

ANGELA WHITE

WANTED

Book Five

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Wanted
by
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Title: Wanted
Book Five in the Alexa's Travels series
Edition: 2021
Length: 445 pages
Author: Angela White
ISBN#: 978-1-945927-97-3

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Thank you to everyone who's helped me. I'll never forget it.

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Chapter One
Hunting Time
Bridgeport, Alabama
December 5th

1

“**G**reen just rolled in, sir. Swears he has a plan for getting us into the bunker. It came from Alexa Mitchel.” Lloyd, the new XO, waited in the tent flap for a reply. He was expecting orders to hang Captain Green for desertion.

Ulysses frowned, but motioned. “Bring him to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Lloyd hurried out. The entire brigade was camped for the night and trials were about to start for some of their remaining prisoners. Nothing moved around them. The frozen, apocalyptic landscape was littered with years old wrecks and debris from another war, another time. The few homes in the distance were dark and appeared abandoned, but this area wasn’t empty. Lloyd would be glad when the brigade moved on. Seven hundred men, and the cries for mercy from their prisoners, made a lot of noise.

The smell of campfires and body odor swirled through the air as men stripped their sweaty winter gear for more comfortable clothing and the cooks

got busy turning out another disappointing meal. It was comforting to most of them.

Ulysses leaned back in the chair and wiped crumbs from his army jacket. It was one of the few things he had left from before the war. It was always on him, under his other gear. He didn't wear it for his men. He wore it for the feeling it gave him, and for the memories of better days.

Captain Green ducked into the command tent. He held out the paper Alexa had given him, but he didn't speak. He'd gone AWOL. He had no excuse.

Ulysses studied the notes, sharp mind seeing how it could work. "She told you to bring this to me?"

"Yes, sir." Green didn't say Alexa had hinted it might get him cleared of the desertion charges. He could only hope that she was right. If he brought it up, Ulysses was sure to go the other way out of spite.

Ulysses glared at his former officer. "The rest of your group have been stripped of rank and given hard chores for the next month."

"Yes, sir." Green had seen them working as he arrived. "I am sorry, sir."

Ulysses liked it that Green wasn't making excuses, but he almost wished the man wasn't being so subservient. He wanted to hang him. "Join your team in digging the latrine. Then help with security during the trials. Then you have guard duty until dawn."

"Yes, sir!" Green hesitated. "Sir?"

“What is it now?”

Green blew out a sigh. Ulysses would never agree to go help Alexa. Asking would only get him in more trouble. “Never mind.”

“Get lost.” Ulysses wanted to make an example of Green, but the man was a prime fighter, a prime shooter, an officer, and the plan he’d brought back was solid. Ulysses also heard Alexa’s unspoken demand that Green be spared in exchange. Ulysses wasn’t going to damage their deal by taking out his anger on a man who would probably die during the bunker fight anyway. For now, Green was a valuable asset that deserved to be used.

Ulysses stored Alexa’s plan in his folder. “If you liked being AWOL, you’ll love the next job I assign.”

2

“The next one I give you will be worse! Drive faster!”

Donna glared into the rearview mirror, fighting the pain spell. “It’s not safe in this snow! We’ll wreck.”

“Do it!”

Donna cried out as pain slashed over her back and neck. She slammed on the brakes, making the wagon skid across the slick road. Kids shouted in surprise and fear.

She turned around in the seat and faced her tormentor. “I don’t care if you’re an alpha. Do it again. I dare you!”

The little blond boy slapped the seat between them. “Drive! You’ll miss her!”

“Not until you promise to stop hurting us!”

The child threw himself back against the worn seat, arms crossing over his small chest.

The other three kids in the wagon held their breath and waited for his explosion.

“Fine! Just drive!”

Donna eased on the gas. “If we wreck, you won’t get there at all.”

“Drive! Drive! Drive!”

Donna increased speed, hating the choices that were coming. Little Andrew had been with her for almost a year now and she wasn’t sure she could take much more. His gifts had unlocked upon being sold, betrayed, by his mother. When Donna bought him, she hadn’t known he was a descendant. She’d just been trying to rescue a male child from slavery or being eaten at a Snake party. For some reason, the reptile women loved the flesh of men.

Icy wind blew against the wagon, coming through the cracks.

Donna wanted to increase the heat, but it was a bad time to take her hands or eyes from the wheel. She hoped the kids were warm enough with their thick coats and the blankets over their laps. She couldn’t check on them right now. This narrow road was winding and littered with debris that had been

here for years. It was no longer recognizable. Running over it would likely mean a flat tire and half an hour of freezing while listening to Andrew scream as she changed it. This area was without homes, businesses, or buildings. If they got stuck here, they would probably die.

The other kids stared at her in the mirror and wished Andrew wasn't with them.

Donna knew. He bullied them constantly, causing tension and fights that ended in her shielding them and threatening Andrew with being alone. She didn't have any other leverage, but she was almost sure the boy knew she was bluffing. *Except...* Donna sighed as the pain shudders finally receded from her spine. *I'm not bluffing anymore.*

She steered around the next curve, tensing as the tires slipped. She let off the gas, bracing to hear the child scream again.

She took a fast glance in the mirror and found his eyes shut. She let out a sound of relief. He didn't have much energy yet for his magic. When that changed, she would never be able to control him. He would end up killing her or the other kids to get what he wanted. Right now, that was to be taken to Alexa Mitchel.

Donna didn't know why he wanted to reach the Mitchel woman, but it scared her. Going to Bridgeport was a bad idea. After Alexa's open radio taunt, hunters would flood that town in hopes of securing the prize. It was a bad place to be with a

battered wagon of orphans and a male magic user who hadn't been registered with the bunker.

Donna eased back on the gas and hoped Alexa would be able to find a minute to help her with the unruly boy. She didn't want to leave him on his own. He was too young for that, but her strength was running out. At some point in the near future, she would have to pick between his life and all the others, including her own. *Please make her help me, Lord. I can't abandon a child, even if he is a monster.*

3

“Help!”

“Someone help us!”

“Where are they?!” William blasted the group with another wave of icy wind.

The weak group of descendants and refugees tried to break free of his mental hold as ice formed on their hands and faces.

The long riverboat where they were cowering had once been white, but it was rotting away now and covered in the same mold that was on most of the trees in Afterworld. The dozen people on the boat were sickly. They stood no chance against one of their own kind, let alone the highest level. They'd barely been surviving before.

William had no mercy for their starving frames or the love for their children that was costing their lives. He didn't care about the groups all around

them, or the winter weather that had come in with a bang. William blasted them again, rage in control. He longed to slaughter them all until the ground was coated in blood. “Where did you hide the kids?! Tell me!”

The women surrendered to the cold darkness first as they froze solid. The bulkier men lasted a minute longer and then they, too, froze to death.

William searched their minds as they passed, but all he saw in each last thought was a bright sun and an island. Even in their last moments, they were thinking of Safe Haven.

William let out his full anger. Ice coated the riverboat in a layer that sealed the scene as a warning. Normal refugees wouldn't understand, but descendants would know one of their kind had done this. They would feel the dead magic in these victims and shudder at the idea of facing the one who was responsible for it.

William marched toward the road to continue his hunt for those rare few with time gifts. He could sense them occasionally on his mental grid. They always vanished before he could track them to exact locations, but he knew there were three in this side of the country right now. “I will find you!”

An unhealthy shadow rose from the weeds along the shore as William left. Carolyn didn't know why the magic user hadn't killed her, too. She'd come to the frozen shore to vomit and stayed down as he attacked. *Maybe my illness hid me.*

Carolyn stared at the frozen river boat for a long moment. The group had let her travel with them for protection. She hadn't been close to any of the low level descendants, but it was still awful.

Carolyn tugged her headscarf down and replaced her woolen cap. The weather was frigid, with nasty wind and flakes of snow that gave off a feel of the holidays, of Christmas. It was depressing. Holidays reminded her of what she'd lost.

Carolyn rebuttoned her long coat, listening to snaps, thuds, creaks, and eerie moans as she limped northeast. She hoped the powerful man didn't come back for her, and at the same time, she almost hoped that he did. Cancer was painful for a long time. If he froze her, the pain would end in minutes. *Waiting to die is hard.*

4

Jason stilled as a sense of menace filled the thick woods around him. He gripped the shovel tighter, waiting for the threat to reveal itself before he reacted.

William kept going. His fast scan of Jason revealed average power and no knowledge of time gifts at all, let alone contact with anyone who had them. William wasn't wasting energy on people unless they challenged him or they had something he needed.

Jason felt the danger pass and let out the breath he'd taken in. After another minute, he went back to

digging the hole. A body lay next to it, ready to be buried. He'd already taken an image on his phone for proof so his employer would know for certain the job was done. Come dawn, he would head east and report his success. *Unless an adventure presents itself. I don't mind being delayed for new job prospects.*

Jason stilled again as a twig snapped behind him. He listened hard and heard the ragged breathing of a normal trying to sneak by him in the dark woods. Jason let her go. He only killed for defense or a job, and he hadn't been interested in women since his wife sold him out and took over a bunker in the west. Jason had been on the run for years. "But I go where I want, and I do what I can to screw with her plans."

Jason used his foot to roll the body into the grave. He began to fill in the hole with quick shovelfuls of icy earth. The woods moaned and swayed around him; wildlife prowled. Jason didn't worry over it. He had the skills to survive out here. His targets usually didn't. This one had come from a group of riverboat people who were headed for the same bunker that he was.

Rumor says my wife is there now to establish her hold over the east. Maybe I'll get a contract for her. This job had come from a woman who didn't want her sister catching up with her. His current employer had authority in the bunker. It was a good contact for a renegade male killer-for-hire who was supposed to be a slave.

Jason tensed, feeling something coming.

A female scream echoed.

Jason didn't hesitate to go toward the noise, despite his profession. He ran through the trees, drawing his bow. Low growls covered his steps.

Two dogs lunged at him from the weeds.

Jason fired his arrow and reloaded in a blur. He kicked the second dog in the jaw, then fired an arrow into its chest and moved on. The screams had stopped, but the grunts of a female in trouble were still echoing.

Jeanie swung her fist against the dog's mouth, crunching its teeth and opening wounds on her fingers.

The yelping animal tried to scoot away. Jeanie stomped on its head and then did it again.

She spun around to meet the lunge of the next dog, knife ready.

An arrow went through its neck.

The last two wild dogs fled.

Jeanie gasped in air, searching for her rescuer. Trees waved at her, swaying in the breeze. She saw nothing else. "Hello?!"

Jason studied the cute blonde from the shadows. She was stocky and had sturdy winter gear. She had sharp brown eyes and callouses on her hands from years of working. Despite the trouble here, she didn't need his continued help.

Jason sheathed his next readied arrow and walked back toward the gravesite. He wanted to finish filling it in before he headed east.

Jeanie watched and listened for another minute, then shrugged. "Thank you!"

No answer came.

Jeanie put it from her mind. She had work to do. Dog meat was good protein and she still had a week or so to go on her journey. She knelt in the bloody dirt, not worrying about her minor hand injuries. "I've survived worse."

Jeanie ripped into the warm body and cut upward. She quickly disemboweled the carcass and then began removing the skin. The bright moon overhead provided light. She would make a fire next and enjoy a hot meal before getting a great night's sleep.

Jeanie didn't mind the blood and guts, the smell, or the chance that the blood would draw other predators. She'd been on the road for a month. She had been attacked multiple times and survived. Something always happened to save her or help her. "I'm protected. I didn't know it until I left home, but I was marked twenty years ago. And now I'm going to claim my destiny with Safe Haven and it's infamous leader." *I just need to group with someone stronger than the normals and wait for their return.*

Jeanie looked up, catching movement from the corner of her eye.

Carolyn nodded at her and kept going.

Jeanie didn't return the gesture. She watched the thin woman until she was out of sight.

Carolyn kept trailing the man who was covered up to his elbows in dirt. She ducked into the weeds as he knelt near a grave. There was something special about him, beyond him helping a woman and she wanted to know what it was.

Carolyn popped a tummy drop into her mouth and tried to stay downwind so her smell didn't alert the man to her presence. She stared at his big arms and fit body in longing. Carolyn had been sick for so long that she'd forgotten what it felt like to be healthy. She had expected the cancer to take her life long before now. *Living through this hell is my punishment. I earned this.*

Jason felt eyes on him, but the mood wasn't threatening. He finished the burial and then cleaned up next to the grave. He didn't feel bad for killing. It was just a job.

Jason headed to the next hilltop over and began digging things from his kit to make a fire. He also retrieved his small radio and turned it on. He'd gotten into the habit of listening to the nightly bunker address that had started a month ago. He occasionally heard a voice in the background that was very familiar.

A woman's calm voice echoed across the country through every radio that was turned on. "Good evening, New America. These are the updates for December 5th. First, the rules for rage

sickness have been expanded. Please follow them carefully.”

Jason placed the wood he'd gathered earlier in the day, listening to clinks, doors closing, and chatter in the background of the radio address.

“Registering as a rage walker is mandatory. That law passed in August, after the slaughter of an entire government complex. Wild, infected children are still rampaging through some parts of Utah. Avoid that zone if possible. Rule two has not changed—all females of puberty and above are ordered to rent a male at one of the bunkers at least once a year. Letting the rage disease have control is not an option. Rent a male, register, and receive an allotment of food.

“The former government has been gone in the Midwest and in the east for more than two years. As such, their rein has expired. A new government is being formed and documents of constitutional law are being written. Those who resist this progress should be reported to a bunker for investigation. The old system abandoned us. They went underground and they died there. Only in western zones do they still exist and even that hold is almost gone. Do your duty to New America and report the troublemakers, the rebel males, and those on our wanted lists, like Alexa Mitchel. Her last known location is Bridgeport, just hours ago. Rewards for Mitchel and her six-man crew are high. Please deliver them, or their bodies, to the eastern bunker. That is all.”

All over the country, people paused to consider if they were strong enough to challenge a Mitchel. Most decided against it. Surviving in Afterworld was hard enough without going head-to-head with the strongest crew left in the country.

A few braver groups loaded up and headed south, eager for the possible rewards if they were successful.

Others also made plans to go that way. These scavengers didn't care if death was waiting on the other side. They just hoped to get there before the fight was over and all the loot had been stripped.

Jason shut off the radio, then struck his flint. The spark caught on the tinder and flared up between the logs. He blew gently, making sure it caught fully. Around him, the night was peaceful again. It made him think of his dead sons. If not for that tragedy, he wouldn't be out here killing for a living. On a night like this, they would have been sitting around the firepit, roasting marshmallows.

Jason settled next to the fire, not ready to eat yet. He listened to the windy night and debated going south to see if Alexa was still in Bridgeport.

5

“Pack up. I want us on the road in five minutes.” Rachel smoothed the dirt and wrinkles from her long red robe as she rose from the dying campfire. “We will capture the Mitchel, or one of the magic trackers who come for her.”

The gate hunters around Rachel immediately rose and began packing up their camp. They'd taken over this convent not long after the war, but they still preferred to camp outside in the courtyard until the heavier snows arrived.

Rachel stayed sitting, sipping her cooling coffee while she finished her plans. Her small group of two dozen couldn't challenge a Mitchel, but they could linger around the edges of the fight and wait for an opportunity to slip in and dart her or one of her crew. The trail of bodies she'd left across two states proved she would come for her crew.

The burnt frame of a city skyline backdropped the highway they'd cleared a while back to make travel easier. The homes and businesses here had been stripped long ago, but it was still a prime location. They had easy access to the entire northern half of Georgia from here, making it possible to monitor nearly everyone in the area. A lot of groups were surviving in this zone despite the lack of resources, and each one of them had their own goals.

But none are as important as mine. Rachel finished her drink, staring into the flames. *We have to capture a magic user. Without that, our lives can never return to prewar conditions.*

Rachel would give her life for that goal. She had no problem dying if it meant her family would live. Their graves were nearby. Rachel wanted that version of this future to be reversed. *I'll do whatever I have to. They deserve another chance to live and*

I'm going to see that they get it. “Mommy has you covered. You won't be in the cold ground much longer.”

6

Radka jumped onto her horse and kicked it into motion. “Revenge will be ours!”

Radka and her group of Snakes had been hunting for Alexa's trail since finding Hemi's destroyed camp, but not the missing leadership token. The reptile women had left their main tribe when the elder refused to go after the Mitchel for Hemi's murder. Now, they were outcasts.

Radka mourned the loss of that bond, but it wouldn't stop her from seeking vengeance for her sister's death. She'd told Hemi to be careful who she attacked. It wasn't just Mitchels who were dangerous, but Hemi had taken one of Alexa's men. It had been foolish to think she could get away with that.

“But it shouldn't have cost her life! The Mitchel has no mercy. I shall show her the same treatment as I slit her throat!”

Bright scales glinted in the moonlight as the horses ran. Two-sided cloaks flew out in the wind. The snowy ground was no problem for their mounts. The resilient horses had been bred for this harsh terrain. The cold didn't seem to affect them either. Radka didn't care. If their mounts gave out, she had another small herd stashed nearby. Catching

and breaking wild horses was one of their favorite pastimes. And when there were no males to roast, the horses served that purpose, too.

Radka's Snakes galloped into the darkness west of them, leaving their fire burning and their male slaves still staked to the ground. Only revenge mattered to them.

7

"We're going!" Mimi punched the protestor again, making sure her opponent was down. "She killed Veronica! Our beloved leader!" *Thud!* "You'll go with us or you'll die right here!"

"I'll go! Please!"

Mimi kept swinging, unable to stop. The rage was in control. Blood splattered the grass.

A battered truck pulled up next to her. "Let's go!"

Mimi kicked the now unconscious woman in the ribs. She stepped back and wiped her hands down her robe. "You're not one of us. We have faith!" Mimi rushed forward and kicked her again.

One of the men in the truck reached out and grabbed Mimi around the waist. He tolerated her pummeling fists, holding onto her as their driver spun gravel and slush to get them rolling.

Mimi slammed her hand into the man's big nose, grunting in satisfaction when his blood hit her face.

The man dumped her onto the seat between him and the driver, then clutched his bleeding nose, but he didn't protest or retaliate. Mimi was unstable. Unless he wanted to kill her, he still had to sleep at night.

Their four-truck convoy was rusted, beaten, and dented, but the engines were solid and they had plenty of fuel. Gas wasn't easy to collect and prepare, but it was still abundant in some areas. You just had to be willing to risk your life for it. Mimi sent members of her group out to gather fuel weekly. She needed the gas more than their warm bodies. They couldn't scavenge if they couldn't travel.

"Faster!" Mimi punched the dashboard, leaving bloody smears. "Don't miss her!"

The nervous driver increased speed. "I won't."

"You'd better not or you'll be the next one gone!" Mimi didn't worry about them fleeing or disobeying. Her group was exactly that—hers.

8

William paused as his grid lit up with magic users who had cloaked their presence. He didn't know what had happened to make so many of them come out of hiding, but they were all headed in one direction.

William immediately turned southeast.

Chapter Two

Tell Me About Mercy

The Eastern Bunker

1

“**A**re they all here?” Marcella glared at her Lieutenant. She didn’t like the twenty-something girl at all. She was organized and she had the experience of being a secretary before the war, but Marcella wasn’t happy with her.

Jackie held out the sheet of names, flushing at the harsh tone. “Yes. That’s all we have.”

The bunker around them banged, clanged, and creaked with echoes of voices, workers repairing equipment, and troops settling in for the night. The complex was huge; only half of it was being used. They didn’t have enough womanpower for all the rooms and stations. They were only manning the vital areas, like air and water filtration, and the labs on the bottom levels.

