe family, pale and out of place.

Jacob stared in surprise. "He's not dead!"

"No. And maybe we can get a full story this time."

"Are we... I mean, should we be ready to..." David was nervous, in awe, and not sure he could pull the trigger against some of these spirits. They felt angry, vengeful even, but not at the fighters, only toward Roscoe.

"They can't harm us." Alexa led them to the cowering family. "I suspect that's why we were sent to the Master of the corn, because she could." Alexa rubbed her ribs. "She did."

"I am so confused." Billy was too astounded by the views to be honestly angry at any information that she may have withheld. Never in his lifetime had he expected to be a part of such things.

"Patience, my pets."

Roscoe and his son were the same men they'd left, only somehow, they weren't. In comparison to the souls above, these two were the dead ones, devoid of life.

Roscoe begged as she stopped in front of them. "Please. For my son."

Alexa studied the glassy-eyed boy without compassion. "He can't be saved."

"Mercy!" Roscoe's hand came up in defense.

Alexa waved Mark forward. The instant he was in range, young Roscoe lunged, baring fangs and revealing his transformation.

Roscoe screamed in denial.

Alexa gently turned him away as her men used their guns again.

Above them the ghosts grew louder, humming their approval of what was happening. They couldn't stop it or help it, but their justice was sweet.

"Tell me. Free yourself, Mayor, and I shall give you mercy."

Roscoe collapsed at her feet as her men stood a close sentry so as not to miss a word.

"Please."

"Not until you admit your sins."

Roscoe crawled to his son's body in defeated misery. "I sold them. To keep control and protect my son." He looked up at her with anguish. "I had already lost my Sophie. I couldn't lose him too."

Alexa ignored the loud, furious buzzing from the ghosts, busy playing judge and jury. "Quit hiding behind your lies. Be honest for once in your life."

Roscoe began to weep, shaking as his final moment neared. "I wasn't really the Mayor. I was his golfing caddie."

Alexa knelt down to hear the rest, needing the break from her throbbing ribs. "Finish it."

"I found him in his office." Roscoe stared at Alexa's Colt. "I look a lot like him, you know?"

Alexa didn't respond.

He gave her the rest in a choked tone that said he was almost ready to face his maker. "He was hiding under his desk when I came in. He didn't even scream when I started hitting him. I was going to throw him out the window, but some dumb secretary found me and thought *I* was the Mayor. She snuck me by the mob demanding city protection. We stayed in the sewers as the Draft trucks came."

Alexa sensed the final sin coming and felt her mind go a bit gray. Evening was nearing.

"Right after we came back out, the woman, Mariah, figured out what I'd done." Roscoe glanced toward the sewer drain under Alexa's feet. "She's down there."

The noise from above them had gotten louder as each betrayal was revealed; the ground under them now rumbled in outrage and the need for justice.

Alexa slowly stood up, aware of Mark and Edward subtly coming to each side. "I find you guilty." The din magnified further at her words. "I sentence you to the fire."

The ground split open under Roscoe. Flame hands rose from the abyss to surround him.

"No!"

Alive, he couldn't be taken. Alexa quickly used her gun to end his suffering and start his torment.

The ground closed up as if it had never opened. The sky above them became a shooting star sunset of freed souls. They'd been held to the earth because

of their hatred and their many crimes, but Roscoe's death released those bonds into a stunning show of a true afterlife.

Jacob watched the souls blink out of existence with a slight wave of bitterness. Unlike the other men standing here and contemplating Heaven and Hell, he was railing against a silent God who still hadn't come forward to claim his people. That was the bitterness he carried daily now and it allowed him to commit the most grievous sins upon Alexa's command. He'd lost his faith.

Alexa felt Jacob's unrest and placed an arm around his waist, as much to comfort as to lean on unnoticed.

Jacob did notice it, feeling her heat and the ragged rise and fall of her chest. He supported her weight as much as he could and felt her gratitude when she relaxed against him.

"I'm sorry your belief was destroyed."

Jacob sighed. "I am, too, sometimes." He smiled softly at her. "But most days, I'm not. It brought me to you and there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

Alexa was overwhelmed with emotion and with exhaustion. She stepped back to scan the sky and the dead city, picking out a few shadows remaining among the rubble. She wanted to go to them, to ask what awful thing had been done to them that Roscoe's death hadn't paid for, but Edward took her arm. "No, Lady."

Alexa could have refused. She had a last reserve of strength, of energy, and she wanted to cleanse this city in a way that could never be undone.

“Alexa.”

She shut her lids, exhausted, depressed, hurting. “Tell me why.”

Edward didn’t want to, but he understood it was the only thing that would get her to leave. “You can’t save them all. Only Safe Haven can.”

A single tear slipped down her red cheek.

Edward felt the heat baking from her then. She’d gotten worse.

She stood on her own. “Get us settled. Quickly.”

Edward waved the men into their basic formation and immediately got them moving, only this time, he kept an arm around Alexa’s waist to help her. As they walked, she gradually became slower and less responsive until Edward finally swung her up into his arms. He put Daniel in the lead.

Daniel got them back to the farmhouse where Paul was stashed. Each of the men noticed they didn’t encounter a single obstacle. Other than the few remaining souls in the city, Alexa had cleared this area of problems. It was impossible to guess how long it would stay that way, though. Without Alexa here to defend it, the land would once again go wild, though the Master of the corn would no longer haunt weary travelers. The leftover undead would do that.

Edward jogged up the stairs and into the house. David had gotten there first to hold the door.

They took Alexa to the upstairs bedroom that Edward had already chosen. It had a bathroom and a mini kitchen, and a wide living space that all of them could share without being cramped.

Once David stripped the dusty top cover, Edward put her on the bed and then leaned against the webby wall to catch his breath. He'd never been so tired. "First watch volunteers?"

"I've got that." There was no way Jacob could sleep yet, not after all they'd just seen.

"Great. Someone get Paul up here in case she wakes up."

"I'll do it." Mark was in the doorway.

Edward delivered the good news. "Off duty time, boys, and damn, did we ever earn it!"

There were small nods and chuckles of agreement. They all felt good about the role they'd played, but waiting for Alexa to explain it all would be hard.

Edward planned to sleep through the wait. He settled down against the bed that Alexa was on and leaned his head back. When his lids closed, he didn't try to stay alert. Even if he only got five minutes, he wanted it.

"He's gone."

Edward's eyes flew open as he realized who Mark was shouting about. "Damn it!"

Alexa's hand on his shoulder was a comfort, though her grip was nearly nonexistent. "Let him go."

Edward was relieved. "You heard the woman. Let the Rabbit run."

Alexa's hand went slack as she grayed out again.

Edward left it on his shoulder. When she stirred, he would be the first to know.

5

"Hello in the house."

Company was the last thing that any of the fighters wanted. They rose from an hour's sleep to fight with their remaining bullets. They would be out quickly and die in a hand-to-hand gory mess of glory. It was what Alexa would want.

"Coming in."

The voice was female, familiar.

Edward motioned Mark to open the door.

"Hi!"

Tabitha and Paul stood on the porch. Her arm was wrapped tightly around his.

Paul shrugged at the looks from the men. "I told you. Most women like me."

Tabitha smiled at Paul with a deep affection that made every man there want to know what the scientist had done to deserve it. Noticing his bruises were already mostly healed came second.

“Tabby knows a few things about vampires. She mentioned it while we were traveling, but I didn’t make the connection until she’d already run off. After that, we didn’t get a lot of time alone and, well...” Paul blushed. “We didn’t talk then.”

Tabitha flushed prettily, giggling.

Paul swatted her on the ass, making her laugh. “Upstairs, Tabby, and go slow. They don’t know you.”

The woman didn’t seem to mind the big men who scowled at her in warning. She climbed the steps eagerly and flounced into Alexa’s room without saying anything else. She sat on the edge of the bed, studying their mistress as the helpless males watched in concerned frustration.

After a moment Tabby hesitantly reached out and placed her wrist over Alexa’s mouth.

Alexa lunged so fast that none of her men could have interfered. She rolled Tabitha off the bed and landed on the floor straddling her, fangs inches from the woman’s throat.

Tabitha whimpered, but didn’t struggle. “Please.”

Alexa’s men didn’t know what to do, but Paul did. He gently put a hand on Alexa’s rigid shoulder. “She is innocent.”

Alexa wanted to gorge herself on the blood and that told her that Paul was right. This woman had committed no crime. Only innocent blood called that hard.

Alexa rose in a painful growl and tossed herself back onto the bed. “Get out.”

Paul took the shaking woman downstairs, where Edward got as much information as he could from her before loaning Paul his sleeping bag. The couple disappeared into the basement bedroom a little while later, leaving the fighters to stare in surprise at the sounds that came. It wasn't the Paul they'd come to know.

6

“Is it possible that we underestimated him?” Mark heard another moan that clearly wasn't faked. Tabitha was enjoying whatever Paul was doing to her, and it had been six hours.

Edward sighed, mind taking him to images that he wanted no part of. “I think so. He's still alive. That's bigger for me.” As he said it, Edward heard a female groan of climax and shook his head. “I'll be upstairs. Let me know when he's...available.”

“You know it.” Mark chuckled. He still didn't like Paul and perhaps he never would, but at this moment, Paul had impressed him. That wasn't an easy feat to accomplish.

Mark and Jacob took up posts at the front and rear of the farmhouse as the sun disappeared and darkness fell over the land. Time slowed as shadows filled the yard to obscure the corn. And in the blackness, a pair of blue, rage-filled eyes watched the men with hatred.

Jacob saw it and knew who was out there drooling over him. “Come on out, boy. Don’t be shy.”

But the child knew better and stayed out of the Preacher’s view.

Jacob started to call for Edward and then spotted a second shadow in the corn. He tensed. *More undead?*

No, he realized as he caught a quick flash of a uniform. It was Brian sneaking up behind the corpse boy. He jerked his knife across the undead neck and then snapped it.

Jacob thought about telling the others, but when Brian only tipped the bloody blade to him and walked back into the corn, Jacob chose to wait. So they had a protector outside. It was worlds better than the alternative and he saw no reason to wake the others for it. Alexa’s green bunker baby was turning out to be more valuable than any of her men had realized.

In the basement, Paul growled as he finished.

Jacob rolled his eyes. “Come on, Rabbit! You can’t have that much energy left.”

In the rear of the house, Mark burst out laughing. He’d been thinking the same thing.

7

Edward heard the laughter and let himself drift down into a deeper sleep where the war hadn’t come and it was his wife’s hand on his shoulder.

Across the room, Billy and David had also fallen out, but Daniel was still awake. He was having a smoke and going over their battle with the hag. The moment where David had fallen still had him confused, so he was running it through his filters, still trying to figure out what had happened. The conclusion he'd come up with the first time, that David had caused the hag to retreat, was too unbelievable. He planned to ask Alexa about it. There had to be another explanation. How could David have a power like that and Alexa not know? Daniel was sure that he'd missed something. He settled against a peeling wall to run through it again.

On the bed, Alexa was awake. This mission was over, with only the explanations left and she felt like a failure. There were still souls to be freed in Lincoln; she mourned them in place of being able to help. It was a wound that wouldn't be able to heal until she did something about it.

As for her own illness, Alexa now understood more than she wanted to. When she gave her men the final answers they would soon expect, they wouldn't want to know it either, but there was no going back. She was about to change forever.

Chapter Eighteen

Traveling On

1

The sound of music playing woke the house.

Haunting strains of a world that had passed by flowed from the basement of the farmhouse. It floated to where Alexa and four of her men were still snoozing.

Alexa stretched carefully, missing the harshness of the ground. It was who she was.

She scanned the room, meeting the eyes of those coming to alertness under the haunting notes of Hotel California. For Alexa, it brought instant memories of her father. For her men, it gave them flashes of wives and children, and of happier days before everything had all gone to hell.

Alexa felt a shoulder under her hand and gave a brief squeeze, recognizing the feel of her thick Horseman.

Edward sighed in pleasure as she ran her fingers through his messy hair, caressing.

He turned around to meet her eyes and found glowing red orbs where bright blue should have been.

Alexa's tinted vision was something of a concern for her fighters, but she only shut her lids

and tried to sleep a bit more. She was drained, with nothing left to give. The virus had done its damage. She wasn't the same as she'd been yesterday. The differences were in the textures of the blood running through her veins. For a minute, it was all she could think about.

“Lexie?”

Her eyes flew open at the nickname her father had called her. “What?!” She didn't want their pity.

“We love you.”

Alexa had no defense against that. Tears slid from her lashes.

“We have to know if this is the end.”

As Alexa sat up on the bed, each of them saw the tear streaks were scarlet.

“That will be up to you.” Alexa held out her arm. “But see what I am before you make the choice.”

She used a nail to slit her arm downward, catching a vein that gushed blood.

The men rushed her way, but Alexa slowly licked the wound and then held her arm up.

“It's healed.” Jacob stared in panicked shock. “You're not human anymore!”

Alexa sighed, staring at the floor. “I haven't felt that way in so long that I'm not sure if I should miss it.”

“What can we do?” Billy came over to wipe away the blood that remained.