Marcella skimmed the names, frown growing. She glanced up at the group of possible candidates. “The reward for this run is a promotion and an increase in your monthly supply allotment. The target is Alexa Mitchel.”

Mutters traveled the small crowd of bounty hunters. All the women were dressed in soldier gear

and carried basic weapons, but they also had colored hair, makeup, and other bright flashes of their personality. Marcella hated it, but she hadn't forbidden it yet. Even Jackie, her Lieutenant, had purple fingernails and purple gym shoes. It didn't look professional. Marcella had black hair, scarred skin, and dark clothes that respected the new world. She allowed herself no concessions. *In time, they'll all dress and act like me or they'll join the slaves.* "I understand the challenge. A crew will be provided. Bring her in dead or alive, but alive pays double. Who wants it?"

No one spoke. Awkward silence lingered in the large meeting room.

Marcella grunted. "Double for dead, triple for alive."

More murmurs sounded, but no offers came. These twenty hard women here knew it was a suicide run for them. They'd heard the call. They were only here to hear the bounty. They glanced at the dirty floor and the bare gray walls instead of looking at their boss.

Marcella relented. "Triple for dead. Alive will get you whatever you want."

One hand went up.

Marcella waved. "Step forward."

The crowd parted to let the blonde woman through. More mutters sounded as they recognized their top bounty hunter.

Marcella scanned the woman from head to toe. The bulging muscles and tool belt of deadly items gave a good impression. “Your name?”

“Nancy Pruett.” The woman delivered a sneer. “I’ve been told we’re distant cousins.”

Marcella immediately felt better. “Excellent. If you die, no one knows you anyway. If you succeed, the family name will grow.”

Nancy shrugged. “Couldn’t care less about the family name or dying.”

Marcella snorted. “Then why are you doing this?”

Nancy motioned toward the hall. “I have a child. Mitchels are all a threat to her, to me.”

“So it’s personal.” Marcella studied her for a long moment, then nodded. “Sometimes hatred or fear will help.”

“I don’t feel fear anymore.” Nancy took the kit the Lieutenant gave her. “I just hold onto hatred like glue.”

Marcella snickered. “Happy hunting, Nancy Pruett.”

Nancy bowed, then headed for the door. She ignored the leers of those who wanted to improve their situation without doing the work. She glowered at those who had now put her and her daughter onto their target list. “Take good care of my daughter, Marcella. Hatred can easily be turned into a mission to see you replaced.”

Gasps filled the room.

Marcella didn't call the woman back for a reprimand or make a promise, but she scribbled a note on the order to have Nancy's daughter brought into her secure area of the bunker. If Nancy lost, the child could be trained in her ways as a replacement. If Nancy won, the child could be used as a hostage to keep her mother from committing mutiny during her headrush from winning against a Mitchel. *Either way, I'm covered.*

Marcella returned to her control room, aware of the Lieutenant on her heels. "Check the names. I want to know if I have other relatives here."

"Yes, Ma'am." Jackie immediately went to handle it.

Marcella settled onto her metal throne, wishing she'd chosen something more comfortable. "Ah, well. My ass will toughen up in time, just like my army."

2

Nancy waved off the hired security standing outside her door. "Your services are no longer required. Draw your pay from my account."

Both bulky females left without asking why she no longer needed them. They already knew Nancy wouldn't answer their questions.

Rats ran along the damp concrete floors ahead of them, scurrying into cracks and crevices. Traps weren't effective and they had no cats here. Starving people ate anything they could catch. Very

few domesticated animals had survived the years since the war. If supplies ran low here, the rats would also become a food source. Leaving them alone now was a way of preparing for that possible future.

Nancy left the door open as she went to the playpen in the far corner of the plain room that held two small beds and a locker.

The nanny, a tall, thin woman with a reputation for enjoying death, nodded to her then left.

Nancy smiled down at the cute four-year-old. “Mommy’s leaving for a week.”

Abigail grinned up at her. “Hunting?”

“Yes.” Nancy snapped the top button of Abigail’s thick pink jumper to warm her chilly skin. “A new target this time.”

The little girl’s face clouded over. “Will this one know where daddy is?”

“No. This one will anger him into coming back.”

Abigail’s smile returned. Her eyes lit up bright red.

Nancy frowned at her. “Marcella will be your mommy while I’m gone. Do you remember what I told you about her?”

“Marcella is the best hope for the future. She is to be protected, and respected.”

“Very good.” Nancy heard steps outside the open door. She didn’t turn around or censor her words. “What are you to do if this bunker is breached or if Marcella is killed?”

“I will take control and hold this facility until you come for me.”

“And if I never come for you?”

“I will be the queen. They will serve me or they will all die.”

“Tell me about mercy.”

Abigail frowned, eyes returning to soft brown. “I do not know what that is.”

“Perfect.” Nancy turned to meet the shocked stare of Marcella’s Lieutenant. She lifted a bleached brow. “Yes?”

Jackie recovered, hiding her emotions. “Your orders are official. Marcella added permissions, gear, and supplies. A crew will meet you.”

Nancy took the paper, but she didn’t read it. She stared at Marcella’s lackey.

Jackie flushed. “What?”

“Do you enjoy being her right hand?”

Jackie nodded, expression going blank. “Of course.”

Nancy sneered. “Liar. You want her place.”

“You can’t know that!”

“I didn’t. Abigail just told me.”

Jackie backed up a step, eyes going to the little girl who was now chewing on the end of her ragged blanket.

Nancy stepped forward while snatching her knife from her belt. She slit the woman’s throat a second later, going deep. Blood coated those purple shoes. The body fell to the floor.

Nancy sheathed her bloody blade and hit the button on the wall. “We have a death. Send a cleanup crew to room 301.”

“Copy. Name and situation?”

“Jackie. Executed for treason against our leader.”

“Copy.”

Nancy went to her dresser to collect her things. She listened to the footsteps coming toward her room. “Never trust a Pruett. We’ll slit your throat in a heartbeat to advance our cause.”

Abigail slowly sat up, favorite blanket now hanging from the corner of her mouth. “Whatss our cause?”

“We have several. We wish for females to rule the world. We also want all males in slavery.”

“To prevent war.”

“Yes.”

“Is there another reason?”

Nancy turned to meet the four security guards coming down the hall. “We want magic under our control. Everyone else is a threat.”

“You killed her without an execution order.” One of the guards began recording as the others came in to collect the body.

“She wanted Marcella’s job.”

“Proof?”

“My daughter saw it in her mind.”

The guard paused, then continued. “Can you prove that?”

“She’ll show it to Marcella if she so wishes.”

“Granted. Please present your daughter in one hour at the main command section.”

“No need. She’s staying there while I go on the run for Alexa Mitchel.” Nancy stepped by the stunned women. “See that she gets there safely. Marcella ordered it. I wouldn’t screw that up.”

The guard immediately shut and locked the thick door behind her.

Abigail giggled as the head broke off the body as they tried to move it. “She lost her mind.”

The guards kept an eye on the little girl while cleaning and listening for her escort to arrive. No one wanted to be on Marcella’s bad side. They also didn’t want Abigail’s mother to return. Nancy was ruthless, like all of her family.

3

“Jackie’s dead.” Selma, third in command, hurried into the room with Abigail clutched tightly to her chest. “Nancy did it. She said her daughter will show you why.”

“No need.” Marcella waved at the play area she’d had set up as soon as Nancy accepted the run. “Nancy is loyal to me. She would never betray my trust.”

“How can you be sure? Family bonds mean little when compared to greed for power.”

Marcella eyed Selma’s dark skin and somber clothes in approval. The woman was short and stocky, with the proper attitude. She wasn’t their

Lieutenant because she was more valuable in organizing the troops and gear, but she really was the best candidate for the job. “Don’t concern yourself with things below your paygrade.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Marcella smiled at the sleepy little girl. “We’re down one Lieutenant. Pick another—more carefully this time.”

Selma bowed and left, face flushed at the mild scold.

Marcella concentrated on the little girl. “Is there anything you require?”

Abigail shut her eyes and rolled over on the soft blanket.

Marcella chuckled. “I see.” She dimmed the lights so the girl could rest, then sat there, contemplating all the choices she could have with a magic user at her side.

“Will you play with me whenever I want?”

Marcella chuckled again. “No. There are rules. Your mother told you, I’m sure.”

“Yes.” Abigail began rocking herself to sleep. “She said you will rule the world. All peoples will be under your do... Do...”

“Dominion.” Marcella heard steps coming down the long concrete hall. “Will you search my companions?”

“For more treasons?”

“Yes, but also for male compassion. If they do not really support slavery, I need to know.”

Abigail rolled over. Her eyes lit up bright red. “Many here are like Jackie. They will kill you the instant you show weakness.”

“Then they’ll be disappointed. I have none.”

“Liar.”

Being called that by a child was infuriating. It was also a reminder that the girl had been taught to always tell the truth. “Very well. I have one weakness. I work daily to smother the need for blood.”

“Good.” Abigail’s head turned toward the two women now entering the room.

Both women froze, aware of the child digging into their minds.

Marcella waited, hand sliding to her gun.

Abigail giggled. “That one’s funny.” Her mirth faded. “That one wants your job. She’s trying hard to think of slavery, but I see...”

“What do you see?” Marcella aimed her gun to keep the new woman from fleeing.

Selma blocked the door.

“I see your death in her dreams.”

Marcella pulled the trigger.

Selma heaved a frustrated sigh as the body fell. “I’ll try again. There has to be one more loyal bitch in this place.” She strode from the room, muttering. “I wonder if I can dress up a slave...?”

Marcella laughed. “You’re right. She is funny.” Marcella reloaded the single round and pushed the button on her chair. “Body cleanup, command room.”

“Copy.”

Marcella pushed the button again. “Send a passive slave to play with my new guest.”

“Copy. Time limit?”

“Until the child is tired of him.”

“Copy.”

Abigail grinned. “Thank you.”

Marcella nodded. “It is my honor.”

4

Nancy entered the armory with five women on her heels. The crew had fallen in on her way here. She waved at the lockers and wallboards that held a variety of killing tools. “Load up. You’ll need it against this target.”

The armory wasn’t guarded even though the long, wide room was stocked from end-to-end with dusty crates, bags, and boxes of weapons. The armory was open to everyone, but most residents stayed in the bunker. They didn’t need to gear up because they didn’t go topside.

Nancy watched the choices, seeing who went for heavy firepower over accuracy and who went for hand-to-hand weapons. When all five females took items from each category, she was satisfied that Marcella had given her a good crew. She also assumed they’d been offered amazing rewards to secure their agreement.

Nancy also chose items from all the boxes and crates. Then she distributed the ammunition for

those weapons. She went heavy on all of it. She'd only heard of Alexa by reputation. *But I knew her father and he was lethal. I expect no less from his eldest daughter.*

Nancy led them to the supply bay next, taking medical items and kits that would allow them to perform surgery. It was likely that some of them would be injured during this adventure. It was also a certainty that some of them would die, but she didn't take body bags. Nature could have the weakest of her crew. She didn't mind.

The medical bay was small and short on supplies. They always used more than crews found on scavenging runs. Nancy estimated the four bent, often repaired cabinets of drugs would be gone before winter was. Addictions and constant infighting had wiped out this stock much faster than other supplies.

She gestured toward the medic on duty. "Vaccinations."

The weary medic began pulling syringes from the shelf. "Which ones?"

"Rage, small pox." Nancy considered. "And measles."

The medic pulled those bottles. "Other than rage, all vaccinations are years out of date. We don't have anyone who can make updated versions yet." The medic stared as she waited for Nancy's choice, finger twirling in her new perm.

The heavy odor filled Nancy's nose and added to the rancor in her voice as she spoke. "I understand

the risks.” No one knew if expired medicines would work the way they were intended to, but Nancy had survived on old antibiotics several times since the war. She wasn’t worried. “Double the doses.”

“I always do.” The medic waved the first woman over. “Roll up your sleeve.”

Nancy watched the crew for reactions to the sticks and stings. She was pleased so far, but any sign of weakness would disqualify them.

All the women kept blank faces.

Nancy went last, now busy planning for their attack. “Who wants the XO slot?”

Two hands rose.

Nancy scanned them both, seeing big muscles and tattooed trophies of past kills. “Current status.”

“Blacksmith.”

“Tactician.”

Nancy pointed at the tactician. “XO.”

The woman immediately took out a notebook for instructions.

Nancy shook her head, though she was happy with that response. “Not until we’re out of here.” She glared at the medic. “We might as well be in a bar right now.”

The permed medic scowled. “I don’t gossip.”

“Yeah, and Mitchels aren’t dangerous.” Nancy rolled her sleeve down without waiting for the band aid. She led her new crew from the room.

Each of the women gave the medic a nasty look as they left.

The medic swallowed the urge to leave her shift early so she could go spread the story.

Nancy took her girls to the food storage area last. She ignored the frowning guard. “Load up. We’ll be gone for at least a week.”

Each of the women took MREs and water, but nothing else.

Nancy splurged on coffee, but avoided the sugar and powdered creamer. She stored the items in her kit, then took a minute to make sure she had everything she needed.

“May I offer a suggestion?”

Nancy nodded at her new XO.

“We were assigned a jeep. Bikes would be louder, but faster and more maneuverable.”

“Denied, to both. I want horses.”

The other women perked up. Horses were coveted among the bunker females.

Trisha sighed. “Shall I go see to that now?”

“No. As of this minute, we go everywhere together.”

Trisha bowed her head. “As you wish.”

Nancy snorted. “Save the meek demeanor for someone who requires it. Speak your mind and do it now.”

“Okay, I will. Horses have to be fed.”

Nancy nodded. “And bikes need fuel.”

“Horses make noises when you don’t want them to.”

“Bikes are loud.”

“Bikes can be disabled. They can take the winter weather.” Trisha eyed her companions, frowning. “Horses may be a distraction.”

Nancy grunted. “Point taken. We will sign out six bikes, and if I need a horse while we’re out, *you* will find me one.”

“Agreed.” Trisha was delighted to have her suggestion accepted. “May I assist you in any other way?”

Nancy stared at Trisha with hard, needy eyes.

Trisha shivered. “If I have to, I can be that for you, as well.”

Nancy walked by her, chin in the air. “Willing or not at all.”

Trisha fell in behind her, relieved. She’d had female relationships since the war, but she still preferred the company of men. *I just need them to be slaves. I like renting one, making him fall in love, and then turning him out to my friends.*

The rest of the women stayed close and tried to copy Nancy’s cool air. They’d agreed to this run because of the rewards, but also because of Nancy’s reputation. If they did well, she might accept them as her permanent crew.

Nancy knew what they wanted, why they’d come, but none of that mattered to her. *I only want my target dead. If I have to sacrifice all of you, I’ll do it in a heartbeat.*

Nancy had been in Hot Springs, South Dakota when the war came, on leave from the Navy to visit family. Her male relatives had been taken to

government bunkers in the Draft and the women had followed their loved ones. She had missed being Drafted, but she'd been in the right place when Safe Haven came through.

When Safe Haven left America, Nancy had been captured by slavers. She'd given birth in captivity. The baby girl had saved her life and given her control over that group. As a punishment, she'd charmed them and began male slavery in the east, drawing Marcella back to this side of the country. *It wouldn't have been possible without Adrian's child. And now I want him back with me so he can be properly punished for leaving. I won't stop until I get it. The cost doesn't matter. Only the goal does.*

5

Nancy waited impatiently for the main bunker door to be opened, though it didn't show in her blank expression. She held the bike in place between her long legs, aware of the two guards eyeing her and her crew as if they were crazy. *We are, a little. That's why we can survive out there while you hide in here.*

Light rain beat against this top level. Cold drafts blew through uneven seams that had settled over the years. The guards up here wore their heaviest gear and cursed the assignment for the entire twelve hours they had to be here. It was the coldest, most dangerous place in the bunker.

The huge metal door began to lift. It screeched and squealed, telling everyone an entrance was opening.

“Activating the guns.” The guard on the right hit buttons on the wall keypad.

The other guard got ready to fire. The computer controls were no longer perfectly accurate from lack of satellite updates. The earth shifted a bit each year. It made the older technology unreliable in some ways.

Nancy and her crew didn't react. The guards would cover their exit so they didn't have to waste ammunition, but each of them was ready to defend against whatever came. All seven women now had their hair and faces covered in thick hats and masks that only revealed eager eyes. They were layered in clothes and kits. They were prepared for the outside.

The door made it half way up and creaked to a loud stop.

Nancy sighed. “Let's go.” She rolled the bike forward and tilted it, sliding under while pulling hard. She rolled forward and kicked the bike to life.

Her crew followed, having no trouble copying her example.

The rear of the bunker sat along a river. The rest was surrounded by a frozen, wide yard and a thick line of moldy woods where scavengers often camped in hopes of grabbing those who emerged. Those woods were littered in bodies and bones.

Shadowy forms flew toward them from the tree line.

The starving males were ill and weak. They wouldn't be taken in as slaves, but Nancy still didn't think the two guards on this door could handle them. Only a few of the three hundred women here knew how to fight. If a real army came, defense would be up to the bunker guns and the magic users Marcella had been collecting.

"Shut the door!"

"It's not responding!"

The guards were panicking.

"Kill them all." Nancy slowed as she pulled her rifle and began picking off the threats. Her daughter was inside. She wasn't moving until the door closed.

Her crew did the same. Loud gunshots filled the air as the door finally began to shut, moving incredibly slow.

Nancy spotted a glint of metal in the tree line. She used her scope and narrowed in. Very few people had ammunition left after so long. They had to be eliminated.

Nancy snapped off two fast shots. A body fell in the woods. No one heard it.

She reloaded to help her crew, but it wasn't needed.

The door clanged shut. Silence echoed.

Nancy holstered her rifle in the bike pouch and rolled forward, enjoying the purring between her legs. *I might like the bike after all.* She gunned it, shooting forward without checking to see if her crew was ready. She flew toward the trees. A few

seconds later, she rolled over the body of the man she'd shot. *Guess that answers that old riddle.* She snickered to herself and kept going.

Her crew caught up quickly. Some of them grinned at the feel of being outside even though damp drizzle was coating the area. The mud splatters and loud engines added to the excitement. Their adventure was underway. For this moment, they were happy.

Nancy took them straight to an old cabin near the bunker that used to belong to a groundskeeper. She rode straight through the entrance. The missing door made it easy. She spun into the rear room and came back out, stopping near the wall to clear room for her crew.

Challenged without words to do the same, her girls copied and lined up along the two front walls. When Nancy killed her engine and left the bike, so did they.

The cottage was missing a wall, as well as parts of the roof, creating damp, snowy spots on the rotting floors. Nancy climbed the short steps to the second floor and went to the single warped table. She began pulling items from her pockets. "We roll out in five minutes. Memorize this map and tell me what you know about the area."

Her crew gathered around the table, eager to see exactly where they were going.

Trisha pointed at the town with the X. "I grew up a mile from there. This map doesn't have the radio station, but the rest of it looks right."

Robin pointed. “That creek is narrow. No problem to cross it on bikes or foot.” She smiled at Nancy. “It might even be solid now.”

The temperatures were hovering around the freezing point. A few more degrees might see all shallow waterways frozen by the time they arrived.

Nancy made notes on the map. She wasn’t familiar with the area. “Keep going.”

“There are three tall buildings we can use as sniper positions.” Trisha pointed again. “That one has a flat top floor where we can see everything in the town. If something moves, we’ll know.”

“What about defenses?”