Alexa's glowing orbs went to his throat.

Billy didn't flee. "Whatever you need." He had complete faith that she wouldn't hurt her crew.

"You may eventually be in danger from me. This thirst is...powerful."

The men were all tempted to swear their lives to her again, but Alexa wouldn't allow them to hide from the truth. "You'll have to watch me as much as our enemies. You should leave now. Go salvage what you can of your lives."

Denials filled the room and brought her other two men up the stairs. Each one waited to be heard. Alexa had no choice but to listen.

"We're a team. We're not going anywhere." Mark pointed angrily. "The quest ends when we reach Safe Haven and not before!"

"You don't scare us." Edward lied easily. "We'll stay."

Alexa had to keep trying to protect them. "I won't be able to control it. You'll all be in—"

"We're staying." David said it firmly. "And so are you. We'll adjust."

Alexa felt more of those red tears slip from her eyes as she understood their bond had finally sealed. Very little would be able to come between them now.

Jacob cleared his throat, curious. "So, do you have any, uh, extra gifts?"

Alexa snorted, reading the thoughts in the room. "A clique of vampire fighters. Yeah, Adrian will let us in that way."

Realizing they would be denied entrance to paradise, the men didn't ask her to share the virus so they could be like her. They'd all thought of it after seeing her fangs so close to Tabitha's throat, but discovering that Adrian would view them as evil quickly changed their minds.

Alexa was glad. She wouldn't have refused these men anything they wanted, but it wasn't right and it would cost them everything. Considering their leader was now a legendary creature who had to feed on the weak, Alexa wasn't sure if they might not already be doomed.

"Paul brought Tabitha back while we were gone." Edward scanned her. "She came up to help you."

"Keep her away from me until I have more control."

"Maybe she can help." Billy stayed back. "What if we stand between you?"

Alexa reluctantly agreed to let the woman come up, hoping her willpower was strong enough to keep from ripping out Tabitha's throat. Alexa had never been so hungry, but she did prefer to test her strength on strangers before her fighters.

Paul and Tabitha came up the steps slowly, eyes wide as they took in Alexa. The glow on her skin was a lie, an appearance of health that the Rabbit knew she didn't really have. "You've completed the transformation."

Alexa nodded, trying not to breathe deeply. “Suggestions?”

Paul glanced at the fighters without speaking.

Alexa shook her head, voice sharp. “They’re not cattle. I’d never do that.”

“You did with me.”

Alexa stared at his exposed skin in anguish and control. “Yes, and I thank you for that. It allowed me to finish this part of the quest. I’m grateful.”

Paul frowned. “So why wouldn’t you—”

David cut him off, annoyed. “We’re not like you, *Rabbit*. We’ll change if she... Hey!”

All the men understood at the same time and turned to sweep Paul with fresh accusations and curiosities.

The scientist flushed, confirming their suspicions. “It was one of the first things Corbin did when he realized I had gifts.” Paul’s voice was scornful. “He thought he could make me a man, but crossing descendants and vampires didn’t work for me.”

Mark looked over. “What do you mean?”

“It cancelled out my inherited power. I became almost impotent.”

Next to him, Tabitha giggled.

Paul brushed a hand down her arm in affection.

“I’ll find you some Advil.”

The men stared in shock. Where was their frightened scientist who couldn’t survive on his own?

As if to remind them that he was still the same man, Paul took a step toward Alexa, caught his foot in a blanket, and went sprawling.

Chuckles filled the room.

Alexa soaked it in as deeply as she could, trying to mend her heart.

“Tabby made breakfast.” Paul picked himself up, still bitter about being laughed at, but not as much as before. Facing his fear of the fire and of Shane had helped him grow mentally. In time, he may not even hate the big brutes that Alexa had surrounded herself with.

Paul led Tabitha to the bed and retreated a step. He shoved those big knuckles into his pockets and waited. This was his last chance.

Alexa and Tabitha had both frozen as they scented each other. Alexa in ravenous hunger, Tabitha in horror.

“It’s too late. You’ve already changed.”

Neither of them spoke again for a moment, where Paul’s future hung in the balance.

“Would you give yourself to me?”

Tabitha shook her head as if coming from a daze.

Alexa smiled gently. “Then get the hell out of here.”

Alexa turned her head, holding her breath as Tabitha fled all the way to the kitchen downstairs.

“Food? A little?”

Not sure she could take a single bite, Alexa reluctantly let Edward help her from the bed. She'd never been so tired.

Edward noticed that her smaller injuries were healed and wondered if her ribs were slowly doing the same.

Her slow grunts and breaths as they went down the stairs said the vampire process didn't fix everything.

Edward was almost glad despite not wanting her to be in pain. He'd been looking forward to caring for her.

Alexa's hand tightened on his arm. "Thank you."

Edward carefully hugged her. "It's my honor."

2

The nine travelers enjoyed a meal together, but Alexa stayed in the corner with her men providing a wall between her and Tabitha as she finished cooking. The powdered eggs and dehydrated bacon had come from the house stock, but the biscuits and gravy were fresh. For a while there was only the sound of eating as the men got their fill.

Only Edward noticed Alexa wasn't actually eating her food, but dropping forkfuls onto his plate to make it appear that she was. He began to understand right then how hard the rest of their quest might be. Her diet was now drastically different from theirs.

Paul and Tabitha served the food and made the rest of them feel invisible in the way that only lovers can. It seemed like a good match for the twitchy man; the fighters were even a bit jealous. Until Edward muttered about descendants having an unfair advantage and the others realized Paul was using his gifts to keep Tabitha with him.

Daniel used the hand code. *Do we need to help her?*

Edward studied the barefoot woman humming with the music as she served them all. Between rounds, she gave Paul small smiles of contentment and happiness. *No. Let them have a chance. He won't hurt her.*

Daniel agreed. The two men put it from their minds. It also eased their feelings of inadequacy to know Paul had help as a lover.

"I'm not cheating!" Paul answered their thoughts, proving his lineage. "She's sad over her cousin. I'm helping with that."

Edward raised a brow. "No help for you?"

"No." Paul flushed with male pride. "I'm just that good."

Tabitha giggled again. "Yes, Rabbit, you are."

Paul swung around to deliver another swat to her behind as she passed.

Everyone chuckled except for Alexa. She was staring out the window, trying to pretend that the smell of the food wasn't making her stomach churn. To control it, she'd been counting the corn stalks,

but a shadow had caught her attention. She knew who it was.

Pain flooded her in fresh waves. She remembered her own days of being on the outside, of waiting to be old enough to join her father. It had felt like forever while she peered in windows and tried to stay alive.

“Why doesn’t he come in?” Tabitha followed her line of sight. “He’s one of the nice soldiers.”