Trisha frowned. “Other than what they might have built, I doubt it has any. There aren’t even any fences except around the farms on the eastern side. No bases, no guard stations, no known defenses.”

“Best place to attack from?”

Trisha looked at Robin.

Robin shrugged. “Straight down the front, but I expect them to have that covered.”

“Agreed.” Trisha held the map in place as a stiff breeze blew through the rotting cottage. “If we come in by the least likely way, we may catch her off guard.”

“Always assume that’s not possible. You’ll live longer.” Nancy studied the map harder. “Is it flat? Are there a lot of homes and businesses?”

“Yes, in the center, but the town is surrounded by hills.” Trisha frowned at the scold. “And it’s always possible to catch someone off guard. We just

need to know the target well enough to predict their moves.”

Nancy rolled the map and put it away without replying. Her crew would soon understand their target wasn't a scared male or some BLM agent who'd gone rogue. She went back down to the first floor and pissed in the closet.

Trisha and Robin exchanged leery glances, but they didn't speak their concerns. They were willing to trust their new leader until she screwed up. When that happened, she would be replaced and her body would be dumped on the side of an apocalyptic road.

“One minute.”

Nancy's call brought them all downstairs.

Nancy straddled the bike. When she kicked it into gear and rolled out, they were right behind her.

Nancy thought of only her target now and what a capture could lead to. *You should have stayed with me, Adrian. Now, your eldest daughter will pay the price for that choice.*

Chapter Three
Say It Again
Bridgeport, Alabama

1

“**A**re we really staying here?”

Alexa and the others looked over at Jacob with pointed stares or frowns.

The rookie dropped his head back to his bible. “Just asking.”

Alexa rose from David’s wide back. “Your turn.”

“Yes!” Jacob hurried over. He removed his shirt and dropped face down onto the warm couch that David had just left.

The rest of her crew went back to what they’d been doing, except for David. He replaced his shirt and headed for the bedrolls near the fire. “Goodnight.” Her back rub had let him relax enough to rest.

Edward rolled a smoke, also relaxed. Alexa’s hands and elbows had worked out the knot in his spine and given him time to think. He was now eager for the battle she’d set up, but not in an angry way.

Billy kept cleaning his guns. He’d broken them all apart on the floor in front of him, mind at peace.

He was scarred, but time with Alexa and his team had convinced him that he could live with it and go on. He was still as willing to be with her, with them, as he had been in the beginning.

Daniel and Mark were on duty, with one at the front door and one at the rear. They listened to the others, and to Alexa, but they watched the landscape through the windows. There was no way to know how soon the first threats would arrive.

Jacob groaned as Alexa's hot hands found the sore spot along his spine and began working it out. "That is so good!"

Alexa was aroused from rubbing on her men for hours. She pressed close to Jacob's warm body and whispered in his ear.

Jacob immediately rolled over, keeping her in place with one hand while the other balanced them. He stared up at her approving expression, leer stretching his lips.

Alexa began to rock. Jacob's body hardened. He held her hips as she unbuttoned her shirt.

The other men kept busy, but their eyes strayed to the couple repeatedly, enjoying the show and the vibes.

Outside, shadows moved away. Rain fell harder on furry bodies and on empty homes that hadn't held life since the war. Above the small town, the radio tower light glowed in the dreary darkness.

Mark turned his back to the couch so he didn't get distracted. He saw Daniel do the same and approved. Alexa's sounds easily sent a man's mind

to more pleasurable activities. *That moan!* Mark smiled. It was amazing how she managed to keep them from all being jealous.

Daniel was thinking the same thing. He hadn't had a private moment with her in a while. Neither had David, but it had been the longest for Jacob. She was very good at sensing which of them most needed her physical attention.

“Oh, God!”

Daniel chuckled at Jacob's stunned noise. He hadn't heard a zipper, but he knew that reaction for what it was. Jacob was deep inside her while she rode. There was no better feeling. *Except maybe killing*, Daniel amended. *And she always gives us plenty of that.*

Mark scanned their surroundings again, not feeling a threat. It seemed wrong somehow after all the battles and surprises, but he wasn't restless for a change. *I might be ready to settle in for the winter this time.* It was a relief. The last time they'd tried, all of them had still been too wound up for it. Billy's capture and the trek to rescue him had provided every bit of the danger they'd still been craving. *Does that mean we're actually tired of it for a while?* Mark shrugged. *Unlikely, but anything's possible.*

“Harder!”

Six male bodies twitched at her raspy order. Three of them looked over to find Jacob pinching her nipples while thrusting up into her. Alexa's

hand between her legs stilled. Her body arched as she climaxed.

Jacob groaned as he joined her, spasms rocking them together. “I love you!”

All their witnesses tensed, not sure how she would take that. They’d all wanted to say it at one time or another, but they feared her reaction.

Alexa shuddered. “Say it again!”

Jacob twitched, hands holding her tight. “I love you, Alexa. I always will.”

She smiled, leaning down. “I love you, too.” She kissed him, riding the waves.

And now we know. Mark laughed at himself for not having the courage to do that. *It took a rookie to let us know she needs that.*

Alexa curled against Jacob’s chest as they recovered, in no hurry to move.

Jacob held her tight, the way she liked, and drifted off.

Alexa enjoyed the feeling. Her mind wasn’t racing with plans and she felt wanted. It was enough.

David watched them from the bedroll. He’d been drawn from dozing by the sounds and by her begging. He caught Billy’s eye and made a motion.

Billy chuckled, nodding. Yes, it was okay for them to say that now. Jacob’s bravery, or mindless emotions in the heat of passion, had just cleared another fear they’d all carried about getting too close to her or letting her know how deeply they’d all been affected on this trip.

David rolled over and allowed himself to sleep.

Billy reassembled his guns in quick, practiced movements, hearing the rain increase.

Edward tossed him the smoke.

Billy finished it.

No one spoke. None of them wanted to ruin the good mood. They all knew this wasn't likely to happen again for a while. They'd been taught to soak up these moments for as long as they lasted.

Edward leaned his head against the chair, body softening, mind fading. *This is almost too good to be true.*

Alexa sighed deeply. It sounded satisfied, happy.

It is too good to be true. Edward opened his eyes to scan the warm room. He found bodies staring back at him with dead eyes. "No!"

Jacob rose, twisting to cover Alexa.

David jerked upright, going for his gun.

Billy drew his and swept for the threat.

Mark and Daniel also turned, searching for the danger.

Edward jerked awake. His rough breathing filled the room.

Everyone stared at him as tension filled the air.

Edward realized he'd had a bad dream. He tried not to be embarrassed. All of them had nightmares, especially Alexa. He found her peering over Jacob's shoulder in concern. "Sorry."

The rest of the crew waited for her call.

Alexa slowly rose, mind coming back to life. “Tell me.”

Edward frowned, but he didn’t consider refusing her. “You were all dead, right where we are now.”

David rose. He went to an uncovered window.

“I’m doing a check.” Billy kept his gun in hand and went to the basement.

Jacob stayed with Alexa.

Edward flushed. “It was just a bad dream.”

“Maybe.” Alexa fixed her clothes. “And maybe not.” She looked at David.

David was surprised she knew he’d had a nightmare last night. “Not exactly the same, but close enough. We were on the porch, all dead or dying.”

Alexa began gathering her gear. “We’re moving—now.”

Edward hated himself for interrupting their great moment. He followed her, avoiding the eyes of his teammates.

Jacob took a moment to whisper in Edward’s ear.

Edward nodded. Better safe than sorry was a good rule to live by, but he doubted they needed to move out of this house.

Jacob shrugged. “She probably already had plans to move us.”

“Yes, but tomorrow.” Alexa pulled on her long coat. “Never ignore simple signs of danger coming. Bad dreams are sometimes your mind warning you

something might be wrong and what it could lead to. Always treat them as a caution.” She met Edward’s eyes. “And when two of your team have an almost identical nightmare, react right then.”

Edward nodded, shame fading. David having the same dream wasn’t coincidence as far as Alexa was concerned. *And that’s good enough for me.* He donned his gear and boots, and got set to go where she led them.

Alexa took Daniel’s spot at the door.

He immediately went to get his things while Jacob took Mark’s place so he could do the same.

Billy came back up and went to the second floor to check things there. He used his new speed to get it done in seconds. He returned to the living room, shaking his head. “Nothing, but it doesn’t feel right again.”

A few of the men nodded at his comment. The tension was growing instead of fading.

“Let’s roll.” Alexa strode to the back door and exited into the rainy darkness, leaving the fire to make it seem like they were still there. She led her team around the house and into the alley next to it. She opened the rear door of the business next to the house and went straight through. She then climbed out a side window, bringing them out three lots down.

She repeated the pattern until they were on the opposite side of town. The alley shadows were pitch black and the windows were already open, for this reason. Her men hadn’t understood that order

yesterday, but they did now. It pleased all of them to know she'd already planned them an exit.

Cold wind and sleet fell on them and quickly melted as they traveled from building to building. Alexa finally stopped on the first floor of the cleared market across from their house.

The market was three stories, with a flat, empty attic at the top. The second floor had been a one-room apartment that still held a musty mattress and rotting checkered curtains. The bottom floor store had been looted and held little of value for most people. They had already collected the packs of shower curtains and cans of shoe polish, as well as the few bottles of vitamins and shampoo. They'd left the rest. In an apocalypse, makeup and perfume was almost useless.

Alexa pulled her rifle, picked a window, and waited.

The others also chose windows and got set to pick off whoever was coming for them.

Silence held for a long time.

Edward's embarrassment returned while they waited. It grew worse when he saw Jacob, David, and Daniel trying not to show how cold they were. Mark wasn't yet, but he would be soon. The temperature was below 30° and light flurries were coming down steadily. Edward removed his cloak and draped it over their youngest rookie. Billy did the same for David.

Daniel stayed between Alexa and Edward, soaking up their extra heat.

Everyone listened for the threat, hearts thumping with adrenaline.

A loud shriek filled the air.

“Down!” Alexa slid to her knees and covered her head. Her crew did the same.

A second later, their house exploded.

Flames and debris rose into the dark sky and then flashed out to slam into the buildings on either side. Shrapnel hit the windows of the market, cracking weakened glass.

Edward’s embarrassment vanished. Anger took its place. *They would have blown us up!*

Alexa grunted. “They have no honor. Remember that when they show themselves.” She stayed down, ears straining to hear steps or voices over the roaring fire. Waves of heat entered the building, warming the normal men. The vampires began to sweat.

Alexa heard a cackle.

“Move in!”

“Find me a body!”

Alexa’s rage grew as her hand tightened on her rifle. “On three...two...one!”

All seven of them rose, using scopes to pick a target.

The bounty hunters entered the town together on foot, counting on their black outfits to blend in. Their eyes roamed the shadows around the burning home, searching for survivors.

Their leader followed slowly, studying the rest of the town. He scanned the dark homes and

businesses and found Alexa's red orbs gloating at him.

Alexa fired. The bullet went into his forehead.

The rest of the bounty team spun as the body dropped, but it was too late to avoid the hail of bullets.

The one-sided fight was over in less than a minute. The only noise after that was the crackle and pop of the burning house.

Alexa reloaded. Her crew did the same while listening for anyone else who was stupid enough to come in openly. When no new noise came, they went outside into the cold darkness.

"Why didn't our furry friends warn us, or just handle it themselves?" Jacob knelt to loot the body of the bounty hunter leader. He took all the ammunition, but he left the rusting rifle that obviously hadn't been cared for.

Next to him to provide protection, Edward motioned. "Too cold. They're not immune to the weather."

Jacob frowned. "So as long as it stays cold, we're on our own?"

Edward didn't reply since the answer was obvious. He scanned the dark trees behind the burning home, not seeing or feeling other threats yet. *But more enemies are close. I know it.* "Let's hurry up."

Everyone obeyed, including Alexa. She finished looting a body, then headed back to the market. Her mind lingered on the incredible shot

one of her men had made. She'd looted three bodies that had been killed by the same 7.62 slug. *Daniel is the only one who uses a MK17. Daniel made that shot.*

Her crew followed, approving her choice, but also leery of it. The brick market would slow a fire, but it wouldn't hold against another rocket.

Alexa scanned as they climbed the stairs to the top floor. When they reached the flat landing, she pulled the rope from her pockets and pouches. "Give me all you have. Mark will secure it to the windows while Daniel stands watch and Jacob provides backup. Everyone else will rest until dawn." Their vampires needed to sleep now, so the sun's pull wouldn't hit them as hard when it rose.

A pile of rope began at Alexa's feet and grew as men dug through their pockets and kits and pulled the connection ropes from around their waists. Rope was a valuable tool with many uses.

Mark began assembling strong, long escape lines from the windows, feeling better about the location choice now. If trouble came, they had a fast way out. He made sure the knots would hold double weight in case they had to carry someone who was injured.

Alexa nodded in approval. "When you finish, relieve Daniel. He will sleep with us and receive a reward for the perfect shot I found." She smiled at him. "Two for one bullet is good. Three for one is amazing by any standard."

Daniel grinned, dropping his coil of rope onto the pile. “They lined up. I just pulled the trigger.”

“At exactly the right second.” She bared her fangs. “Do you accept the reward I offer?”

His amusement faded into respect and gratitude. “With honor.” He went to stand guard duty, heart thumping. Come dawn, he would be like Edward and Billy. It was exactly what he wanted.

The other men were happy for him and even more determined to do something just as amazing to earn that reward, too.

Alexa was satisfied that she had provided encouragement for the next fight. Her men were already amazing to her. Now, they would prove that to themselves.

2

A few miles to the north, the explosion and gunfire echoes brought loners and small groups to their feet and then to their transportation in hopes that they hadn’t missed the action. As they flew toward the town, more people joined them. Some of these immediately began killing those they saw as a threat to getting the prize. The others blended into the rear of the throng and dreamed of the rewards.

The group was made up of escaped males, survivors of the Snakes and Fanatics, and BLM deserters. There were also lone bounty hunters and scavengers who’d refused to join any of the power players in this zone. They didn’t share encouraging

words or supplies; they didn't have compassion, mercy, or even hope. They thrived on the carnage, living on the scraps of society. Whenever they heard a gunfight, they hurried toward it to steal their share of the leftovers.

3

A few miles to the east, a small group of BLM agents turned toward the loud noises echoing through the cold darkness. They were also hoping to steal a prize.

“Should we head out now?” Gina hoped their leader said no. She didn't think their group was enough against Alexa Mitchel.

Brenda kept studying the map she'd drawn in her notebook. “No.”

Brenda knew her people were weak, but these were all she'd been able to gather for the quest. Many of them had lost loved ones to Alexa, but that anger wasn't enough. They huddled around a small center fire, sharing their thin squirrel soup.

All of the women, and the three men, relaxed. Alexa's open challenge to the bunker had been a persuasion. However, they weren't reckless. Most of them understood death waited at the end of this mission. Their thin bodies held a few weapons for such a battle, but no ammunition except for Stephanie and she would die before sharing it.

Stephanie regretted joining this hopeless crusade, but she hated herself even more for

bringing her husband along. He and the other men had been charmed upon sight. Frank wasn't big or strong, but he was a man. That was all it took to be a target these days. The other women here didn't care that Brenda was mating their men. They wanted to be under her protection even though they feared her power.

Gina went back to patrolling the perimeter.

Brenda gestured with her pen. "Turn on the radio. I want to hear the bunker update."

The only bald man among them shrugged off his wife's arm and retrieved their radio. He tuned it in with expert hands, missing his days as a network technician. Loud static echoed. "Not on yet." Frank checked his watch. "Ten minutes to go." He shut off the radio so it didn't waste power. The battery he had rigged up wasn't strong. *We need to find a new one somewhere.*

Brenda looked at him across the small campfire. "Would a radio station have what you need?"

Frank nodded, ignoring the fearful mutters from the others at Brenda's open mind reading. "It should."

Brenda smiled softly, not caring when the man's wife glowered at her. "Then our mission will give us a double reward." She patted the ground next to her. "Come warm up."

Frank went quickly, leaning against her heat.

Brenda stared in direct challenge at his wife. "Do you wish to file a complaint?"

Stephanie shook her head and stared at the fire. She kept her mind blank, but fury burned brightly in her heart.

4

To the west, the gunfire echoes made Fanatics and Snake women pause in their battle for the campsite.

The Snake leader let go of the Fanatic leader's throat and stepped back. Her gory women paused to hear her words.

The Fanatics scrambled back out of reach or reloaded, but none of them ran. Their long robes were dirty and faded next to the bright scale covered hides the Snakes were wearing. The same could be said of their thin bodies and filthy skin. The Snakes were healthier in every way.

The Snake leader listened for more gunshots. When none came, she made a leader's choice. "We will share this site, then fight together."

The Fanatic leader wanted this site for the trees to keep warm. The Snake leader wanted it for the trees to observe the town where Alexa was holed up. Both females considered the location worth dying for.

The horses tied nearby gave stomps and snorts to battle the cold and show their displeasure. The Fanatic cars and trucks were scattered across the site in an unorganized mess. They'd all arrived at the

same time, but the Snakes had still been careful with their transportation.

The Fanatic leader, aware that she had been about to die, nodded. “A temporary truce.” She held out a hand. “Mimi.”

The Snake leader clasped a bloody hand to hers. “Radka.” She pulled Mimi close, forked tongue sniffing her as weapons rose again on both sides. “Who gets the prize?”

Mimi glared, ready to pull her knife if the gun in her hand didn’t work. “We want the men. If they survive. As long as Alexa dies.”

Radka grunted. “We want the Mitchel dead, as well.” She let go of the Fanatic. “We have a deal. Do not betray me.”

Mimi snorted. “Take your own advice. If you kill the men intentionally, our deal is off.”

Radka snorted, but nodded. “Agreed. Do not violate these terms or I will eat you while you are still alive.”

Anger fled at that threat. Fear took its place.

Radka looked at both sides, taking control over the entire group before Mimi could think of it. “Clean up the mess. Get food started.”

The two small groups merged into a fighting force.

5

William paused atop the hill to survey the town below him. Bridgeport had already seen fighting,

and the magic users had gone dim again, but he'd picked up a powerful signature on the way here. He was almost certain it was a time controller. The girl was still glowing brightly on his grid. Unless someone more likely popped up, he was heading there. But he'd wanted to scan the Mitchel first. Adrian's daughter was strong and her crew was solid. If she made it to the coast, he might have to interfere with her attempt to leave in search of Safe Haven. It would depend on if he had found the three time controllers he needed by then.

William turned east, confident in his choice to handle Alexa later. More people were coming here to attempt her capture. It was likely she wouldn't survive. William had no doubts about winning in a fight against her and her full team, but those deaths might bring Safe Haven back too soon. The Mitchel family was complex, complicated, and connected to each other in ways that other ancient families weren't.

His own history was long, but boring compared to many of the Safe Haven people. He resented them for that, and for their attempts to repair and rebuild the old world. "When the reset happens, I will control it and you will all serve me in any way I desire."

To the south, Ulysses and his men also listened for more gunfire. When none came, they went back to their hot coffee, except for Captain Green.

“We should go help her. We have enough men.”

The usual setup was in place and the weary men had been fed hours ago, though not many of them were in their bedrolls. The few who had been sleeping were wide awake now.

Ulysses frowned over the fire in the protected center of their army. “She got to you.”

Green blew out a frustrated breath. “We need her alive!”

“We need our men for the bunker battle.”

“If she dies, she can’t make the call! Stop being a coward!”

Ulysses’ eyes narrowed. “You’re lucky to be alive, Captain Green. Be careful. That status could still change.”

Green softened his tone, but not his words. “You’re making a big mistake. If we let her die, Safe Haven will be against us. That’s worse than the bunker bitches.”

“Agreed. However, the Mitchel woman does not need our help. She knew what she was doing by making that call.”

Green couldn’t stop his worry or his doubt. “How can you be sure?”

“I believe in her mind. She’s brilliant, ruthless, and it has already helped us.”

“How?” Other than the infiltration plan she’d given him, Green didn’t see many benefits.

“The bunker will send their best fighters to collect or kill her. Our final battle got easier the minute her call went out.”

Green hadn't thought of it like that. “What about the rest of the prisoners?”

Ulysses scanned the bound women huddled near the rear of the camp. They were cold, fearful, and no longer a threat. “One food ration. Drug their water so we can sleep tonight.”

Captain Green frowned. “We really can't spare the food...”

Ulysses grunted. “Fine. We'll do half of the remaining trials now since we're all awake.”

“That will wind the men up. They'll want to drink, too.”

“No. See if our prisoners will give a service.”

Green's mouth dropped open.

Ulysses shrugged. “It's their last night on earth. Sex and a meal isn't unreasonable.”

“They'll expect delays in their trials.”

“That will not happen. Make it clear.”

“What if there are no takers?”

Ulysses scanned the miserable women again. “There will be. They'll hope the moment will convince us to spare them. Save the rest of the alcohol for when we face the Snakes in their nest. We may need that liquid courage then.”

When Green would have kept arguing, Ulysses slid a hand to his gun. “You have command of the perimeter sentries until we roll out in the morning to remove the Snake nest. Get there!”

Green went with anger in his stride, snapping his mouth shut on the protest. His bond with Alexa was unwelcome, but undeniable. *If she dies, I'm killing Ulysses.*

Half a mile away, Nancy and her crew pushed their bikes around the army of males. All of the bunker hunters wanted to call and warn Marcella, but they couldn't do it yet without drawing attention from the huge group.

Her crew followed, eager to be riding again, but they were all furious that so many males had gathered for the fight. Hatred kept the women warm as they got out of the area.

Chapter Four
Connections

December 6th

1

Nancy led her crew into an old barn that was missing both front doors. They'd been riding for six hours now. She needed a break from the constant vibrating motion. She sped through the entire barn, searching for trouble. Upon finding none, she came to a stop on one side of the wide structure, like she'd done in the cottage when they left the bunker. Leaving reliable transportation outside was a bad idea.

The farmhouse next to the barn was in bad condition, with broken windows and missing doors, though the roof seemed solid. Nancy didn't want her crew to get used to any luxuries they might find in there, however. That's why she'd chosen the barn.

“Get a meal going?”

Nancy shook her head at Trisha's question. “Eat from your rations. We leave in half an hour.” Nancy went into a moldy stall to use the bathroom, stomping on mutated spiders that tried to flee.

Her crew spread out to search the barn for treasures.

“There’s tobacco hanging back here!” Bethany examined the hanging plants. “Little mold, but it might still be smokable.”

Nancy didn’t say it would make them sick. If they weren’t smart enough to know that it was their problem.

“It’ll give you the shits.” Trisha glared at Bethany. “Hit the head and eat something. You don’t need to smoke.”

Bethany reluctantly left the moldy plants. The rest of the barn was dirty, covered in webs, and held nothing else of value.

Nancy sat near her bike and got out her radio. It was time for the bunker to put out an update. She’d gotten used to listening to it with her daughter. She saw no reason to stop the tradition just because she was out here.

“This is Bunker 11 giving a status update. Stand by for a status update for December 6th.”

Her crew finished using the stalls and gathered around to eat and listen. They dug out their own rations, leaving the garbage on the floor.

Wind blew through the barn, rifling clothes and webs. The women ignored it. Their gear was made for these conditions.

“Bunker 54 in the western zone is now online. Males can be taken there for registration or sale, but not for rentals. The male enslavement law went into effect on December 1st. The two year moratorium has ended. Anyone found hiding males of any age will be imprisoned.” The female voice continued,

not hiding her glee at how the world had changed. “If you cannot care for your males, we are happy to buy them from you. We offer top prices. Males roaming free will be claimed for the government. Males not being cared for will be confiscated. All sightings of soldiers or free males should be reported immediately.”

Nancy listened to the reminders, waiting for the announcement she’d discovered through her daughter. The bunker didn’t keep many secrets anyway, but with her daughter’s abilities, Nancy knew most of what was going on before the others did.

“Martial Law is still in effect. The President died in the war. As such, leadership has changed without requirement of a public vote. Stand by for an update from our new President, Marcella Pruett.”

Trisha snorted. “That title’s new.”

The crew snickered at her sarcasm. Now that they were out of the bunker, it was okay to show how they really felt. None of them actually liked Marcella. They feared her.

“Good evening, New America.” Marcella’s calm voice echoed across the country. “As your Commander in Chief, I am delighted to offer you hope for the future. My scientists have been working day and night to find a cure for the sickness that has been ravaging our female population. There is now an experimental vaccine. All females who have reached puberty are required to come to bunker 54 or bunker 11 to receive an injection. All

women will be given this medication. Do not wait for spring. Come now and let us help you. You will be allowed to leave after you receive the injection.”

Nancy rolled her eyes. Marcella was lying though her teeth. The women who showed up would be Drafted into the coming fight in one way or another. As for the cure, Nancy doubted the shots would stop the illness. Marcella liked women being mean and stronger. There was no way she was trying to cure it.

“While you are at the bunkers, you will receive a free allotment of rations that includes food, clean water, and medications for the flu that many of you are suffering. Bring your sick people to the bunkers and we’ll help you.”

Trisha snorted again. “More fuel.”

The others nodded, not snickering anymore. They supported most of the choices Marcella had made so far, but it was hard to know the heat coming through the bunker vents was powered in part by bodies. The fuel reserves in the bunker had lasted for almost two years. After that, they’d learned to find other sources. The third year had seen a lot of structures around the bunker dismantled, but most of those were gone now. The easy sources had dried up, leaving ugly choices.

“I am forming a government. If you have abilities we need, let us know upon arrival and you will be evaluated for those positions.”

“She’s smart.” Nancy was impressed. “That will bring the rest of the skilled people in to help her keep the bunkers running and expand her reach.”

Her crew nodded as the address continued.

“I am also forming a breeding program over the winter. As you know, most births since the war have resulted in female children. If you are pregnant, you can come to any of our bunkers and receive free food and medical care for the duration of your pregnancy. Those carrying male children will be given extra rations and rewards. We need those male babies. Please consider coming to us. If you wish to join our breeding program, you will be checked for good health, given medications if needed, and entered in order of arrival. We have a wide selection of potential fathers that are not in the rental program.”

Nancy had been tempted to join that program herself, but in the end she’d decided that any more children she birthed would come from Adrian. She didn’t care about having male babies. *I did that already and sold it as soon as I could. Men are trouble, no matter who their parents are.*

“The anniversary of the war is coming up. We will hold a memorial ceremony on that date. I encourage all of you to do the same, even if you can’t get to this bunker in time. We have survived the apocalypse and the rebuilding has begun. Together, we will make it through these hard times and return the world to glory. To that effect, I will be sending crews out to clear the cities as soon as

winter breaks. When they arrive, help them. It's your future, too." The radio crackled heavily, then went dead.

Nancy put it away, certain people all over the country were now celebrating. That was the first message of hope that had come from any form of government since the day the bombs fell. *Fools.* Nancy expected a new rush of people trying to reach a bunker now. Marcella had covered their needs, their greed, and their emotions. She was a genius.

Nancy motioned. "Finish up. We're heading out as soon as you're done and we gas up. We'll sleep at the next break."

No one argued. The hordes of scavengers would come soon. They needed to reach their target before those desperate people did or there would be nothing left for them to capture or kill for the reward.

Nancy skipped the required check in in favor of radio silence to prevent anyone from hearing the call and tracking them by clarity. *I don't want Alexa to know I'm coming until I fire the kill shot.*

"I think someone is in the farmhouse behind us." Bethany was at the only window. "I saw a light go out."

Nancy joined her to study the two-story farmhouse that had ugly green paint over a long, wide porch and empty, cracked flower beds. She didn't see anyone, but she could feel them watching. *And who would hide from us? Snakes...and men. And the Snakes would be coming out to fight. They*

aren't scared of us. They don't hide when a threat comes. Nancy got her radio back out, changing her mind. Anyone listening to this call would think she was a bunker scout. "I have a sighting of enemies in Zone 12, section 2. Farmhouse with a green porch. Send a patrol."

The radio stayed silent for a few seconds, then lit up.

"Identify the enemies."

"I believe it's a group of unowned males."

"Copy. There's a patrol already in that sector. They will be redirected."

"Copy. A main target has also been spotted in zone 14, section 3. The numbers are three times ours."

"Copy. I will inform the President. Out."

"Out." Nancy put the radio away and went to her bike, fighting the urge to go check out the farmhouse herself. She loved hunting men, but she already had a goal. *And I sometimes lose control if they talk too much.*

Nancy swung onto her bike, aware of the disappointment from her crew that they weren't going to capture the males. *The rage vaccines knock it down a bit, but they don't stop it. Marcella isn't trying to end the problem. I'm not sure what she's doing, but I am sure of that.* "Let's roll."

The group rode out of the drafty barn and sped down the broken street toward destiny.

“They’re gone.” Lucius Baker moved away from the window of the farmhouse, lowering his gun. “We’re okay. They didn’t see us.”

The eight males with him relit the fire and gathered around it to keep warm. They didn’t have coats. Half of them didn’t even have shoes. They’d all escaped with whatever they’d had on.

“We should join the soldiers.” Chris Malin smoothed down his dirty brown hair. “We’d be safer with our own kind.”

“Those men hate females. They aren’t our kind.” Lucius sat next to the thief who’d joined them last week. “We have to go north and stay free. Over time, the hatred between the sexes will fade and then we can return and help put things back the way they were before.”

“I don’t want that.” Chris shrugged at the disapproving looks from the others. “I like being able to take what I want. I just don’t want to be a slave. The woman are mean now.”

All of them nodded or shuddered. Each of them had been hurt or betrayed by a woman and most of those awful moments had come from a family member.

“I miss the sex.” One of the other men, a curly blond, flushed at the scowls. “I can’t help it. I thought about turning myself in so I can be part of the renting program. Those guys have all the sex they can handle.”

“I understand.” Lucius smiled at his small group of varied races. “But we’re better off staying to ourselves. The soldiers want to fight the women. If we join them, we’ll get killed. If the women capture us, or we turn ourselves in, we’ll be reprogrammed and lose our will to fight back.”

“What if we turn ourselves into the bunker just to try making changes from the inside?” Chris rubbed his hands together near the fire, trying to get feeling back. His thin clothes were no match for the weather. “All we have to do is survive until Safe Haven returns. Then they’ll free us all and we can help them win that fight.”

“Others have tried. No one has succeeded. Their methods are too brutal. We won’t last until Safe Haven comes back.” Lucius sighed, scanning the dirty house in longing. With enough time here, they could have repaired things and turned it into a real home. “I want to be warm and fed, too, but I refuse to sacrifice my freedom for it. I’ve already lost my son. I can’t give them my life.”

“You were a scientist. They won’t kill you. They need people like you to help them figure out why the rage disease is getting worse even though they have a vaccine.” Chris was a little jealous of Lucius’s value. As a thief, Chris wasn’t nearly as needed.

“We can’t beat the women. According to my calculations, it’s going to get worse. I believe there will be seven stages and this is only the first of

those. We need to go north and let it all die down or we won't survive.”

The filthy men tuned him out as he continued to talk about the effects of the war. They'd heard it too many times to still be interested. Their concerns were food, shelter, clothes, warmth, and sex. Lucius didn't have the same needs. He knew how to cut wood open to get the center that wasn't covered in mold. He liked to hunt and prepare the hides for clothes. He seemed to thrive on the dangers of this new world. The rest of them just tried to stay alive. They didn't want to learn to be like him. They wanted to be taken care of like the bunker females were promising.

Time on the run had been hard on them. They were almost without hope that things would ever go back to the way they'd been. Lucius had joined them during a fight with Snakes and saved them all with his homemade grenades, but those weapons were gone now and they were tired.

Lucius fell silent, annoyed that these men couldn't see the bigger picture. He did understand their points. He also wanted to be in a bunker to have access to labs so he could keep working on his observations of the disease that all females in this new world were now suffering, but he was afraid. The bunker women had killed all the soldiers there when they took over. He doubted his own fate would be any better.

Lucius longed to have his family returned. His wife was still alive somewhere. After selling their

son to the western bunker, she'd gone on a crusade to find more male children. He'd tried to find her, to kill her for what she'd done. He had spent three years on it. Now he was ready for a long break and the time to create a better plan. "We can't forget the old ways. If we surrender, we'll lose who we are, who we were."

"But if we stay out here, we'll die. We've seen the creatures in the dark. We've been lucky they didn't attack us. And there are more women than men now. We can't keep going like this."

Lucius sighed. "Chris, you can go anytime you want to. I'm heading north come dawn." He curled up next to the fire and tried to go to sleep. It was almost sunrise and daylight was a bad time for them to be traveling.

The other men voiced protests at the thought of being split from him. Lucius was the only reason they'd survived so far. They began to discuss what it would be like in the north.

Lucius tensed, feeling danger. He listened hard and heard the last thing they needed. "Shit!" He rose and began dousing the fire again. "Someone's coming! I hear engines!"

The ripped screen door flew open. The front egress filled with angry forms in bunker clothes. They blocked the exits, dart guns lifting.

"Run!" Lucius shoved men toward the windows. "Get out of here!"

The female hunters rushed in, firing knock out darts. They'd been bored when the call came in and

hurried here for the fun. None of them missed. They'd perfected this type of hunt.

Lucius fell to his knees, groaning at the drugs now overwhelming his system. *Caught! We've been caught!*

The other men dropped instantly. None of them had resistance to the drugs. Lucius stayed alert a few second longer, cursing himself for not leaving after the first group of women on bikes had come through. "I'm sorry..."

"You should be." The patrol leader fired a second dart into his body and waited for it to take effect.

Lucius collapsed, mind going dark.

"Bring the transport truck closer and load them up, then we'll head back." The leader's nose wrinkled. "Put the windows down. These guys are ripe."

"Are we using them first like we usually do?"

The leader considered it, then shook her head regretfully. "No. Nine fresh slaves for Marcella will earn us a week of rest and double rations. I'll also try to bargain a few renting chips from the bunker stock."

The women all agreed. It was a great reward. Being out here every day was depressing even when they found men to use. Being in the bunker was always better.

"This one still has an ID." The hunter held it up. "It says he's a Malin." She scanned his cute features

and the brown hair that Malins were known for. “He matches the description, too.”

“Awesome!” Another woman came over to verify it. “Wait until Debbie hears we found one of her missing brothers. Or maybe her son.”

The leader frowned. “He’s too old to be her teenage son. Has to be a brother. She said she had five of them.”

“Do you think we’ll get a better reward for him because he’s on the wanted list?”

The leader shrugged. “Maybe. We’ll make sure they’re all checked against that list. If there’s one here, there might be more. Marcella really wants some of those men.”

“Why, though? One male is as good as another, right?”

“I’m not sure. You can ask the *President* when we get there.”

“No, I won’t.”

The other women understood that reaction. Marcella didn’t like to be questioned. Her personal experiments were private programs that only a few women had details about.

The leader hefted a captured male over her shoulder, marveling at her new strength from one of those programs. Marcella’s plan to make stronger fighters was working. The next generation of women would be unbeatable.

William waited for the transport truck to pull out, then followed it. He concentrated on the thoughts of the victorious females, gleaning details about where they were headed and who they were. He held no sympathy for the normal males they'd captured. "That's not my goal."

The glint of a time controller on his grid was still bright and these women were headed in that direction.

William rode half a mile behind the patrol, using the trees as cover. His new bike didn't make much noise and it was full of fuel. He knew how to take what he needed, often without using his magic. He was always covered on clothes, food, water, and weapons. The heavy coat he had on was fur lined. The woman he'd taken it from had also given up her body, her bike, and her lifeforce. Offering him shelter because she thought he was an escaped male hadn't been good for her, but he was happy with it.

Since leaving the beach after Safe Haven sailed away, William had learned a lot of things he'd never thought to have a need for. He was now meaner, leaner, and more ruthless than he'd ever been. Only Safe Haven's deal with the ocean had stopped him from following them and claiming that camp as his own. *But you'll be back soon. I feel it. Our final battle will see me in charge and all of you as my slaves.*

William didn't notice the light snow that began to fall or the heavy wind that pushed against him. He was the highest level of magic user. The weather

was no longer a concern unless Nature made a direct attack. For whatever reason, she never had. Even when he filled his energy banks from the storms, Nature didn't retaliate. It was as if she knew he was on her side for the final battle that was coming.

And I am. But only until it gains me control of Safe Haven. From there, I'll make them show me how to ascend to heaven so I can take over up there, too. William increased speed to avoid losing the small group of hunters. *If there's a God, I'll kill him and rule all worlds.*

William knew he'd gone crazy. He didn't care. He wanted more power and that was all he concentrated on. Killing other magic users was his way of ensuring that Safe Haven would have fewer allies when they returned. Killing the normal humans was his way of releasing the rage that he'd been left behind and was prevented from tracking Safe Haven to their island. That rage had to have an outlet.

Maybe I'll wipe out this patrol group and whoever they're meeting. If there's even a hint that these people will fight for Safe Haven, I'll bathe in their blood and sing to the music of their screams.

4

“We would like permission to leave.”

Marcella studied the five females who had requested an audience with her. They were all wearing heavy gear and carrying thick packs that

were no doubt loaded with loot from this bunker. All of them had black hair and eyes so dark that they might as well have been black, too. Tall and muscled, it was like looking at herself. *Just without the cowardice. I run from no one.* “Why do you wish to leave?”

“We do not enjoy the torture of men.”

“We do not like the hours.”

“We don’t feel safe here even as distant members of your family. If we leave, we are no threat to you.”

Marcella snorted. They’d been hiding here with her for months. Nancy’s admission of being a Pruett had ruined that. “But it might make you a threat to my plans. Where will you go?”

“Wherever you tell us is okay.”

“Any place you want us, just not here.”

Marcella considered the consequences, but she didn’t really have a choice. If she killed them, the story would spread to the rest of the women under her command here and it might cause an uprising. “You may leave. Go wherever you wish. Do not break my new laws or you will be hunted.” She waved at Selma, who was standing behind them and ready to pull her gun if ordered. “Escort them out and blacklist their names from all bunkers. They are never allowed to come back.”

Some of the women paled or frowned at that distinction.

“What if we want jobs later?”

“Bounty jobs are open to anyone, even the Snakes, but you will not be allowed inside the hubs or bunkers no matter the prize you bring in.” Marcella stood from her hard seat, tone dropping into anger. “Now get out of here before I change my mind and have you slaughtered where you stand!”

The women left quickly, following Selma to the main doors. Each of them were relieved to be allowed to go, but they would miss some of the comforts they’d had here.

The new leader led her group out into the cold darkness. She spotted a patrol returning. She and the others stepped aside and didn’t speak to the returning women. They eyed the captives in sympathy, though. All of them wanted to help the men. They left before they could, vanishing into the tree line. Their compassion for men would get them killed here. If they stayed, Marcella would slit their throats while they slept.

The main doors shut behind them. They clanged loudly, echoing into the night.