An awkward silence fell as the men saw Brian sitting at the edge of the corn, eating something that looked dry and dusty.

Edward glanced at Alexa, but the emotions made her sharp.

“You have spent this trip talking, drawing stories, and filling in your blanks. Enough. I’ll not be badgered into giving away information that it has taken me a lifetime to earn. You’ll get it when you need it or when I’m ready for you to have it, and not a second sooner!”

Paul, feeling braver than he had in a long time, retreated a step and provided the answer.

“He can’t join his mother until he’s of age. It’s a law among our kind.”

Gasps and shock filled the kitchen.

Alexa rose without speaking. As she staggered from the room, she paused long enough to slap Paul.

The scientist fell into the cabinet, knocking down a stack of pots that thumped into him repeatedly, nearly rendering him unconscious.

Tabitha wanted to run to Paul, but she hadn't forgotten her terror. She stayed still until Alexa was gone.

Paul let Tabitha help him up, noticing the fighters hadn't risen to assist him. Even though they were grateful to know who Brian was, they agreed with Alexa that he should have kept his mouth shut.

"That's why I have to stay here." Paul rubbed his head and neck. "I know the rules and our ways, but I ..."

"Can't follow them."

Paul shrugged at Edward. "Maybe I could, but not with you guys. I'll spend the entire trip doing what I just did to get you to like me. And it won't work."

New guilt rose to suffocate the fighters. Each of them shifted uncomfortably or glanced away.

Edward sighed. "Yeah, about that, Paul. We were rough on you against her wishes. She didn't want you abused."

David grimaced. "She wanted you trained."

"She can't force that on you, so it backfired. I get it." Paul's face was growing red, showing the weak scientist they were used to. "You were jealous and you didn't want me there to take up your time with her."

None of them could deny it and they didn't.

Jacob was ashamed. "There are already six of us."

David sighed miserably. "And she told us we were a full group."

The other men stayed quiet, trying to figure out what to do. Alexa was upset, they were upset, and so was Paul. Something had to be done to fix it.

“Unless we go the other way.” Billy chose brutal honesty. “Paul, the truth is, we know you’re like her, a better choice for a mate, and our DNA insists that we get rid of you. It’s nature, you understand?”

Paul, who enjoyed studying everything, did. “Sure. All species are territorial.”

“Exactly.” Billy forced himself to continue. “But it was the same when each man here joined. We all wanted to be alone with her. We got over it because we saw the benefits of being stronger in number. With you, the balance tipped us back to chaos and took away our strength. If you had tried harder, we would have accepted you in time. I know that because there isn’t anything I won’t do for the men in this room and they feel the same. You broke our harmony somehow.”

“Because he only cares about getting to Safe Haven.” Alexa was listening from the rocking chair in the front room. “If you all died tomorrow, he would celebrate.”

Paul wanted to deny the accusation, to say if they could be reasonable, he could too, but the hatred had already set into place. He turned toward the stove to start cleaning up.

Alexa’s men couldn’t take much of the tension after that. They abandoned the kitchen for packing their gear in case Alexa wanted to get rolling.

As he padded through the front room, Mark spotted her dozing in the rocking chair and went to place a soft kiss to the top of Alexa's head. "I'm sorry."

Alexa sighed, leaning against his arm. "So am I. This wasn't what I envisioned when I took you from that place."

Mark flashed to the chains and the bit, to the tests and the torture. Instead of fading, it had remained vivid in his mind, often tormenting him in dreams. "You could rip my throat open right here and now, Lady, and it would still be a kindness compared to Slam."

Alexa froze as doors swung open in her mind. Awful, terrible images came to her. She shuddered.

"What is it?"

Alexa looked up at him with dead eyes. "I won't be able to stop it."

Mark understood immediately and felt panic sweep over him. "Keep me by your side! I want that! I don't care in what form."

Alexa hugged him tightly, but she didn't make any promises as Mark wept lightly on her shoulder. He wasn't ready to die yet, and not because of fear. He couldn't handle the thought of being away from Alexa.

"I feel the same, but no future is set in stone. We'll guard against it. For now, get me out of here. I can't stand her stench."

Mark helped her when she tried to rise and had to stifle a groan, then kept an arm around her hot skin as they limped up the stairs.

Thirty minutes later, they were all going out the front door. None of them bothered with a goodbye or well wishes for Paul. Guilty of causing it or not, Paul hated them and there was no point in wasting their time with words they didn't mean.

“Shouldn't we get more information from Tabitha?” David frowned. “Paul brought her to help.”

“No, he didn't. He knew if I had an innocent meal, I'd be tainted and no longer able to deny him a place in this group. He betrayed me. And her, but she wants to die anyway, so there was no sacrifice on her end.”

The men weren't sure what to say after that. The fighters walked into the corn in silent contemplation.

3

Alexa's mood was ugly, but the men with her, minus the one following against her wishes, were ecstatic to have succeeded and ditched their noisy burden. Their thoughts were full of misconceptions and assumptions that could be dangerous, but she didn't have the strength to correct them yet. That would come during her recovery.

Sensing Alexa wouldn't berate them right now, the two rear men held a low discussion and managed to clear up a few of the questions for themselves.

"He said the tracking juice should be out of her system now. We might get a break from the soldiers for a while."

"Good. We need to find an ammo stash. Only four mags among us."

"Yeah, none of them were carrying much in the way of supplies."

"Neither were those other travelers. I didn't understand why they were never concerned with water or food. Until we hit Lincoln that last time, anyway."

"Ghosts don't need those things. Creepy."

"The death dance is still freaking me out. They have to spend eternity dancing out their deaths for entertainment? That's weird."

"Agreed. What about that room with the portal she shut down? Have you ever seen so many?"

"Only in movies."

"This should have been one. Might have become a classic. A ghost wagon train would be awesome if you hadn't actually been there firsthand."

Both men chuckled and fell back into silence as Edward gave them a sharp look to curb the noise.

He had been studying Alexa, wondering how long she could travel in the daylight before she collapsed or started to burn. The baby had been

sensitive to the light. That meant Alexa would be, too.

“Do you think he’ll survive?”

Jacob’s question was muttered, but Alexa heard it and let out a heavy sigh. “Only if he goes back to the bunker.”

Alexa took the weed dotted road at the first intersection.

All the fighters were glad to be on the cracked pavement this time. They’d had enough of the corn.

Alexa walked until her ribs and lungs were burning, determined to be out of reach of their enemies here. Until she healed, they were weak. She wasn’t going to seek shelter near Lincoln.

As the day wore on, her straight line became blurred, but the men didn’t speak. This slower pace wasn’t hard for them, but it had to be murder on her. They respected her will to keep going.