In the command room, Marcella noted the names of the deserters in the back of her notebook. There were only a few others listed in it. Most women who refused to support her were dead or they now wished they were. More than a few of her experiments in the western bunker used unwilling volunteers. Her hold there was much stronger than here in the east, but she was still working on it. She’d had three long years in the west to spread her

vision of the future. In time, the east would also submit to her.

That was the entire reason she'd come here. Converting all females couldn't be done from only one location or even just one country. She had already contacted surviving magic users and United Nations members in Canada and Europe. She'd invited them to come and see how well her plans were going. That meant making sure things in the east matched her setup in the west. She didn't expect those envoys until spring, giving her five months to finish her foundations here. Work was happening on those goals daily now that she was able to directly supervise it. The long trip here had given her time to make more plans, and to prove that she didn't need the protection of a bunker to conquer or convert anyone.

Marcella stored the book, then left the room, content that her male slave would handle whatever little Abigail wanted while she was gone. *I need to do rounds before I forget what I'm fighting for.*

Chapter Five
All I Need Is Time

1

Marcella took the creaking elevator to the lowest floor of the bunker. The ride was short despite going down five floors. The elevators were one of the few things still working properly. The engineers had been given orders to see to their maintenance above other items, like doors to the outside. *I can fight if someone gets in. I can't do anything if I'm stuck on a bottom level.*

The faint ding announced her arrival. It pleased Marcella when the three big guards down here immediately stepped forward with their guns in hand. She'd insisted on heavy security over her projects. "Stand down."

The guards moved aside so she could enter the restricted hall. Long, with multiple doors, this hall held eighteen experiments in various stages. All the cells were the same size and held beds, toilets, and chipping gray walls that matched the rest of the bunker. The only differences were separate ventilation systems, and holes in the doors to let items be passed through so feeding crews didn't have to enter.

The first five small cells were occupied by orphans who had to be sedated to keep them from hurting themselves when they attacked the doors and walls. The rage illness was increasing the strength in their little bodies without any help. The scientists were studying them daily and then using those results to further other tests. The orphans were dirty and wearing faded clothes that were ripped or full of holes. Thanks to the heat being pumped in, it wasn't necessary to keep them clothed, and their immune systems were being boosted by the rage illness, so dirt wasn't an issue, either. If they'd tried to clean or dress them every day, the scientists would have been injured. It also would have been a waste of time and Marcella wouldn't allow that.

The five cells across from them held bunker children who were under the age of three. All of them had gotten the rage sickness from their mothers, either from the pregnancy or during birth. The scientists didn't know which yet. The mothers had all eventually agreed to let their offspring be studied, mostly to protect themselves. These toddlers were violent. If they'd stayed with their mothers, the women would have been in danger.

Only one of those mothers bothered to visit their offspring, but even she came rarely and never stayed long. The others were scared of their kids. Marcella wasn't. She was delighted. She spent hours down here each week, talking to the filthy, bored children, grooming them to be her fighters in the future. She gave them harmless toys and

activities that increased their intelligence and muscles. As a result, the toddlers often quieted when she arrived and even listened to simple instructions. “All part of the plan.”

The last four cells on each side were women who had volunteered, in one way or another, to be test subjects. Half of them were given weekly doses of rage sickness that the scientists had perfected from blood samples. The other half were also given those weekly doses, but they were receiving steroids, too, in hopes that it would increase their physical strength faster. The women here were able to clean themselves and do basic care, but Marcella didn't provide supplies for that. Those who complained about the conditions had their tongues removed. After the first two, done right here in this hall, the rest had submitted without argument. They knew she wasn't going to give in. Fighting would only hurt them.

The data implied the rage sickness was making changes to all eight females, but those receiving the steroids were now showing physical signs on top of the mental anger. Their muscles were larger, their bodies were growing more hair, and they were able to control their anger for short periods of time that allowed the scientists to ask questions about thoughts and reactions to stimulus. So far, bringing a male to their door had the biggest effect.

All the females here reacted violently to that, but those receiving the steroids were able to beg, while the rest just screamed and tried to break down

the doors to reach the men. The only time the steroid females acted that way was when the men spoke. The sound of a male voice was an instant trigger to bloodshed. “It’s perfect.”

These females would be sent out to collect the rest of the free males, as well as to fight the soldiers who were gathering for a last stand. “My army will be unstoppable.”

Marcella finished her quiet tour of the hall, then headed back to the elevator. All the subjects were sleeping right now. She’d come down for peace of mind. Having women abandon her had shaken her confidence a bit. She felt better after seeing what she’d accomplished here in only a few months. By the time spring arrived, she would have five times as many rage walkers to be released into the general population or to fight her wars. Things would progress faster then. Every blood contact or sexual moment these women experienced would spread her new fighters throughout the country. It would be unstoppable, as it already was in the west.

Her experiments there had been released as she left. The random screams from hiding males had been a beautiful noise as she traveled. The scientists weren’t keeping track of those freed experiments. They didn’t have the technology for that yet, but it was another part of her plan. The six scientists here were smarter than those in the western bunker and they were all female. They didn’t have to be beaten, drugged, or bribed to get them to do her bidding. They were happy to further her goals. They wanted

the same thing she did—for all men to be slaves and women to rule the world.

Marcella took the elevator one floor above the restricted area. Here, there was only a single guard and she was asleep in the chair.

Marcella didn't wake her yet. The maternity ward didn't get much use. They only had two newborns right now. The entire bunker had only had ten live births since the war, according to the records. Five of those children were below. The three missing children were presumed dead in the chaos as the bunker succumbed to fighting. These two recent babies were the hope of a normal future. Marcella hated them.

“Good evening.”

Marcella nodded at Debbie Malin's greeting, peering into the isolation cell. Her twin sons were pink and healthy. Sleeping now, they would soon wake for feeding, changing, and a mother's love.

“They're the first boys born here. Did you know?”

Marcella nodded again. She kept her tone neutral. “They will be loved by all.”

Debbie shrugged. “How much are they worth? To you?”

Marcella stared at the woman, mind now spinning faster than she could keep up with.

Debbie refused to look away even though Marcella intimidated her. “Rewards for male children are big. These are *twin* boys. Surely that's worth something important.”

Marcella studied the plump young woman who had no decorative clothes or accessories. Her long brown hair was in a thick braid that revealed pale, perfect skin and greedy brown eyes. “Who is the father?”

“He’s in the rental program. I don’t know his name, just his ID number. It’s 82.”

Marcella memorized it, not looking away from the heartless woman who wanted to sell her newborn children. “Why did you become pregnant without permission?”

“For this reason.”

“Why did you think you would have male children?”

“It’s all my family has ever had.”

“What about you?”

“In vitro fertilization. My mother was tired of having only sons.”

“Ah.” Marcella gave a curt nod as new plans formed in her dangerous mind. “You will be well rewarded for each male you birth and sell to us. It will start with these.” Marcella’s tone deepened. “You will tell no one. You will not make this deal with anyone else or you will not survive.”

Debbie snorted as if the threat didn’t spook her. “No one else can pay what you will.” She frowned a little. “But why can’t I tell anyone?”

“Snakes will take you from me and force you to breed sons for their food until you die from lack of care.”

“And you won’t?”

“No. Your body will be given time to recover between each birth and I will pick the fathers carefully from the best of our stock.”

“Deal.” Debbie held out a hand.

Marcella scowled. “You have not asked what I will do with your sons.”

“Once I’m paid, that is not my concern.”

Marcella laughed. She grabbed Debbie’s hand. “We have a deal. You will serve the future in this way and be rewarded.” Marcella let go and walked back toward the elevator. She kicked the guard in the ankle as hard as she could.

“Ahh! Ahh!”

Marcella went to the elevator. Once inside, she hit the button on the console. “We need a new guard for the maternity ward. The one here broke her ankle while sleeping on the job.”

“Copy.” Selma’s voice was amused. Everyone knew the guards on the birth hall slept on duty. It was about time they learned that wasn’t allowed. “Our patrol captured nine warm bodies. They’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Excellent. Handle them like usual.”

“Copy.” Selma went to make sure their reprogramming area was ready for that number of males. While there, she would also recruit a new guard for the birthing hall.

Marcella went back to her command room, feeling better. The deal with Debbie Malin would ensure a small supply of healthy males for the scientists. If it was possible to make women only

produce female children, they would figure out how to do it. Once that family line was in place for all their females, it would be easier to do the same to the rest of the world. It would take centuries for the human race to begin dying off, but in the end, it would come down to an all-female population that used frozen sperm. Marcella hoped by that time they would be able to create their own sperm without the need of men. *I want them all gone and there isn't anything I won't do to accomplish that.*

In the meantime, her scientists would find out if males could be infected with the rage illness, too. They were already working on that one with several of the angrier men they'd captured. If so, it would help convince the remaining population that men had to be locked up to protect everyone. If that didn't work, she would release the birth numbers and tell people the men were being enslaved for their own protection. *One way or another, I will accomplish my goals. All I need is time.*

2

“She’s dangerous.”

The other magic users in the training room nodded at their alpha’s comment, but they didn’t stop the workout. The common consensus was that Marcella’s past had driven her insane, but the magic users knew her story. It wasn’t the typical abuse the rest of the bunker occupants assumed. Marcella had

never been hurt by a male. She'd been born in a lab. Her twin sister had been a magic user.

Marcella had been the Invisible, but back then, the scientists hadn't understood that when twins were born, one was always mentally locked. She'd been split from her sister and sent to an orphanage. Her gifts had never presented. As a result, the caged magic had driven her to study the world in different ways. When her sister died in the labs from their experiments, a lifelong hatred had begun. She'd reacted by planning a way to ensure that men would never again be able to rule the world and repeat their crimes against women. The apocalypse had given her an opportunity to implement those plans.

“Should we be worried?” April was new here, and new as a descendant. Her gifts had unlocked not long after she arrived, dragging her little brother on a rope to trade for food.

The other descendants snorted at the question.

The alpha, Lorey, increased the speed on her treadmill. “Magic users are the safest people in this bunker right now.”

April frowned, voice lowering. “Yeah, but what about after, when she gets what she wants?”

Lorey shrugged. “That has not been revealed.” None of them had been able to view ahead yet.

“I suggest we make ourselves valuable to her in other ways.” Vanessa was the second strongest descendant here. She had been stewing on that since Marcella's arrival. “Or we need to leave, like her family just did.”

“But they lied. They plan to take over the western bunker and rule that side of the country. They just want to be nicer to the males.” April hated being a rookie. “You should listen to me. We’re not safe, even now. If her gifts unlock, she’ll slaughter us all because we’re competition.”

Vanessa shrugged, also increasing the speed on her treadmill. “If her gifts unlock now, Marcella will be byzan. There won’t be any place we can hide from her. It’s better to be on the same side as the devil than to try and fight one.”

April wasn’t convinced. She turned off her machine and stepped down, wiping away sweat. “I think we should go with her family to the west.”

Lorey motioned. “Go on. The rest of us are staying here, on the winning side.”

“Safe Haven might win.”

Silence fell for a few seconds where each of them considered that possibility. Lorey finally shook her head. “They aren’t coming back, *rookie*. Alexa Mitchel is going to join them and they’ll all stay there while the rest of us reform this country into something it was never meant to be. You’ll help with that or Marcella will order us to kill you. She only let her family leave because they weren’t valuable to her. We are.”

“I can leave anytime I want to.” April headed toward the door. “You guys won’t hurt me. You’re my kind.”

Lorey fired a fast spell that knocked April to her knees. The other magic users did the same.

April slumped to the hard floor. She dropped into the darkness in shock.

“Very good.” Selma was in the doorway where she’d been listening. “Marcella will be informed of your loyalty.”

All the women nodded and then resumed their workout as guards came in to collect April. The rookie would wake with no memory of her life before and then she would be retrained. It was the deal the senior magic users had made with Marcella upon being Drafted and they intended to honor it, no matter who the target was.

Selma continued to the male holding facility, bracing herself against the pleas and cries of the youngest. It wasn’t easy to come here, but she did believe in the dream. Under Marcella’s leadership, women would never again be abused. If they had to hear cries from male kids to accomplish that, it was a small price to pay.

Selma walked the narrow hall, counting the open cells. They had three areas for the men. This was where they were brought first to be broken.

“Let me out!”

“I want my mommy!”

“Don’t hurt me anymore! Please!”

“Six empty.” Selma studied the clipboard of notes, looking for any who could be transferred to the retraining quarters. She saw several of the older kids had responded to the training program and pointed them out. “Move those. Get their cells ready for new arrivals.”

The guards hurried to comply. The big, angry females also ignored the pleas and cries. They no longer had sympathy.

Selma waited until the three mostly docile teenagers were taken to the next area, then she went into each of their rooms, searching for signs that they were faking or planning to rebel. When she found nothing, she left, confident they were ready for the new men to be brought in.

Guards behind her began unraveling the hoses to use on the kids who were still shouting or begging. The retraining was harsh. Food was denied for days at a time and beatings were given at all hours, for no reason. Clothes were removed. No toys or entertainments were allowed. When they spoke or yelled, they were blasted with icy water. Marcella had no mercy.

Selma went up to Marcella's command room, knocking before entering.

"Come in."

Selma joined Marcella at the narrow desk. She didn't try to read the note the boss was writing. She waited until Marcella looked up. "April decided to leave. She's in the reprogramming center now. When she wakes up, they'll get started."

Marcella sighed. "It's only a matter of time before more people decide to go. If they all make that choice at the same time, we won't be able to stop them."

"I have an idea for that." Selma sat in the chair across from her. "We have a lot of males here. Right

now, women have to pay for rentals. If we start a program where they earn credits toward rentals, it will give them something to hope for.”

“What would they do to earn these credits?”

“All the shit we don’t have covered. We need more bounty hunters, cleaners, and trainers. We also need breeders, test subjects, and executioners. If we’re short on something, offer credits.”

Marcella wrote it down. “I’ll consider it.” She’d just copied her deal with Debbie.

“The magic users know you’re one of them.”

Marcella grunted. “I would have only been surprised if they didn’t know.”

“Why won’t you unlock it?” That subject was dear to Selma’s heart.

Marcella answered honestly. “I’d be too unstable to accomplish my goals.”

“Oh.”

“What were they fighting about?”

Selma frowned. “The youngest one doesn’t think they’re safe here. She was worried you’ll kill them all after we win the fight against the soldiers.”

“I see.” Marcella wrote it in the book.

“They also don’t think Safe Haven will return.”

Marcella snorted. “They will.”

“How can you be sure?” Selma wasn’t. Safe Haven hadn’t been heard from in years.

Marcella flashed back to the months after the war. “I spoke with their leader once. She isn’t the type to give up and sit on a deserted island while we run this country.”

Selma was surprised to be receiving this information. She kept going. “Is it true that she let you go?”

“Yes.”

“Then won’t she be lenient with you, or even join our cause?”

Marcella snorted again. “No.”

Selma shrugged. “Maybe they’ll have a different leader when they come back.”

“Perhaps. What news of the soldiers?”

Selma’s brows came together. “Nothing in the last week, but we all know they’re out there gathering for the fight. We’ve offered nice rewards for sightings. Nancy called in a possible location during her run.”

“It’s a good call, but it won’t matter. We will not go out to them for that fight. We will wait for their arrival, just like with Safe Haven.” Marcella gestured. “We hold the advantage here.”

“A Byzan male was sighted less than a hundred miles away.”

“And you worry he’ll be able to penetrate these walls.”

“Yes.”

Marcella shook her head. “Studies in the labs suggested concrete and ground are impossible for us to see through. Evidence suggests that’s true or else those hunting for their loved ones would have found those labs and rescued them more often than they did in the past. Rest your mind. We’re safe here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. I know your concern isn’t for yourself.” Marcella finished writing and stored the book. “Are you staying with me tonight?”

Selma blushed. “If you like.”

“I would.”

Selma rose. “I’ll get clean sheets and your bath ready.”

“No.” Marcella looked over at the sleeping child and the filthy male sleeping next to the playpen. “I want her cared for first. Then you can see to my needs.”

Selma nodded. “As you wish.”

Marcella waited until the woman left to go get a warm bottle and a clean outfit for the child. Then she let her real emotions show. Fear was the clearest. People were starting to desert her. Nothing good would come from it. She needed more than credits or a breeding plan. *I need...* “A manifesto.”

Marcella got her book out and made a list of the important parts.

- Men are the enemy.
- Women have inherited the earth.
- Our suffering was created by men.
- The old ways are wrong.
- Blood is the cure.

“I’ll pass this to every woman who comes through these doors. I’ll make them understand any other choice will lead to men being back in charge of the world. My way is the only way.”

3

“What happens to me, when the fighting’s over?” Selma had been sitting up in bed, going over her notes. She hadn’t meant to ask.

Marcella sighed. She’d been enjoying the glow of her orgasm, but that question had brought reality back in a blast of rudeness. “What would you like to happen?”

“To stay with you.”

Marcella hid her true thoughts. “I cannot make promises. Neither of us may survive the battle.”

“But if we do?”

Marcella shut her eyes. “You’ll stay with me, as will others. We will go north and begin spreading my vision to Canada.”

Selma was happy with that. Since Marcella’s tone wasn’t upset, she kept going. “What happens when Nancy comes back?”

“She will be executed before she can challenge me for leadership.”

“The magic users suggested you let them lock her daughter in case she dies out there.”

Marcella stiffened. “Have they foreseen that?”

“No. They’re not strong enough to look ahead. They need lifeforces to achieve that level of power.”

Annoyed now, Marcella switched the topic again. “Did you see to the girl?”

“Of course. She had a pullup change, was fed, and she played with her slave for an hour. They’re both sleeping hard now, with guards.”

“Are there signs of rebellion in him?”

“No.”

“Good. Finish your questions and updates so I can sleep.”

Selma swallowed, suddenly feeling as though she had crossed a line she couldn’t come back from. “I’m sorry.”

Marcella’s voice hardened. “And I’m waiting.”

“More women signed up for the breeding program, and there are more women on the rental list than the males in that program can handle.”

When Marcella didn’t respond, Selma knew not to push her idea about the credits. “We fixed the door issue. One of the slaves is an engineer. I had him moved to safer quarters. Do you want him retrained?”

“Yes. Any other problems?”

“Not that I know of. Everyone is accounted for.”

Marcella yawned. “Update from the western bunker?”

“None yet, but you already know our radios don’t carry that far and it takes months of travel time.”

“Put the engineer on it after he finishes his retraining. I want communications established with the west as soon as possible.”

“I will.” Selma scanned her list. “Last thing. Our hunters haven’t found any food in a week. Do you want them to go further north on the next run?”

“Yes. Tell them I also want a spot picked for a wall to close off this country from our northern neighbors. It will trap the game on this side.”

“You got it.” Selma added the answers to her sheet, then slid down into the bed. She kissed Marcella’s arm and kept going.

Marcella allowed it, hoping a second orgasm would allow her to sleep until dinner. *If she ruins my mood one more time, I’ll have her tongue cut out...* Marcella arched at the pleasure. *Okay, she can keep the tongue. I’ll have her hand taken instead. She’s not as good with her fingers.*

Chapter Six
A Drink

1

Daniel smothered a groan as Alexa's fangs sank into his neck. The pain and pleasure merged as she began to drink.

Edward wrapped a big hand around Daniel's mouth as Billy crunched into the man's shoulder.

Daniel shouted against the hand. When Edward took the other shoulder, it changed to shrieks.

All three of them drank. Alexa began shoving in venom. As the others felt the harsh sting of her, they changed to pushing, as well. They were developing a way to do this that took only a minute and merged all their blood into a powerful cocktail that would give Daniel a gift no one could remove.