4

Sunset saw them barely moving as she trudged along. Edward couldn’t take it anymore. He gently scooped her into his arms.

Mark hurried to take point, relieved.

Alexa mumbled in his ear, trying to stay conscious.

Edward listened carefully to her instructions.

Those around them didn't need to hear it to know what she wanted. She'd walked herself into near collapse again to be away from here.

"She needs meat." Edward's voice didn't betray his true feelings. "Bloody."

"I'll hunt. One hour."

Daniel took Point as Mark disappeared into the tall grass with his knife in hand.

Edward delivered the next order. "We need a shelter across the state line."

Billy dug for his map. "I'll find that right now."

"We also need the nearest mall and a good plan for scavenging with only half a crew. Ammo, water, and tools this time."

David was already thumbing through the telephone book from his kit. He hadn't understood why Alexa gave it to him, or why when she'd taken it as they reached Nebraska and found a small library. Now, he was thankful and held more respect for his mistress. Every day she proved herself worthy to lead them on this quest.

With the entire group distracted and night falling over them, danger lurked nearby, but the fighters didn't concern themselves with what might happen. This was the way they lived now. There would always be times when they were unprotected. It was part of the risk.

"If we keep going up 77, we'll hit Fremont by morning." Billy stored his map. "We can take 43 and be in Sidney this time tomorrow."

Alexa muttered again. Edward passed her words on. “She said it doesn’t matter where we want to be, so long as we avoid Kansas completely, especially Leavenworth Penitentiary and the state line towns.”

Billy snickered. “I say we cross into Iowa and find the closest hotel.”

Alexa forced out words. “Agreed. Put me down.”

Edward gently set her on her feet.

Alexa spent a minute pulling herself together. She stayed in the center as she waved them into a normal pace.

Edward wasn’t sure she could keep up, but nightfall had returned some of her strength. She even managed to stay in the right spot. Around her, the men monitored her progress as they continued with their preparations.

Daniel looked over his shoulder. “We’ll have to hole up when daylight comes.”

Alexa ignored them, concentrating on regaining her rhythm, her stride. Not being in the lead was an adjustment.

Billy shrugged. “Wahoo is the closest town, due north.”

“East, to Syracuse. I can make it that far.”

No one argued, but their thoughts were full of doubt. Even with the extra night boost, she was still weaving as she walked.

Alexa sighed. “The noise coming isn’t a threat or an option, so put both notions from your mind.”

The men twisted around to discover headlights behind them, chugging down the road at a slow speed and a low rumble.

Brian behind the wheel of the long black van wasn't a surprise, but none of the men got into the inviting vehicle. They stopped only because he pulled across the street and forced them to.

"Put her in here." Brian peered out the window that gushed wonderfully warm air over the fighters. "But be clear, she wouldn't allow this for any of you and she resents you doing it for her."

Alexa had a scathing retort ready. She was shocked when Edward scooped her up and deposited her in the rear of the van. Billy held the door and quickly shut it in her face.

The two men exchanged worried grins as they went to hang on the side rails. They didn't want to be in there with her right now. No one did.

The other men also found a place to hang on, sure that Mark would know where they'd gone and with whom.

The van rolled quickly, covering ground too fast to see most of it.

Alexa's sarcasm spewed all over the inside of the vehicle, chilling it. "Stop and let Mark climb in. He's behind the trees. You just scared off my dinner."

Brian ignored her anger, but did as she told him, glad to still be driving. If she were truly offended, he would be on the ground writhing in pain.

“I won’t accept you yet. I won’t cause your death.”

Brian also ignored her warning. There was nothing she could say or do right now to hurt him. Her men had accepted his hospitality.

Brian took them straight to his hideout. He’d been waiting for Alexa since the season changed. He’d gone to the station intentionally and let himself be captured so he would be there as she came through. The dreams had told him to be ready.

A short time later, Brian stopped the van to let everyone climb inside.

The men were relieved when Alexa only glowered.

An hour later they were sorry in a number of ways, including the upset stomachs from Brian’s wild driving. He didn’t believe in taking it easy.

Edward took the spot on Alexa’s right and Billy took the left, there to hear her anger or her directions, but Alexa had neither for them. The driving had been rough on her as well. She slumped over into Edward’s lap with a groan.

“Damn kid!” Billy helped Edward get her into a more breathable position. “Slow down!”

But Brian didn’t. He wanted her safe in the den he’d created and he wasn’t pausing for anything, including broken roads. “Hang on. It gets bumpy through here.”

“That’s what we’re used to, kid.” Edward shifted Alexa’s head to rest on his kit. “Wouldn’t know we were still alive any other way.”

5

Brian stopped in front of his hiding place a little before dawn. The men climbed out of the van warily, not sure exactly where they were or what to expect. Edward and Mark stayed with Alexa as the other four cleared their surroundings.

When they returned to the van, their expressions said trusting Brian had been a good idea.

“There’s a lake, a bunkhouse, and a cave down by the creek. Two roads, no power lines. Hell, I can’t even find it on the map and I used these every day as a dispatcher.” Billy was happy with the location. “We’re good here.”

Alexa was unloaded and carried into the long bunkhouse where a rear corner had been made into a private bedroom area. The female decorations told the fighters that a woman had lived there, but Brian’s words disproved the theory.

“I hope she’ll like it. I made most of it for her before Zale recaptured me.”

Edward noticed the boy’s roughened hands then and the quiet intelligence. “You really her son?”

Brian shrugged bitterly. “When she claims me in two years, ask again.”

He left them alone, going out to pull the van under the cover of the trees.

“He knew she was coming. And how did we miss those eyes being the same shade as hers?” Mark didn’t like how much they’d overlooked on this run. “What else don’t we know?”

“Shut up, will ya? I’m busy here.” Edward watched shadows on the wall. The lantern was throwing an amazing play.

The others joined in his silent admiration as they realized it was Alexa undressing. The silhouette was perfect except for the bandage around her ribs. Calm filled the bunkhouse.

“Guess it doesn’t matter, does it? That she hides things from us, and risks our lives for her gain.”

Jacob confirmed Daniel’s words. “No. Because what we’ve gained is enough to drown the bad things.”

David hated himself, but he had to voice his concerns about that. “And when that isn’t the case anymore? If we lose respect for her, or each other, we’ll fall?”

“Yeah, but after Paul, which one of us feels good right now?” Edward sighed. “She’s right that we drove him out and helped that temper of his get out of control. Don’t we deserve to pay for that?”

“Of course, my pets.” Alexa came from the private area in only a long blue robe that stole their breath. “But not today. These things add up for death’s tally. Right now, you’ve succeeded in your mission. Allow yourselves a moment’s peace. You have earned that.”