Daniel shuddered, trying not to scream again. He hadn't considered the pain. His body cramped and burned. His throat clogged with bitter venom. His eyes watered, now shedding crimson tears.

Alexa stepped back with Daniel's blood on her lips. Like the others, he tasted incredibly sweet to her.

Edward and Billy withdrew their fangs, but they kept hands on Daniel to lend support.

“Stay with him. You know what he’ll go through.”

Billy barely remembered the first hour of his new life. He’d been too ill and broken. He waited for Edward to take charge.

Edward guided Daniel to the bedroll they’d put out for this moment. “Sleep for an hour if you can. The pain eases after that.”

Daniel let them cover him up, stomach cramping, heart pounding in his ears. He took the stick Billy gave him and placed it between his teeth to help stifle sounds.

Jacob, on duty at the bottom of the tall stairs, tapped twice on the brick wall.

The sound echoed up, alerting them to a problem.

Alexa grunted. “They were close.” She began checking her guns.

Edward and Billy took places in front of Daniel, both frowning. They wanted to be down there when the next fight started.

Alexa knew. She slid her Colts into her holsters and checked her rifle. She didn’t remind them that Daniel would be defenseless for a while. They already knew.

David and Mark joined Jacob at the bottom door, glad the fire from the house had burned down most of the way. It had thrown the town back into darkness, but their eyes had already adjusted.

Jacob pointed toward the trees, where shadows were running toward them. Then he gently shut the

thick door, suddenly glad Alexa had chosen this building. There were no windows on the ground floor and the door was made of thick steel. It would take a mob a while to break through it.

David and Mark slid to each side of the door and listened hard. They didn't want to miss Alexa's orders when they came.

Alexa joined them at the bottom of the stairs. "No one gets up there."

All the men nodded.

"Save your ammunition. This is not the force we'll need it for."

The three men drew their knives, excitement starting to fully wake them.

Eager footsteps rushed into the town. Voices echoed through the darkness.

"Search the rubble!"

"Search all the buildings!"

"The bounty hunters are dead! The Mitchel survived!"

"Loot!"

"A rifle!"

The scavengers rushed the bodies, fighting over everything they found.

Under the town, hungry forms rose from their slumber. They moved to the doors and windows, red eyes glowing with vengeance. Their new deal prevented them from hunting the innocent. These scavengers were not innocent.

Zaro and his chosen fighters emerged from their damp crypts. They grabbed the scavengers, draining

them dry. Withered bodies fell to the cold ground. Other creatures had to hide from the winter weather. The vampires did not.

In the market, Alexa and her men listened to the screams and quickly figured out who was helping them.

Jacob wanted to go out. Alexa denied him with a simple head shake.

Jacob obeyed, but he wanted the chance at glory so he could become like her.

Alexa spoke softly. “Your turn will come. Find the patience you’ve gained on my crew.”

Jacob dropped his head at her mild scold.

Outside, the screams grew louder. They neared the door. Heavy bodies slammed into it, now seeking safety.

Alexa went back up the stairs. She stopped at the third floor to observe through the single window in the stairwell.

Zaro felt her attention. He dropped the body of a struggling woman to look up at her. The woman scrambled back, neck bleeding.

Another vampire snatched her up and finished the drain before she could scream for help.

Zaro barred his fangs at Alexa.

Alexa inclined her head in response, then went to check on Daniel.

Zaro grabbed the next panicked human running by, long fangs driving through the man’s dirty neck. He let the body fall, already full from what he’d taken. He scanned and found a group of five men

coming at him with long knives and terror. He rushed toward them, moving fast.

All five turned and ran.

Zaro sliced with his powerful claws, raking across their necks. Heads rolled into the bushes as the bodies fell.

The screams slowly faded. There were only a few gunshots to give away this fight, but those who arrived next would understand another life and death struggle had taken place. Blood and body parts now littered this section of the town.

The fast fight ended with a final shriek. Zaro and his clan were unscathed. They returned to their shadowy basements and closets to rest for the next wave who came through.

In the top of the market, Alexa sat next to Daniel, content with how things were going so far.

Daniel removed the stick from his mouth, shuddering at the pain. “Why didn’t they c-come out before?”

Alexa shrugged. “Perhaps they knew it wasn’t needed. Maybe we already had it covered by the time they woke. It’s hard to say with their kind.”

Daniel tried to grin. “With our kind.”

Alexa’s lips thinned. “We are not like them.” She took out a canteen and drank to erase the taste of his blood. She was still hungry, but he couldn’t spare more. Every drop in his body was now precious. “We didn’t have to make a deal to know who should die and who should live.”

“Will we honor that deal?” Billy had caught her tone when the bargain was made. He wasn’t sure what it had meant, only that she hadn’t been entirely truthful.

“As much as we can, yes.” Alexa refused to say more. It was possible that Zaro could hear them. “Join your new brother. Sleep if you can.”

Edward and Billy obeyed. Daniel stared at Alexa, vision becoming crystal clear. He could see the thin hairs above her lips, even in full darkness.

Alexa snickered. “Should I shave soon?”

Daniel shook his head, ignoring the fire running through his entire body. “It’s beautiful. You’re beautiful. Perfect.”

Alexa sighed. “I am a beaten, broken shell of the past. Do not be deceived by your new vision. I am the same killer I’ve always been.”

Daniel shut his eyes as the pain increased. “Thank you. For everything.”

“It is, and will always be, my honor.” She clasped his hand. “Sleep now. When you wake, it will be time to hunt.”

2

The scavenger survivors fled in all directions. Many of them spotted campfires. Some chose to go around. Others ran toward the lights, believing they held safety from whatever was chasing them.

Brenda heard panicked footsteps. She felt their fear and loathing, and the desperate desire for

protection. “Do not shoot. We need more manpower.”

The group of BLM agents tensed, looking around. They hadn’t known trouble was coming. The agents drew knives to fight.

Stephanie put a hand on her gun. She only had five bullets, but she wasn’t good enough with her knife.

Frank peered up from the bedroll. “What can I do for you?”

Brenda patted his wrist. “Sleep until I need another service.”

Frank smiled at her and shut his eyes. “Yes, my love.”

Stephanie drew her gun and fired.

The bullet bounced off Brenda’s shield and flew back, hitting Stephanie in the shoulder. She screamed, pulling the trigger until there was only a click. Slugs ricocheted off the shield and into the group, killing one and injuring three more.

Brenda’s eyes lit up bright red.

Stephanie realized what she’d done. She took off running before Brenda could fire back.

The rest of the group fled behind her, leaving their meager belongings, except for the charmed man at Brenda’s side. He stayed still, not bothered by the shots, screams, or his wife’s actions.

The scavengers flooded the campsite. They spotted Brenda’s glowing red eyes and panicked. “She’s one of them!” They immediately took off running again.

Brenda went back to studying her map. “Shit happens.”

3

Survivors who went west found a lit up area with robed women on guard duty. The females smiled and waved at them, silently offering shelter. Injured and terrified, the ragged people swarmed by the guards and flooded into the center of the large camp. Most of them were male.

Radka and Mimi looked up from their dinner in surprised delight. Bloody juice ran down their arms and chins. They’d made a fire and picked two slave men for a meal. The rest were tied to trees nearby; almost all of those longed for death so they wouldn’t be cold and starving anymore.

The survivors saw the Snake women. They spotted arms and legs roasting over an open fire... They turned to run and found lusty Fanatics lifting dart guns, blocking their escape.

The women began darting their targets, picking only the men.

Males dropped to the ground, groaning and begging for mercy as the drugs removed their ability to run or fight.

Mimi watched the new females for a minute, seeing weakened conditions and scared eyes as they huddled together. “What should we do with them?”

“If they were capable of fighting, they wouldn’t be running.” Radka waved her guards forward. “Remove them.”

Mimi nodded. She went back to her meal as the screams echoed. *Grouping up was a great decision. I feel stronger already.*

4

Nancy saw a small group of scavengers fleeing toward them through the woods. Sharp eyes picked out bloody clothes, injuries, terror. She increased speed and plowed into the front line, kicking as she went through.

“Wait!”

“Help us!”

Nancy’s crew followed her, swinging knives and relishing the feel of bodies snapping under their tires. They were past the few survivors in seconds.

Nancy increased speed again, not worried about the soldiers hearing them now. If gunshots didn’t get them to leave their campfire, neither would bikes fading into the night.

Nancy assumed the fleeing group had tried to overwhelm Alexa and failed. *You didn’t have enough warm bodies for a move like that...* Nancy slowed a bit, thinking it through. “I need a few *cold* bodies.” A huge grin split her face. “*And I know just where to get them.*”

Nancy veered north.

Confused, but willing to see what she had in mind, her crew followed.

5

“I’m sorry.” Jacob jerked back against the wall, arms crossing over his wide chest. “I can’t get it!”

Alexa kept whittling the chunk of wood. She scraped the curls into a canister. Around them, the rest of the team was also carving out their tinder supply from fatwood they’d picked up while traveling. “I learned to use my shield somewhere around the age of four.”

Jacob’s scarred face reddened.

Alexa kept carving. “That was very late, especially for a Mitchel. The scientists tried to teach me. They thought I needed encouragement. They tried many forms of persuasion.”

Jacob understood this wasn’t to mock him and tried to relax enough to get her point. He also kept studying the glint of his shield. *If I could just make it do what I want!*

“The other children tried to help me. Through them, I learned my emotions controlled it. I screamed at it, demanded, and finally, I begged. It refused to be controlled.”

The whittling slowed as the team listened. It was sad to imagine her childhood, but every story was fascinating enough to keep them listening. Each moment provided another clue into what had made her who she was now.

“It took an overheard comment from one of the nurses after a medical check. She said I was always angry or sad, that I didn’t have any other emotions.” Alexa looked at Jacob, giving him a cool grin. “She also said I’d probably grow up to be a killer like the rest of my family.”

Jacob snickered, feeling better. “What was the solution?”

“I had to feel something else. I didn’t have happiness; joy was foreign to me. I was too young for romance and we were forbidden to have contact and form relationships of any kind. Horror and fear only made me angrier.” Alexa put her knife away. “I chose the option open to me. I took the anger and sadness and turned them into rebellion. From that moment on, I lived my captivity on my terms as much as I could. During one of those moments where I broke out of my cell and went visiting, one of the complex dogs found me. Because I’d secured a way to fight back, I had more confidence than I should have. I lifted my hand and my shield popped up like it had always been there.”

She chuckled. “Then the dog came right through and left its opinion in my calf.” She lifted her muddy pantleg to reveal a faint scar. “I didn’t know I had to hold it once I got it up. I thought those things stayed up on their own!”

The men burst out laughing at her crude joke.

Jacob concentrated on how he’d felt to be chosen as part of her team. He pulled up his shield with a huge smile.

Triumph lit his face and made Alexa's stomach growl. All her men were beautiful to her at different times, but when they made progress with themselves, those moments were clearer, sharper, more vibrant. "Very nice."

Jacob expanded it in response to her pleasure. He included her and then it vanished. He gasped for air as the rest of the team clapped. His success was theirs.

Alexa looked at Edward and Billy. "Introduce Daniel to a new food source. Quickly and then right back."

Edward helped Daniel to his feet as Billy led the way downstairs and opened the door.

"Welcome to the night life." Billy grinned at Daniel.

Daniel stared at the darkness, still stunned by his new vision. "This is awesome!"

Edward chuckled, leading the way. They needed to find Daniel a quick meal, then get back to Alexa.

"I see something." Daniel narrowed in. "It's a deer." His stomach growled. "Can I?"

Edward's tone hardened. "I don't know. They're quick. Can you?"

Daniel took off running.

The deer twitched. It sensed the threat and leapt. Daniel caught it around the neck and bit in as hard as he could. The warm blood cascaded into his mouth, replacing what he'd lost in the transfer. He

felt new strength flood into his limbs and sucked harder.

Edward and Billy stood watch while Daniel enjoyed his first meal as a vampire. They listened for steps or shouts, watching for movement. Everything seemed peaceful at this moment. They knew not to trust it.

Daniel drained the deer, eyes rolling back. He'd never tasted anything so sweet.

“Bring it back. We need the food.”

Daniel hefted the deer over his shoulders, marveling at his new strength. The huge buck weighed next to nothing now. He jogged back toward their den.

Edward waved Billy on. “I’m one minute behind you guys.”

Billy didn’t argue with the senior man. He followed Daniel, providing protection.

Edward went to the creek and knelt to fill up his canteen. “Come on out.”

A shadow broke away from the tree.

The black dog came to his hip. It looked normal, but Edward could feel that it wasn’t. Its golden eyes were too aware to be a common canine.

Edward rubbed the big animal, recognizing it from their night of creature discovery. “I don’t think the boss wants another mouth to feed.” He stood. “But she’ll decide. Come on.”

The huge black dog heeled neatly as Edward returned.

Guarding the door, Jacob grinned at the sight. “She’s gonna love this.”

Daniel glanced up from the floor where he was now butchering the deer. He chuckled and went back to work.

Edward went straight to Alexa. If she said it had to leave, he wanted the animal to have time to slip back out before the sun rose. That wouldn’t be much longer, judging from the way the sky was lightening in the east. The sun’s pull was already tugging on him, making him feel sluggish.

Alexa grunted as Edward reached the top floor. “I should have known you’d want a pet.”

Edward flushed. “It wasn’t my idea.”

Alexa shrugged.

The big dog sat down near her feet and stared up at her.

She sighed, hand going out to rub its ears. “Very well. But you hunt your own food and find your own water.”

The dog curled up on her boots and appeared to go to sleep.

Edward went back down the steps, almost sure the dog had come for her. He immediately felt better knowing she had more protection.

“It’s time to bar the door.”

Alexa’s words got the men moving. They quietly moved furniture down to the first floor and stacked it like a puzzle, making sure it would keep the entrance blocked even if the door was forced open.

Alexa tensed. She turned toward the window, feeling something. She wasn't sure what it was, but instinct said it didn't bode well for them. She scanned the dark town and then the perimeter she could see from there. Nothing moved. There were no sounds. *But I felt something go wrong.* Alexa began to check her guns.

The noise filled the staircase. Her men responded by doing the same. Knowing she was doing it was their warning.

Daniel grabbed chunks of the almost bloodless meat and shoved them into his pockets to work on later if there was time. He cleaned his hands to be ready.

“Second floor window.” Alexa wasn't sure if that's where the problem was, but it seemed likely. All the other windows were too high up to reach by climbing the slick, frozen brick, but the second floor was accessible by a ladder.

David and Mark hurried into the second floor room together. Shadows rushed out to meet them.

Edward lifted his attacker off his feet and threw him against the wall. Something snapped. The man screamed.

David spun and kicked the shadow going by him, stabbing with his longest blade to get the man in front of him.

Grunts and groans echoed as the two men fought to keep the half dozen infiltrators in the small room.

Jacob and Mark waited in the doorway to block it, eyes straining to see their teammates.

Edward sliced, ducked, stabbed, and kicked.

Next to him, David did the same, using Alexa's training for close combat in the dark.

Edward listened for more footsteps and heard only blood dripping onto the floor.

David rose.

Edward put a hand on his arm.

David froze, waiting for the next wave.

A furry shadow darted between them. The dog grabbed the last shadow from along the wall and dragged him out.

Edward and David stabbed together, getting a stomach and a spine.

The dog padded out and went back up to Alexa. Alexa chuckled. "Fair enough."

The dog curled up on her boots again and shut its eyes.

Edward and the others barricaded the window, then waited for the next threat.

Alexa also waited, but the bad feeling didn't leave. Something had happened away from here, something that meant trouble for her and her team. *What did I miss?*

6

The mall was four stories, with part of one side crushed like a wrecking ball had gone through there. The damage path on either side would have told

Nancy it was from a tornado even if she hadn't been in there when it hit. She hadn't told anyone of her time in Safe Haven, but she thought about it now. When the tornado had hit the mall, she'd been hoping Angela would die. Her hatred had been growing, even then.

I wonder if they were able to loot all the stores. Nancy sighed. It didn't matter. The hundreds of undead all over the grounds would make it an impossible treasure to claim. *Maybe I'll come back after I finish my run.*

"Why do they gather at old malls?" Trisha kept her voice down as she and Nancy spied from the moldy branches of a thick tree. The sunset shadows made it hard to see with their eyes, but the view was clear through their glasses.

Nancy scanned, looking for the best way down into the hundreds of growling, twitching bodies. "Books and movies implied it's old habits, but this is real life. The rage disease doesn't take their minds completely. I think they're trying to find help."

"You think they know who they used to be?" Trisha shuddered.

"Yes. Sometimes you can see them thinking. Then they'll figure out how to open a window or ease under a damaged door." Nancy saw a broken gate and made her plans around it.

"The bunker files are full of records about other diseases being released. Or it could be a radiation side effect that we didn't know about. It might not

be from the rage disease.” Trisha was horrified at the thought of that being her final fate.

“Maybe. It could also be none of those things.”

Trisha took a chance, trying to prove she deserved to be Nancy’s XO. “I have an idea.”

Nancy didn’t look over. “Keep it to yourself.”

Trisha glared. “Why did you pick a tactician for your XO if you aren’t going to use my plans?”

“Because a blacksmith would have looked bad on my crew sheet.”

Trisha didn’t know what to say to that.

Nancy was glad the woman didn’t keep arguing. *I’m in the mood to kill. Any target could get me through.*

Nancy began to climb back down to their waiting crew. When she reached the bottom, she waved them over. “I’ll go down and bring them. Ride slow enough so they can still see and hear you, but no yelling or gunshots. If one of them catches up too quick, use your knife or die. Do not make sounds that anyone will recognize as normal.” She pointed at the faint path sunrise was illuminating. “I’ll be coming through there. Be ready to roll.”

Nancy didn’t wait for questions or agreement. She mounted her bike and kicked it to life.

The crew straddled their bikes and got them running. They didn’t want to waste gas, but engine trouble sometimes happened and right when a horde was upon them was a bad time for it. Their bikes idled in the stillness of the woods surrounding this

side of the large mall. They waited nervously, straining for any sound.

A gunshot echoed from the lot below.

“I thought she said no noises...” Trisha started to exit her bike and climb back up to look.

“I wouldn’t do that.” Bethany shrugged at the dark look and pointed. “I hear her. Get ready.”

Nancy emerged through the trees half a minute later, moving slow compared to the ride they’d taken to get here.

Behind her, the woods came alive with the stumbling dead.

Nancy rolled by her crew, grinning. “I’m coming for you, Alexa Mitchel! And I’m bringing a few friends!”

Her crew hurried to catch up, all casting looks over their shoulders at the zombies. Unlike the movies, these walking dead didn’t try to eat their victims. They only killed. It was enough to keep the women awake as they rolled a few feet ahead, each of them praying their bike didn’t stall or need to be fueled before they reached Bridgeport. Except for Nancy. She gloated inwardly and made sure not to go too fast so she didn’t lose them.

The movements and noise pulled more undead from sheds and homes as they passed. The zombies followed the others, mindless arms reaching for safety they would never find.

Trisha rode close to Nancy and matched speed, mind flying through the possible outcomes of this reckless decision. The undead weren’t like bullets

that could be fired at specific targets. If they got their skeletal hands on any of this crew, death would come fast.

On the other side of Nancy, Robin was thinking the same thing. She wondered how upset Marcella would be if she pushed Nancy into the horde after the Mitchel was dead.

None of the women considered taking Alexa back alive despite the offered reward of anything they wanted. Even the undead were safer than a live Mitchel.