Alexa handed each of them a chocolate from Billy's reward and popped the last one in her mouth, grinning at them.

"She found the pain killers." Brian came inside. "We may be able to stand her for a while."

Alexa grimaced at the tasteless joke, but her men scowled.

Brian understood his disrespect wasn't allowed. "Fine, whatever. Here are the keys to the van in case you have to split. Half a tank of gas in it, but you know how the old shit works. It really doesn't." Brian handed the keys to Edward, staying away from Alexa. He pointed toward the cave. "I'll be there if you need something. Thanks for coming."

As the boy left them, Mark frowned. "Why can't he stay?"

"Because of who he is." Alexa took the seat Billy guided her to. "A descendant."

Edward, who understood things more clearly than the other men who hadn't helped free the bunker kids, changed the sore subject. "We figured on a week here."

Alexa rested her head against Billy's hip, hurting all over as she listened to the wind. "I think we're ready for a break, my pets. A long one."

"Here?" Edward didn't mind being around Brian, but he still felt too close to Lincoln.

"No. We'll remain here until I'm good to travel again. Then we'll pick a place to den for the winter and get it ready."

The men were a bit surprised to hear her say that. They'd wondered occasionally what she planned to do once winter came, but they'd assumed she would get a vehicle and try to keep going.

Alexa answered the thought without scorn. "Many people have frozen to death out here trying to do that. The cold is merciless and I'd not risk you just to gain time. Safe Haven will be there when we are."

Alexa took the warm cup of chocolate Jacob handed her, noting the marshmallows from his personal store. She took a tiny sip, knowing what to expect. "Better."

She waited for him to turn away before wiping at her mouth. When she began to lick the pillow on the armchair to get rid of the taste, the other men burst out laughing, sending light and love through the bunkhouse.

Brian watched without bitterness. He'd waited for this for a long time. As she improved, she would teach him the other things he needed to know to survive until he was of age. If he learned the lessons well and completed the final test, he would be free to join her as an equal. He would never ask if he had to play Paul's role. That life would be intolerable.

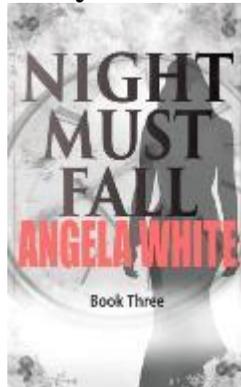
Brian listened to the group until they put up a sentry post and bedded down. Dawn was coming and Alexa needed rest.

Brian closed his eyes to replay his moments with her. None of them was particularly special, but

in a way, they were more than that. Rumors and legends were built easily. Backing them up was something else, but Alexa was able to. She was an alpha, a leader, and the mother that had been stolen from him.

Brian couldn't wait to get to know her. It was killing her that he was dreading.

End of Book Two
What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“I’m off duty now.”

Carol spun around, caught off guard. “What?”

Daniel kept his distance as she made up her mind. The slaver’s tent was full and he’d watched her make a bed behind all the gear to have a bit of privacy.

Carol was suddenly afraid. She hadn’t been with a real man since the war, and back then, she hadn’t been willing.

Daniel sensed that and more as he slowly removed his jacket.

Her nervous gaze went to his arms and chest, and lingered on his lean hips. The formfitting black shirt was tucked messily into his waistband, but Daniel held still against the urge to fix it. He hoped it was coming off.

Carol swallowed, not sure what she wanted.

Daniel draped his jacket over a stack of crates, but he didn’t move toward her. They stared at each other, one with incredible longing, the other with infinite patience.

Carol found her voice. “You won’t...hurt me?”

Daniel delivered a soft, inviting smile. “Not even if you wanted me to.” He moved a bit closer, keeping his hands still and his eyes on hers. “Would it help to know what I want?”

Carol nodded nervously, tension flooding her stomach with pangs of fear and need. This was what it felt like to be alive. *I've missed this!*

Daniel carefully reached out and stroked his thumb down her weathered cheek, body tightening when her lips parted in a gasp. They had great sparks. "I want your pleasure."

Daniel unbuckled his gun belt and put it with his jacket, then dropped down into her bed with a sensual grin. "Can I hold you first?"

It was the perfect thing to say. Carol crawled into his arms without any more delay and Daniel closed his eyes as sensation rushed over him. He couldn't help but compare the feel of her to Alexa, but he refused to decide which was better. Ruining the moment wasn't part of the plan.

Carol trembled when he gently tilted her head up so he could look at her. "We can just stay like this."

Carol answered him with a kiss that begged him to take her all the way to the edge and shove her over.

Daniel groaned in response, grip tightening. He didn't let her pull away when he felt fear trying to creep back in. She'd obviously not been treated well. "I won't hurt you, baby." He kissed the corner of her mouth as his hands pressed her close. "I'll just love you."

Carol was helpless to the rush of emotions and hormones. She held tight to his big arms as his tongue danced with hers. When his long fingers

found a rocky peak and gently squeezed, she arched in his embrace. The erotic promise in his touch was enough to conquer her fear. Carol gasped again as his body pushed against hers.

“I want you naked under me.” Daniel kissed her lips, hands roaming, bringing bolts of pleasure. “Take your pants off.”

Carol did as she was bid.

The feel of his hand sliding over her slick flesh brought a cry to her lips that Daniel let ring out in male pride. He tried to muffle the rest with his mouth while he made sure she was glad she’d chosen him. *He* was certainly grateful.

Carol was unaware of anything shortly after the man began touching her and she didn’t want it to end. When the edge slammed into her and then so did Daniel, she clutched his shoulders and let him have his way.

For Daniel, it was a release for all the tension of killing and waiting, of waiting to kill, and he didn’t hesitate to spill himself inside her. It was something women usually had to pay for now; he gave it freely, but Alexa’s face never left his mind.

When it was over, Daniel curled around her and dozed for a while, not pretending anything, simply enjoying a peaceful moment. He might have been able to make a connection with Carol, but Alexa had found him first and there hadn’t been another female since then that he’d bonded with. He didn’t expect that to change, but he was content anyway.

Deleted Scene #2

Daniel didn't want to, but he forced himself to go to Carol as she lay dying. He was prepared to hear anything except what came from her bloody lips.

"It didn't happen. But I wish it had."

Daniel wasn't sure what she meant, but the life ran from her eyes and then her body, and he was left alone with yet another corpse.

"Tell the boss we lost another one." He shoved to his feet. "Where the hell is that doctor?"

Daniel stormed to the door of the warehouse, ready to hit anyone who got in his way.

Alexa was the one who stepped in front of him. "I need a minute."