Chapter Seven
Life Is Hard

December 7th

1

“**W**e may have a problem I didn’t account for.” Alexa sighed as her men turned to her in surprise. Alexa was at the window facing west, watching the sunrise that still hurt her eyes. “I don’t know what I missed in my calculations, but I’m now certain that I did.” She gestured toward the dark, smoky town around them. “People used to live here. Where do you think they went?”

Edward frowned with the others. “The Draft, Safe Haven.” He considered. “Evacuated to the mountains?”

Alexa waved for him to keep going.

“Other towns, roaming groups. Snakes.”

“All of those are likely, as well as a few others. But we found no signs of evacuation or the Draft here. There was light looting and that’s it.” She pushed her mind to try harder. “We know the UN was in this country for a while. The Mexican army was also here. We’ve found leftovers from both of those groups.”

“Maybe they were killed in the war.” David thought of all he’d gone through after that awful

day. “Millions of Americans died or were injured. Hell, they might even be undead now.”

Tension sparked in the small loft.

Alexa went to the other window, considering his words. They hadn’t seen many undead in their trek through this area. Even while rescuing Billy, there had only been a few. *And that makes this a perfect time for that, doesn’t it? Right when I’m not expecting it.*

Alexa motioned them toward the windows. “Keep watch.” She sat and began digging items from her cloak.

Alexa mixed chemicals and poured them into small bottles that she’d collected for this purpose. As she finished, she tossed several of them to each man. “This chemical mix only reacts to dead flesh. The government discovered it by accident. Many towns use traps of it around their perimeter to keep the undead away. We’ll use them like grenades if we have that problem.”

“Shit.” Billy turned toward her. “How much of it can you make?”

Alexa went to the window facing north. A dusty cloud was rising in the air, but it wasn’t from vehicles or fire. Hundreds of corpses were staggering toward the town. “Not enough.” She dropped and began mixing all that she had. “We’ll need them to cluster together for this to work.”

The men watched the landscape lighten, able to pick out stumbling, mindless forms. They were hard to watch. Each of those staggering bodies had been

a person with dreams, hopes, families. Not one of them was looking forward to the up-close view they were about to get.

“I see people on bikes.” Daniel narrowed in with his new sight, still fighting the pain of the conversion. He hadn’t expected it to hurt. Billy and Edward hadn’t told him that part. “They’re leading them here!”

“Do you have a shot?”

Daniel knew she meant the bike riders. He frowned. “Too many trees and moving bodies.”

Alexa looked up at Edward.

Edward immediately joined Daniel to see if he could make the shot. He was usually better with his rifle than the biker. He reluctantly shook his head. “Not until they’re closer.”

Alexa gestured. “We’ll use the deer carcass when they get here. Wait for them to gather and then we’ll use the chemicals.”

“After that?” Jacob was eager to use his guns, but he doubted they had enough ammunition for the horde. There were hundreds, judging from the size of the dust cloud.

“I’ll use fire. Then our waiting enemies will see the blaze and converge on the town. You’ll use guns until I recover.”

They understood she planned to use all her energy to remove this threat, leaving her vulnerable to other magic users who might arrive.

Edward scowled. “I want all of you to concentrate on the *living* targets. Find the leaders.”

The other men accepted his order, realizing they would be the main fighting force then.

“If you can find me a healthy lifeforce, it will speed my recovery.” Alexa kept mixing and stacking the small bottles.

Mark eyed the ropes he’d attached. All of them were coiled neatly on the floor, waiting for use. He went to the center rope and began fashioning a lasso at the end while the rest of them watched for a clear shot. The bike riders were still too far away to determine who they were, but it didn’t matter. They’d signed their death warrants. Names weren’t needed, only clear shots.

2

“Do you hear that?” Mimi peered up from the weeping, bloody male she was branding with her mark. The Snakes had insisted on her Fanatic males being marked and put with the other slaves. Mimi hadn’t argued.

Standing a few feet away, Radka stilled, Snake ears expanding to listen. “Engines.” Radka whistled. “Up high. Right now!”

The Snakes left their morning meals and chores. They scaled the trees and vanished into the thin canopies.

The Fanatics looked to their leader for orders, not sure if they should take shelter in the trees, as well. Many of the Snake habits and defenses were useful.

Mimi jerked her new slave to his feet and dragged him along. “Get in the vehicles. Save your bullets. We’ll need them for the Mitchel.”

Her male stayed by his new tattooed owner. He didn’t think about escaping. Despite the pain of being burnt, he’d been well fed. That was better than what he’d had a day ago.

Radka peered through the dark branches, ignoring the Fanatics as she spotted the dust cloud and then the staggering, stumbling bodies causing it. Radka kept her clan in the trees in case the herd of undead passed through their camp. She tried to find the engines, but the trees allowed no clear line of sight. She assumed someone was leading them. *I wish I’d thought of that. I need to meet the person who did. They might make a valuable ally.*

Mimi kept her clan in their vehicles, hoping the problem didn’t come this way, but also resenting the fact that the Snake leader hadn’t tried to protect her and her girls. *Maybe she’ll be killed in the chaos.*

3

Nancy didn’t slow as they reached the town. She rolled right into it, using the nearest alley for cover from anyone who saw them. When she got to the end of the alley, she looked back to be sure the undead were still following. Seeing they’d slowed and were breaking off on different paths, she drew her gun and fired a single shot. Then she rolled into

the open center of town and kept going into the next alley.

Her crew stayed right behind her, nervous in the light of day.

Another shot echoed.

Trisha instinctively lunged from her bike. Next to her, Robin gasped as the bullet went through her chest. Both bikes crashed into the alley wall, clogging the path.

The three riders behind them hit the debris. One of them jumped clear and took off running. Three others wrecked, flying from their rides. They rose slowly, dazed. Undead rushed toward them.

Bethany saw the trap and yanked on her bike, lifting the front tire. She rolled up an undead body, hit the side of a dumpster and flipped around to go back the way they'd come.

Bullets met her at the end of the alley. She flew from the bike and landed in a thicket of teeth.

Nancy circled back around, arm out.

Trisha grabbed it and swung herself onto the rear. She held tight as Nancy crossed a frozen creek and kept going. They'd both heard the shots and assumed Alexa had fired them. They needed cover to plan the next attack. Neither of them spared a thought for the crew they'd lost, only for the supplies those women had been carrying. They disappeared into the trees while the undead swarmed the town.

“Glad I’m not on her crew.” Edward used his scope, trying to find the leader again. She’d come out of the alley in a blur, not giving him time to aim.

Daniel snorted, reloading the single round he’d used. “Still, we got five of seven. Rather good, even if the crash did most of the work.”

“Did we get a look at her? Is it someone we know?” David watched the undead rip the bikers apart. They didn’t eat them, but the result was the same.

“A big blonde dressed in heavy gear.” Mark was the spotter for their snipers.

Alexa fired her arrow with a bottle attached.

It slammed into the center of the bloody mass below and broke. Odd colored fumes rose.

The undead didn’t scream as they began to burn, but their snarls grew louder. It became a cry of relief as they finally collapsed and died.

“That’s about fifteen of them.” Mark was also their counter. “Another group is right behind them, Boss.” He held up a hand.

Alexa watched his hand drop, then fired a second arrow. The bottle broke against the wall of the alley, shattering and travelling further. The fumes attached to rotting flesh and bones, and started burning through like acid.

“Another fifteen...twenty now.” Mark scowled.

Alexa fired her third arrow, then watched the bottle break apart on the storefront next to the alley. Another twenty undead were removed. Their snarls and grunts didn’t bother her. Their relief did. She

could feel it clearly. *They're all waiting for help or death. That's why they follow the living. They don't want us gone. They want us to help them.*

Alexa began gathering energy for fire. "Save your bottles."

The men stored the chemical mixes, eyeing the narrow alley below them. Groups of undead were coming between the buildings. Unless they were drawn to a noise, they should keep going. The team stilled, refusing to make noises.

Alexa sent a quick, weak burst of fire, seeing how far it would travel.

The flames shot down to the ground and spread out, catching the undead in front of their den. Flaming torches staggered into more of the unfortunate victims, catching their ragged clothes and hair. The town began to fill with small fires.

Alexa fired another blast of flames.

A bullet slammed into the wall by her head.

She ducked. "Find that sniper."

Rifles came up.

More slugs hit the walls and windows; glass shattered.

Edward counted. "Wait for the reload." He used his new sight and found a distant shadow in a tree half a mile from the town. "It's not the bikers. Looks like...a Snake."

Billy shuddered, rage flaring. He rose up, rifle ready. He loathed the Fanatics, but he also hated the Snakes.

Mark used his glasses, then gently pushed Billy's barrel higher. "On my call."

Billy didn't need it. He fired.

The body fell from the tree.

Edward grinned. "Nice. Now do it again. She's in the next tree to the right."

Billy was already lining it up. He pulled the trigger, hatred in his heart.

Edward nodded as they all ducked return fire. "It was good, but there are at least twenty more in those trees."

"We'll never get them all this way." Alexa leaned against the wall that was now being peppered with shots. "Let's have lunch and wait for them to come closer."

The men chuckled or smiled. Even in a moment of being surrounded, their leader was cool and calm. It was nice.

Alexa snorted at their thoughts, but didn't scold them. She needed their faith. Without it, none of this would work. "Whose turn is it to cook?"

Jacob lifted a finger.

Men groaned in good natured teasing. Despite all the lessons, his skills weren't improving.

Jacob began digging through his pockets. "Fire, Boss?"

Alexa obligingly sent a short stream of flames to light the two logs he placed in the corner, laughing at his sand.

Jacob loved the sound of her amusement. He assembled a fast pot of stew from dried ingredients,

trying to think of something funny to say so he could hear it again. The smell began to waft through the tower.

Daniel worked on the chunks of meat that were starting to stink, salting and wrapping them. When there was time, he would also smoke them. As he finished each one, Daniel delivered it to a teammate so they would have meat if they got separated, but also to lighten his load. He used his new speed like a greedy child as he worked, smothering the delight.

Billy and Edward chuckled silently, glad another teammate was like them and Alexa. Soon, they wouldn't have to hold back to prevent jealousy.

The bullets stopped.

“Stay down.” Alexa could feel the trap and the need of her men to respond. “Let them get impatient. They believe they have the advantage now that they know where we are.”

Billy reloaded, always surprised to find he trusted her no matter how ugly things seemed. *If I were still with Safe Haven, I'd be a mess right now. Adrian never inspired me like this. Neither did any of the Eagles.*

“Tell me about them—my father's Eagles.”

Billy sighed. “They're good men and women. He worked hard to train them. It was an honor to be in his army.”

Alexa frowned at him. “Now tell me the truth.”

Billy's voice hardened. “They were all flawed. Safe Haven was their second chance to do life right.”

“And did they?”

Billy slowly shook his head. “Not many. Life is hard.”

Alexa grunted. “No argument there.” She kept staring at him.

Billy realized she wanted more. “A story? Now?”

Alexa nodded. “We have time to kill before the people.”

The other men chuckled.

Bullets hit the building again. More glass shattered on the bottom floor.

When Alexa didn't react or give an order, her men understood to stay below the window line and let the enemy use up their ammunition.

Jacob covered the pot, then looked expectantly at Billy.

Billy let out a sound of misery. “I don't like to remember those times. I still feel guilty that I left them.”

“Your second chance was never with my father. It is here, with us.”

“I knew that when I left the mountain. I've never doubted where my place is. I just feel bad for how I did it.” Billy considered the many stories he had from Safe Haven. He sensed they needed something to energize them for the coming fights, but his mind lingered on the quake and on the way he'd left. Then it went to who he'd left. “She's around sixteen now. In the mountain, she was

twelve and forbidden. She had a normal girl's crush."

Men frowned at him.

Alexa didn't. She already knew what was in his heart.

"She used to slip me notes and cards." Billy fingered the pocket where one of those, faded and torn, rested. He'd been grateful it was still in the pocket of his cloak when the team rescued him. "She's special. Some people said she charmed me and got into my head."

"But you don't believe that." Edward wasn't sure if he should be upset.

"No. The first time I saw her, the earth moved under my feet. I knew right then that she was made for me. All I had to do was wait for her to grow up and we would have that special type of love that most people miss out on." Billy sighed. "I still think that, but I'm too damaged for her now, no matter her age." His voice broke. "I hope she has someone who loves her as much as I would have."

David scowled. "You mean Leeann. I always knew you were attracted to her! The other Eagles said you weren't like that, but I felt it."

Billy dropped his head. "I wasn't attracted to her at all. She was just a kid. But I knew when she was older that would change...and I wanted to make sure she didn't turn her attention to anyone else. So I encouraged her. I even took their crazy couples class so I would be allowed to protect her while she grew up."

Alexa kept it moving, glad to free him from his last secret among teammates. “What happens when we find them, when we reach Safe Haven?”

Billy’s eyes blazed. “I’ll claim her. She’s mine.”

“One of your loving teammates will handle that when the time comes.” Alexa looked at Edward.

Edward nodded stiffly, hating the duty he’d just been given.

“Thank you.” Billy’s eyes returned to their normal bright misery. “She deserves better than me. Honor my last wish and make sure she’s happy.”

All of them nodded, proud of him for the choice and sad for him for the result. When they found Safe Haven, their team would be broken forever.

Alexa looked at David. “What about you?”

David shrugged. “I was scared of submitting to their alpha. I refused to accept who I was. When we reach them, I’ll ask to stay with you.”

“Because you still refuse to submit?”

He smiled softly. “Because I love *my* alpha. There’s never going to be anywhere else I belong.”

Alexa fought back the tears. “Your alpha feels the same. I will always have a place for any of you.”

A fresh spat of bullets hit the building. They carried an edge of frustration that brought mirth to the room.

Alexa waved at Jacob. “Stir that stew before it burns. We have people to kill and a new den to pick.”

Mimi slowly opened the truck door and went to the tree where she assumed Radka was hiding. “Is it clear?”

Radka dropped to the ground in front of Mimi.

Mimi snatched her knife from her belt, startled.

Radka laughed at her.

Mimi turned back to her vehicle, face a thunderous mask of hatred. *Soon, you won't be able to laugh. I'll wear your tongue around my neck.*

Radka watched the woman, reptile eyes narrowing. She felt the danger. *Do I really need the Fanatics?*

After a minute, Radka looked away, motioning her girls to come down. *For now. Once the Mitchel is dead, Mimi's group will be consumed. We usually only eat men, but we'll make an exception.* “It's time to get closer. Bring only your best shooters and your males. If you leave them here, my clan will claim them.” Radka grinned. “Or eat them.”

Mimi knew that to be true. “Where are we going?”

Radka pointed. “The farthest trees on the edge of town. We'll start there and see if the undead can do the job for us.”

Mimi liked the plan that didn't endanger her life. Despite the courage that had earned her leadership, she was scared of both Mitchels and magic. She was only brave when the rage disease had control. She motioned to her women. “Do as she says.”

“Do we have a report yet? Nancy should be there by now.” Marcella stared at her newest assistant. She’d woken in time for dinner, but her mood wasn’t good. Her dreams had been rough.

The woman tuned in the radio, but she already knew there would be static. “We have a visual report of fires in the town, but nothing else.”

Marcella wasn’t worried. Dealing with a Mitchel couldn’t be rushed. “Any idea what caused the fires?”

“An explosion of some sort. The eye witness didn’t survive to give us more.”

“So the first attempt failed.” Marcella wasn’t surprised. She looked over at the playpen, where Nancy’s daughter was chewing on a hard biscuit. “Can you tell me what your mother is doing right now?”

Abigail paused, drool running down her chin. Her brown eyes turned red as she connected to her mother. The hum of power filled the chilly room.

The assistant left quickly, hair standing up on her neck.

“Mommy is with the dead.”

Marcella tensed. “She died? Already?”

“She led the dead.” Abigail’s eyes lit up brighter. “She’s at the town, hunting my sister.”

Marcella gasped. “You’re a Mitchel!”

Abigail turned those bright orbs on Marcella.

Marcella swallowed her unwelcome fear to give the child what she needed. “I do not hold you responsible for the actions of your family. Thank you for looking for me.”

Abigail stared a minute longer, eyes slowly fading back to brown. “Play now?”

Marcella pushed the button on her chair. “Send in the toy for my guest.”

“Copy.”

Abigail stuck the biscuit back into her mouth.

Marcella went to the small chamber where she slept and kept her personal items. She sat at the desk and began searching through her folders. When she got to Adrian Mitchel, she stopped to read it. “Eleven sons, five living. One daughter, living.”

She crossed that out and replaced it. “*Two* daughters living.” That was important information to have. She planned to keep it to herself, but if she fell, her successor would need that knowledge. Adrian was known for indifference toward his male children and love for the females. “He’s like us. It’s too bad he has a moral compass. Maybe we can change that by offering to trade his youngest daughter for the lives of the Safe Haven council.”

Marcella had no doubt that Safe Haven would be against them. When she’d decided to enact the female rule laws, she’d known she would only have a few years to get it rolling. Now, it was in full swing, with more and more abused women joining the cause. Some of those were forced into it by the Fanatics and the BLM agents, but most were

willing. *We've been slaves for centuries. It's only fair that the men have a turn. And if I do this right, that legacy will last forever.*

Marcella flipped to a folder marked *The Network*. She scanned the notes and the names, then marked off the most recent death. Jackie hadn't been loyal to the dream because she had a male child. "I can't let our kids grow up and change it back, not after all we've suffered. My council will be unbreakable by anything, even family ties."

Marcella thought about Nancy. Now that she knew the woman was also a relative, it gave her more faith that Nancy could accomplish the mission, but also a fear that the woman would want real power here if she returned victorious. Marcella stopped herself from planning Nancy's death. Her daughter might sense it and that wouldn't go well.

She and the child had passed a peaceful late afternoon wakeup broken by a bathroom trip that had reminded Marcella why she'd chosen to never have kids. Besides being a weakness for her enemies to use against her, kids were gross.

Selma smiled at the little girl as she entered the command center. She tossed a stuffed raccoon into the playpen. She'd searched for an hour, offering an extra ration to their few mothers. Soft toys were rare because so many had rotted in the weather topside or been chewed up by animals to make nests—even those in homes and stores. It was yet another item

they would soon be without, thanks to the apocalypse.

Abigail immediately began to chew on the new toy. The biscuit fell to the floor.

Selma hurried over to clean it up so her boss didn't have to. Marcella liked everything neat.

"Boss is lonely." Abigail ignored Marcella's frown. "Play with her more."

Selma blushed. "I will if she wants me to."

Marcella laughed from the other room. "She wants it."

6

"That's close enough." Radka stared at the brazen woman who'd just rode into her new campsite without fear. "What do you want with uss?"

Nancy stared back, evaluating the Snakes in the firelight of their evening meal. Their shiny clothes and hostile attitudes weren't ideal. She was surprised to see Fanatics here, too. "A partnership."

Radka gestured toward Mimi. "We already have such a deal."

Nancy ignored the Fanatic with the leadership tattoo. "I want Alexa Mitchel dead. The men and loot are yours to split."

Radka considered it. Nancy looked just as hard as herself, unlike Mimi. Radka was almost sure the Fanatic leader would run if faced with magic. "I assume you have a plan."

Nancy nodded. “I saw something bright and shiny as I rode through that town. Imagine my surprise when I went to a high spot and found a lot of bright and shiny camped about six hours from here.”

The other Snakes tensed. Their faces paled or became angrier at the news.

Radka scowled. Her breath streamed out in the cold air. “So why do I need you?”