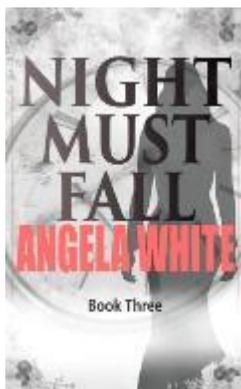
Alexa studied him, seeing what was really causing the anguish. She placed a gentle hand on his cheek. "I'll make sure you don't witness it. Does that help?"

Daniel shrugged off her hand for the first time. "No. I'll still know that you're dead."

He went outside to stalk around the perimeter.

Alexa left him alone. Daniel didn't want to get close to anyone and she understood. It hurt when you lost them. Right now, her illness was reminding her men that she wasn't invincible. At some point, they would have to watch her die. It wasn't easy knowledge to carry.

Book 3 Sample



[Night Must Fall](#)

1

“**Y**ou guys should pack up. It’s almost time for you to go.”

Comfortable conversations came to a screeching halt at Brian’s words. Everyone looked at him.

Brian straightened from his slouch against the bunkhouse door. “You’re all pretending you don’t know, and I can’t take that. She’s half an hour from finishing a full shift on guard duty. That means she’ll want to get back on the road now that she’s healed.”

Edward set his three aces down, but slid a socked foot on them to keep Mark from peeking. It had been three calm days of recovery. They’d

enjoyed it, but the need to get moving wasn't just hitting their leader. The men had been ignoring it in order to deal with it. "Why you breaking our good vibes with your mouth, kid?"

"Yeah. Spit it out or stop farting up the oxygen."

Jacob laughed at Mark's joke. "Gotta remember that one."

Brian flushed, coming closer to the circle of men who had insisted on these positions despite the bunkbeds and living room furniture lining the rear walls. "She hasn't talked to me yet!" Brian dropped into a tattered chair by them. "I thought she'd stay longer."

Edward swiveled around and leaned back on his hands. His fingers kept his cards in place. All of them cheated. "Why can't you be with your mom?"

Brian's lips drew up in a sneer. "That's private!"

"Not for us." David shoved into the boy's mind. *Tell them or you get nothing.*

Brian perked up. "That's awesome! I was worried about her going nuts from being alone with normals."

Daniel's frown was identical to the others in the group. "Explain."

"Descendants need to be with their own kind, at least occasionally. Paul might have been why she wasn't showing signs of it yet."

Mark shook his head. "We suspected that weeks ago. She has amazing control over herself."

"Yeah." Brian's glance went to his feet. "She's leaving me here."

“We know that, too. If she was taking you along, we would have gotten orders by now.” Billy was sympathetic to the kid. He almost liked him. Resourceful teenagers were rare. “How did you two get split up?”

“We’ve never been together. I was born in the lab. She didn’t know about me until I was ten.”

Horror flooded the warm, dim room.

“They take babies and never let their parents know?” Jacob fought the urge to scream. “Why?!”

“Because we bond completely and then they can’t corrupt the child.” Alexa stood in the doorway.

Only Edward had heard her come up the rickety steps and open the well-oiled door.

She refused to look at Brian. “Be ready by lunch tomorrow. Stay inside after the next bathroom break—all of you.” Alexa leapt over the rail and slid into the shadows.

“I still don’t understand why he can’t come.” David scanned the group. “He’s like her. I know you feel it, too.”

“She won’t risk his life like she does ours.” Billy shrugged at the stunned realization coming over his teammates. “The quest would fall.”

It was an explanation they could understand, even if it was hard to accept. They’d mostly ignored the boy, on Alexa’s orders, but it hadn’t stopped them from making observations. Brian was like seeing Alexa at a young age. It was fascinating.

Brian had already known why. Bitterness twisted his face. “She’d love me, so I can’t go.” He slammed a fist into the chair. “It’s not fair. I just found her!”

All the men held sympathy for the teenager, but they didn’t offer comfort or platitudes. The quest mattered more than a family being ripped apart.

“You think she’ll be okay out there alone?”

Edward snorted at Jacob in the lantern light. “Yes.”

Jacob flushed as the others chuckled.

“I raise you...cooking duty. That’s worth your supply evaluation.”

“Not even close.” Edward snickered. “Just fold.”

Mark frowned. “You’re bluffing. Okay... What do you want?”

“That last piece of fudge you’re hoarding.”

“Deal.” Mark dug it out of his cloak and turned over his cards. “Three tens. You lose!”

Edward flipped his cards without turning. He was still watching Brian.

“Trip aces? Are you kidding me?!”

“Why doesn’t she want us outside?” Jacob couldn’t let it go yet.

“She’ll feed.” Brian shoved the door with his foot, shutting it. “And make sure you guys want to continue the quest now that she’s...changed.”

“We won’t leave her.”

“We’re with her until the end, kid.”

Brian sighed miserably. “I’m glad of it. You’ll keep her alive.”

“You don’t sound glad.” Daniel handed the smoke on as he gave Brian an intent glare. “Are you a danger now that she confirmed you can’t go?”

Brian shook his head. “Never.”

“Don’t lie, boy!” Mark lunged to his feet as Brian cringed. “We feel your secret. Spit it out so we can make a final decision on your life!”

Brian cowered under Mark’s rage, but he didn’t consider lying. “She’s corrupt now! She has to be put down!”

All the men had wondered about that since she’d been bitten.

“Is that all?” Mark hefted Brian up by his jacket, ignoring the pitiful swings of defense. “We’ve got things covered.” He shoved the shocked boy toward the circle, scattering the cards. “Sit down there and tell us some stories.”

Brian crumbled on the floor, sobbing.

Edward frowned at Mark. “Little rough, weren’t you?”

Mark put a hand up. “He’s stewing over putting a stake in her heart, but I’m too rough?”

Edward sighed. “We’ve all considered the end of the quest. Stop it now.”

Mark grinned. “Okay.” He dropped down next to Brian and patted the boy’s arm. “You need to toughen up. Work on that, will ya?”

Brian gave a jerky nod as he swiped at his eyes. His rasping breaths made the men feel pity, but not

the disgust that Paul's weak moments had encouraged.

"We're working on something for that problem." Jacob's face was stern. "You're out of it now. Put it from your mind."

Brian's gratitude washed over the group with a calming effect that brought smiles and groans.

"Yeah." Daniel inhaled. "That's her kid, all right."

Edward took the smoke and drew. "Before we get to the nostalgia, I want to know the lay of the land we're heading into."

"And who's around." Billy folded the socks he'd finished mending and placed them into one of the slots that lined all their cloaks. He didn't play cards very often. He always won and feared angering his teammates. "What's the weather like here?"

No one had mentioned it, but all the men were hoping corn fields were behind them. They hated that plant now.

Brian took the last question first, still trying to recover. "Dry and windy now. For the last year, there's been no snow..."

Outside a window, Alexa listened to her men guide Brian into the right frame of mind for the trip. She was certain the child would follow. Her crew was trying to help him survive. They would also glean any details about her that he would share, but

there wasn't much he could give. They barely knew each other.

Alexa shut off her emotions as she scanned the darkness. There were flares of light in the west, all moving north. South was as dark as ever. The east... A bright green glow caught her eye and held it. "The path to the portal!"

Alexa memorized the location, then studied the moonlit shadows around it. She could see the outline of an RV starting from the top of the hill. "We're not the only ones hunting that portal."

Alexa refused to allow a grimace at the pain from her aching ribs and changing body. She stalked into the darkness behind the house, not leaving prints in the dust. Tomorrow, she would be well fed and maybe heartbroken. Her men might decide to spare their lives and take off. If they stayed with her now, they were almost certainly doomed to share her fate. Smart men would leave. She was making sure they had the opportunity.

Alexa expanded her restless midnight prowling to the edge of the property. The lake was low, though she could hear frogs, but it stank. Brian had to be boiling the water or he would have gotten ill from it. The bunkhouse had survived a fire according to the char lines on the rear and the ashy foundation of a larger building half a mile away. She assumed fencing and sheds were here somewhere, too, but years of growth had covered their locations. The fire that had come through here

had been massive. It was surprising that the bunkhouse had been spared.

Her son was in as good a place as any, but Brian was going to abandon it for an ugly ride on her heels. She'd done the same with her father. She wondered if Adrian had done it intentionally, like she had. Brian was a target now. She had to find a place to stash him and this wasn't it. Hunters would be here within a week, trying to pick up her trail. Their adventures in Lincoln would not go overlooked. Brian would be a perfect way to get her to surrender.

The sandy blonde boy was wiry and determined, much like her. His father was unknown, but Alexa assumed he had also been a descendant because Brian's gifts, though still mostly locked, were strong. He would have made an interesting addition on a quest like this—a complete contrast to the taller, stocky, older men that surrounded her. She had no doubt that he would have been an asset, unlike Paul, but nothing would change her mind. She had to be able to risk the lives of all her men. Brian didn't fit that requirement. On his own, he had a chance. With her, only his death was certain.

2

The morning came and went without Alexa's appearance. As the afternoon sun peaked above a dusty horizon, her men lined up in front of Brian's den.

Brian was nowhere to be seen. The kit he had been wearing when they met was gone, leading them to believe he was out scavenging. The men assumed he had done it to make things easier. This way, the mother and son didn't have to say goodbye.

Afternoon shadows began to creep in, making the men exchange uneasy glances. Maybe Alexa had done the same as Brian and cut out without saying goodbye. No one voiced the thought, but it was there.

Seven kits of supplies were lined up on the porch by their boots. Brian had put them together overnight. The lonely pack was a reminder that they were without a leader.

Dusty wind blew over the faint grass struggling to survive. Another shower of grit splashed across their worn boots. They were in Missouri, near the Nebraska border. Between a relentless new Jetstream and bad crop choices, this area was undergoing dustbowl conditions. Instead of the deep-rooted corn that Nebraska hosted, Missouri had tried to grow a lot of soybean. The plants were too shallow to stay in soil sockets against a constant harsh wind, causing the plants and earth to be scoured and scattered. Farmers replanting the next season's crop would have solved that, like before, but those men and women were gone. Farmers were extinct in America.

On top of that, herds had moved north years ago and ate it barren as they traveled. Animal skeletons

were visible in all directions, though most were graying remnants now. Edward suspected even the faint crabgrass that lined Brian's den would vanish after just a couple days of walking. They were in another wasteland.

Time passed slowly as they waited for their leader to arrive. Concerns flashed over her safety and illness but returned to the original thought of her giving them a chance to back out of the quest now that the situation had changed so drastically.

Jacob hoped she knew they would track her down. They were just as committed to it as she was.

Alexa stepped from the side of the bunkhouse without crunching the gravel. It still drew instant attention.

The men approved of her adaptations to the uniform. The only skin showing was her face, though the hood of her cloak was now tied snugly to her head. They were encouraged. She might be able to continue walking in that garb.

Mark delivered Alexa's kit as the others took a marching formation around her. None of them spoke, but each of them allowed her to feel their relief and happiness that the quest wasn't over. For most of them, the lives they'd led before couldn't compare to these moments with her.

Alexa sighed in misery and triumph. "It's the same for me. We may go to our deaths, but we'll go together."

Each man there echoed her as she led them toward the start of their next adventure.

Brian stepped from the shadows near them, making a last desperate attempt to be allowed along. “Grandpa told me to give you a message. I saw him after the war.”

Alexa spun around, grabbed Brian’s arm. “Tell me!”

Brian didn’t struggle. “He said he’s sorry he couldn’t wait.”

“He left you here?”

Brian shrugged out of her loose grip. “He tried to get me to go with them. Conner was there...”

Pain sank into Alexa. “But you stayed...for me.”

“I stayed because he’s corrupt. It would have bled onto me.” The boy looked away. “And then you wouldn’t have given me anything but a bullet.”

“And what is it you think I can give you now?”

“Time, lessons...a family.”

Alexa grunted. “I want that, too. You have to know it won’t happen until I finish this quest. The survival of humanity may very well depend on it.”

“I know. I’m just delivering a message.”

Alexa studied her son, hating the chore. “You can’t come with us. There’s no way we’ll succeed with you along.”

“I know.”

“You can go to ground and wait. You’re strong enough to do that. I see it.”

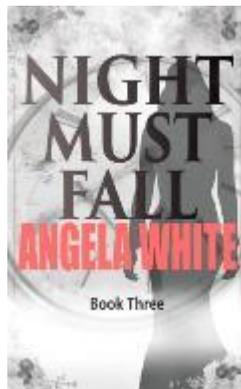
Brian studied his mother, searching for the love he needed. “You’ll come back for me?”

Her heart broke. “Always.”

Brian walked away. That was all he'd needed to hear. He vanished into the shadows next to the bunkhouse.

Alexa cursed the world governments for the thousandth time as she resumed her walk. He would never stop following her now. Their bond was new, but it was already strong—like the one she had with Adrian. “Let’s go. We’re not stopping again for more than a nap until we reach the state line. This part of the quest will increase our stamina.”

Her men followed her into the darkness, smiling or chuckling. There was no other place they'd rather be.



Book Three
[Night Must Fall](#)

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