“Because I’m not afraid of anything, and this is personal for me.” Nancy looked down at her rifle. “I’m also a better shot than all of you put together. When the shiny arrives, you and I will go straight to Alexa’s front door and face her head on.”

“Her men are very well trained.” Radka didn’t say she wasn’t sure her girls could move fast enough in this weather. Winter was a hardship for her kind and a weakness that the new woman didn’t need to be reminded of. She preferred to attack from a distance.

“They can be distracted. Send a group up the side of that market.”

“They have the second floor barricaded now.”

“Then go to the top. While they’re looking in that direction, we’ll go in the bottom.”

Radka grunted. “Mitchels always escape traps.” She considered, eyeing the two women on the bike. “We need her to let us in, then my monkeys can go up the side.”

Nancy shrugged. “Do you have any magic users?”

“No. That kind is forbidden to join uss.”

Nancy grinned. “But we can fake it, right?”

Radka nodded. “You have their attitude. We can read each other if we work it out now.”

Nancy got off the bike, ignoring Trisha’s arm trying to hold her back. “Stay with the bike.”

Nancy approached the Snake leader, not caring that her people were ready to attack. “Do we have a deal?”

Radka clasped her arm, eyes glittering. “If you fail me, I will kill you.”

Nancy scoffed, letting go. “If this fails, we’ll both be dead. Save your threats for the target.”

Radka laughed. She put an arm around the tall blonde’s shoulders, encouraged by the strength she felt. “We will have a drink and work it out.”

Nancy nodded. “After we drink, I may want to rent one of your males before you eat them. Got any with blue eyes?”

Mimi watched them go toward the small campfire, jealous. Her welcome hadn’t been as generous. She didn’t join them. She stayed still and quiet, making her own plans. *When the time comes, I now have two extra targets to remove.*

Chapter Eight
You're No Different

1

“**Y**ou’re burning the water!” A Snake woman kicked the cringing male aside and lifted the pot onto the highest rung. “You’re only melting snow! How can you ssscrew that up?!”

Nancy snickered. She’d only been in the Snake camp for an hour, but it already felt like home to her. Their methods were efficient and brutal—just like hers. “There’s another change in the new world.”

Sitting next to her as they ate, Radka nodded. “Yesss. Now the men will learn to cook and *we* will sit back and complain about their efforts.”

Nancy scooped up the last bite of her stew, not trying to identify the ingredients. She didn’t care. The last hour had passed with plans being made and men being used. It was almost perfect.

The Snake camp was small, and deep in the woods. A dozen women with two-sided cloaks stood watch while the rest of them ate, rested, worked, and enjoyed the males. The men were naked, bruised, branded, and subservient—just the way the Snakes liked them. After they were mated and used for manual labor, they would be eaten. A

few were still hoping for a rescue or an opportunity to escape, but most had accepted their fate. Nancy admired the methods the Snakes used, but she didn't like submissiveness in a partner. She'd chosen not to use one. The bunker had males who weren't broken yet but needed to be. She preferred that fun.

Mimi stayed with her Fanatic group for the meal, but she stared at Nancy and Radka in jealous dislike. She wanted to be over there with the two leaders, but she wasn't brave enough to just join them without permission or an invitation. She knew her group was getting upset with her lack of courage, but she didn't want to die. She assumed her group would remove her from leadership soon because of it.

Nancy ignored Mimi's hot stares. She tossed her empty bowl at a male who was serving everyone.

The man immediately retrieved it and filled it without showing a reaction.

"She trained that one well."

"Yesss." Radka looked over her shoulder at Mimi. "But she has no courage, only rage. She will not survive this fight."

"Why did you let her join your camp?"

Radka nodded toward the cold, angry Fanatics sitting behind Mimi. "I need the numberssss. When they tire of her leadership, they will join me."

"Smart."

Radka smiled at the praise.

"Where was the nest of your clan?"

“In the swamps, though they were preparing for a great migration into the west. I did not expect them to take this path.”

“I assume you will join them once this mission is over?”

Radka shook her head, only giving half of the truth. “We will stay and fight. Let the others run from the soldiers or your bunker women. I will never leave my home.”

Nancy scooped a fresh bite. “Maybe I can put in a good word for you when I go back. Marcella makes exceptions when people are useful.”

“We are hunters. Any job we are given will be based on that, yes?”

Nancy shrugged. “I’ll make sure my boss knows. Marcella always needs hunters.”

“We also enjoy fighting. It keeps us warm and gives us entertainment.”

“I, too, enjoy fighting. It keeps my skills at top level.” Nancy thought about it. “Maybe Marcella could activate weekly matches where we can all participate.”

“You will ask her?”

“Probably.”

Radka frowned. “And what will you expect in return for speaking on my behalf?”

“You’re already doing it. My crew wasn’t good enough for this run, this target.”

“Help!”

They both looked at the tent where Trisha was renting a male. The screams and grunts had been muffled until now.

“That one is.”

Nancy nodded again. “I’ve been pleased with her so far.”

“She would be welcome to stay with us. So would you.”

Nancy grunted. “She can make her own choices.”

“But you will not.”

“No. The honor is nice, though. I will remember your generosity.”

Radka stared thoughtfully. “What is waiting back in that bunker for you?”

Nancy grinned. “Everything.”

2

“This is Alexa Mitchel. I’m still in Bridgeport. I’m offering a place on my crew to a magic user with honor. Thank you for your attention. Have a Safe Haven night!”

Alexa was aware of her crew’s surprise and disapproval as she waited for the responses. She didn’t explain why she’d done it or if she meant it.

All of them wanted to question. None of them did.

The radio lit up with garbles she couldn’t decipher. She waited for it to clear. The person she needed would also know to wait. She waved off the

cold coffee her men were sharing, as well as the dried meat they were chewing on while Jacob's stew finished cooking.

It took a full minute for the jumbled calls to stop. Then a female voice came through, radiating calm and confidence. "This is Brenda. I'm eighteen hours away. Proof required?"

Alexa keyed the mike. "Defense of the innocent, of course."

"Copy. Out."

Jacob opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. This was one of those moments where they weren't supposed to question her decisions, but it was a struggle. None of them wanted another teammate, but a female was twice as unwelcome.

The radio lit up again. "Does that offer apply to anyone?" This voice was also female and confident, but it carried an edge of malice.

Alexa snorted into the radio. "No normals, no Snakes, and no Fanatics."

"I'm none of those."

Alexa ran through the options. "Bunker hunter."

The voice chuckled back at her. "Nice guess."

The radio stayed quiet while Alexa considered her reply. All of those listening waited to hear if she fell for the obvious trap.

Alexa finally keyed the mike again. "Can I assume you like bikes?"

Nancy laughed as she answered. "Another great guess. Perhaps we should meet and discuss your terms."

“Perhaps we will, though I doubt you’ll be happy with that outcome.”

“I knew your father, intimately.”

Alexa froze for an instant. Then that Mitchel mind took over. “A lot of whores knew my father. He didn’t stay for any of them. You’re no different.”

“Slam you!”

Alexa laughed, but didn’t answer. The hunter was dangerous. That was clear by her actions with the undead, but she was also easily riled. Sometimes that was a weakness. In this case, Alexa suspected it would make her deadly if provoked at the wrong time.

Alexa took the bowl of stew from Jacob and began eating, not making a face at the salty, burnt taste. Her mind worked on what she’d just learned. The second call was a bounty hunter sent from the bunker. The big boss there had declined her invitation to come handle it personally. Ulysses would still have to face that one if his army attacked the bunker. The first voice was one of her kind and therefore, an even bigger threat than the undead piper. She could also be a valuable asset if she was honorable. There was no way to know for sure until they met.

“One fast look. Three seconds.” She glanced at Edward.

Edward rose up, scanned, and ducked back down. His dirty cloak billowed with the movement.

A fresh spat of bullets hit the wall again. Brick dust floated in through the shattered windows.

“Undead everywhere, about half the first count. Two houses are on fire, but the snow is putting it out quickly. No other signs of people close.” Edward wished there had been time to see how many of the tree assassins were still there. He had a gut feeling that they were closer now.

Alexa kept eating without giving an order and her crew followed her lead. The waiting wasn't over yet.

3

“You summoned me?” Captain Green eyed his commanding officer with growing dislike. He didn't want to be here doing work for Ulysses.

Ulysses finished pouring his cup of thick, strong after dinner coffee. “Yes. I've changed my mind about sending you out.”

Green heaved a sigh of relief. “Excellent. I'll leave now.”

“But...”

Green tensed. “Yes?”

“Alexa is not your mission.” Ulysses glared at him. “I need five females brought back to stay the winter with us.”

“As service girls?” Green rolled his eyes. “We'll need more than five.”

Ulysses shook his head in disgust. “You saw the plan. We need them to infiltrate the bunker and get the doors open for us, you idiot!”

Green flushed. He clamped his lips shut on a sharp reply. He scanned the cold surroundings and the grumbling troops who hated keeping military hours. It wasn't snowing yet, but he could smell it in the air. The only good thing about traveling during winter was the lack of bugs. Everything else was hard.

"You will pick a small team of *good* men. Treat the women with respect and care." Ulysses farted. *Damn beans.* "By the time winter is over, they'll be on our side."

"And where do you suggest I find these gullible females?"

"From the survivors who escape Alexa's wrath. If they're injured, that's even better. We'll nurse them back to health. Make it clear that we'll protect them even if Alexa comes for them. After battling her, they'll want safe shelter more than anything else." Ulysses sipped his coffee. "While you search, feel free to help Alexa, but do not let anyone see you. If you fail this run because of your obsession, you will not be allowed back in."

"Yes, sir." Green got away from his commanding officer before he said something else that was stupid. He was being sent out. That was all that mattered.

Ulysses watched him walk away, eyes narrowing. *I may need to send a backup team. He can't be trusted.*

Lloyd came to Ulysses. "I can follow him."

Ulysses knew Lloyd meant he would kill Green. He slowly shook his head. “I need you here. We had a report of undead nearby. I want us ready to roll out at dawn.”

“Yes, sir.” Lloyd smoothed down his last clean army shirt and began buttoning his overcoat. “New site or straight to the Snake nest?”

“The nest. We’ll keep their site if we like the location. I want to handle this while our men are cold and bored. The fight will warm them. The blood will soothe me.”

4

“They’re slowing down.” Daniel dropped back below the window. “The snow is heavier.”

Alexa also took a fast glance, then got below the window edge. “It’s almost time for the next wave.” She pulled out her bow and the chunk of deer meat Daniel had given her earlier. “I’ll need cover fire for five seconds, maybe a little longer.”

Edward and Jacob checked their guns.

Mark and David went down to the ground floor to watch the door. Daniel and Billy went to the second floor to watch that area. Alexa had given them instructions for defending the market while they waited. All of them were expecting another sneak attack. It was only a few hours before dawn, making it the perfect time.

Alexa shoved an arrow through the meat. Then she sliced her forearm and let her blood fall over it.

Jacob scowled, but didn't scold her. He just wished she'd used his blood or any of the team instead of herself. He hated to see her injured.

"On my count." Alexa knelt, ready to rise and fire. She notched the heavy arrow. It wasn't going to go far or fly straight, but if she put enough muscle behind it, the meat would end up where she needed it. "On three...two...one!"

Jacob rose, opening fire on the trees where they had spotted the snipers.

Alexa quickly stood and drew back the bow as far as it would go.

Jacob stopped firing to reload.

Edward opened fire, completing the switch.

Alexa fired. She watched the arrow slam into the open door of the post office to their right. Undead immediately went toward the movement. Alexa ducked down. So did Edward. He quickly reloaded.

Alexa got her mirror out and held it up. She saw the undead below them start moving toward the scent of blood on the meat.

Pop! The mirror exploded in her hand.

"Damn it!" Alexa held still as Jacob checked her hand for glass, then bandaged her forearm. It was dripping blood.

"Someone out there is a great shot." Alexa added that into her calculations. "But they won't have a clear line of fire on the ground and it's too dark to see clearly, even through a scope.

Volunteers to go secure that door when the undead are inside?”

All of her men lifted a finger.

Alexa chuckled, always pleased with them. “Billy and Daniel will handle it. The rest of us will be ready to go get them if they fail.”

Everyone knew she was using that edge of doubt in her tone to encourage her men to be victorious, but it still worked. No one wanted her to doubt their skills.

Alexa dug for her last mirror, mentally adding it to the list of items she needed to replace. She waited a few minutes, trying to give the undead time to catch the scent of blood and gather. When she lifted the mirror, she saw nearly all of them were crammed into the post office or in front of it.

Pop! The second mirror exploded.

Alexa felt shards dig into her skin. Anger flooded the room. *That’s two. On three, your ass is mine.*

Alexa’s crew understood all hell was going to break loose at some point.

“She’s pissed now.”

Mark nodded at David’s comment. “Yep. If they get her up to rage, none of them will survive.” Mark listened for her call as he and David slowly, quietly, cleared the barricade from the door. Cold wind blew in under the rotting planks.

Alexa gave it another minute, then crawled toward the stairs. She went down the steps and

joined the others who stayed split between the first two levels, all hoping their men returned unharmed.

Alexa looked at the dog that had stayed by her side. "It's time to go."

The dog whined.

Alexa shook her head. "You'll be dead before we leave here. I won't have that on my conscience. Go find a group of..." Alexa smiled. "Go to Claudia and protect her kids."

The dog's ears twitched.

Alexa motioned to Mark. "It needs a scent."

Mark flushed as he pulled out a dirty shirt he'd taken from Claudia's gear when she wasn't looking. He held it out for the dog to smell.

The big animal sniffed it a few times, then went to the door, tail straight up.

Alexa motioned. "All at once. Go!"

Mark and David yanked the door open; Billy and Daniel used their new speed to run across the open courtyard as the dog flew out and headed north.

The movement drew the undead toward the running men.

Billy leapt to the fire escape on the side of the post office. Snow blew into his face and quickly coated his shoulders and hood.

Daniel went straight into the post office and through the crowd of snarling men and women, shoving a rough path with his new strength and speed. Despite the darkness, he had perfect vision.

He jumped through the rear window, shattering glass, and streaked into the trees.

Gunshots echoed, hitting the ground behind him. The sniper wasn't fast enough to track his movements.

Daniel ran straight toward the tree line, eyes on the prize. He used the rocks and moldy trunks for cover, eyes lighting up red. He felt his body respond to his anger. His feet barely touched the ground. *I love my new life!*

Bang!

Daniel staggered as the bullet went into his shoulder, then he took off again, refusing to be stopped.

“Run!” Radka watched in horror as the man scaled the shadowy tree and pulled Mimi from her perch. He flipped the stabbing woman over his shoulder and ran back toward the snow covered town. “Shoot him!”

All of the Snakes and Fanatics opened fire.

All of them missed. He was too fast and they were barely awake.

Nancy, one branch above where Mimi had been resting, growled in frustration as she tried to get a clear shot. Before she could, the man vanished into the alley next to the building he'd come from. “Damn her!” Nancy hadn't counted on Alexa giving gifts to her crew. She also hadn't thought Alexa would send them out in the face of so many threats.

Radka climbed down, waving to her clan. “Fall back!”

The Snakes hurried to obey, but their movements were still slow. They were snow covered and lumbering in the darkness, much like the undead.

The Fanatics, now without a leader, chose to follow Radka. She was clearly better than Mimi because she was still here.

Nancy stayed in the tree, not intimidated by the thought of the man coming back for her. She almost hoped he would. The man had taken Mimi to Alexa. *That's where I want to be.*

Billy swung the post office door shut and wrapped his belt through the handle, staying above those outside the door as they swiped and grunted. The undead inside piled against it, growling and scratching, but the door opened inward. Their weight was keeping it shut. Billy tried not to look at them, unable to take the sight of their bones and rotting flesh. It was awful.

Billy tied the belt to the small sign holder that no longer held a sign. He climbed to the window ledge and leapt over the half dozen undead trying to grab his feet. He landed in the hard dirt and took off running back to the market. He could hear a screaming woman getting closer and guessed what Daniel had done. He laughed as Daniel flew by him and into the market.

Alexa and David shut the door while Jacob helped put the barricade back in place. Then she turned to Daniel.

Daniel had wrapped his hand around the woman's mouth to stop the noise. "Be still!" He'd smacked her into a wall of the alley to dislodge the knife from her hand, but he was sure she had another one under her filthy robe.

Billy yanked the tool belt from her waist and quickly searched her, swatting away her attempts to defend herself. He stepped back, pocketing her knife and her empty gun. He could tell it was out of ammunition by how light it was. "All clear, Boss."

Alexa spotted Daniel's injuries and sighed, but she didn't scold him. She'd told them to find her a lifeforce during the chaos. He'd followed orders, though not the way she'd intended.

Daniel grinned at her as he brushed off snow, barely winded.

Alexa rolled her eyes. "Update me."

"Fifty of them were sleeping in the trees. They're moving back now. They only have a few snipers. This one didn't make the shot, but she has a leadership tattoo."

Alexa stared at the stars carved into the glaring woman's cheek. She waved at Edward. "See to his injuries while we talk."

Daniel shoved the woman down, letting go of her mouth.

Alexa shook her head. "If you scream, I'll take your life right now."

Mimi clamped her lips shut.

"Good." Alexa took out her canteen and held it out.

Mimi spat at her.

Alexa's eyes turned red.

"I'm sorry!"

She's scared of magic. Alexa stored the canteen, but kept the glow, using it. "Tell me the plan."

Mimi hated herself, but she couldn't help babbling. "They're coming up the side while our new sniper picks you off. Nancy is very good."

Alexa glanced down at her bleeding hand, where pieces of the second mirror still waited to be dug out. "She came from the bunker."

Mimi nodded shakily. "The reward for you is triple and dead."

"What about alive?"

"Anything we want, but Nancy knows you can't be taken alive."

Alexa shrugged. "Anyone can be caught off guard." She stood, heading up to the second floor. "See what else she knows. Be nice if you can. If you can't, then be what you are."

Three of them flashed hungry fangs at the Fanatic. Billy also let his anger show. He hated her kind.

Mimi shuddered. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know! Please don't kill me!"

Billy began to ask questions while Edward dug the slug from Daniel's shoulder. The stab wounds were already healing, but the bullet wound couldn't until the slug was removed.

Alexa sank down on the mattress, ignoring the thick dust cloud and the few bugs that scurried from

it and ran over her boots. She took out her radio. “Is that all you’ve got? I thought bunker hunters were the best.” She kept the mike keyed as their hostage below screamed for help. Then she put it away and began digging out pieces of glass from her hand.

Shots hit the outside of the chipped, crumbling brick wall again.

Edward chuckled, pulling the bullet out.

Daniel grunted, face tightening. “I thought you guys didn’t feel pain anymore.”

“Well, now you know.” Edward bared his fangs. Venom dripped into Daniel’s chest wound.

They both watched it burn in and start closing.

“Wow.” Edward hadn’t known for sure it would work. He was relying on the few details he’d gathered from their night with the vampires.

Daniel gritted his teeth against the pain, eyes watering.

Next to them, Mimi stopped screaming. She stared, shivering.

“Tell us the rest of the plan.” Mark grabbed the woman’s chin and forced her eyes back to him. “Tell me right now.”

“I don’t know. Nancy kept saying the shiny was coming.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know!”

Billy stepped closer. “She’s lying. Let me have her.”

“I don’t know! I don’t know!”

“Enough.”

Alexa's call stopped the interrogation.

Mimi waited for death now that she had no more knowledge to give them.

"Daniel needs the blood." Alexa tossed glass from her wound onto the floor.

Daniel snatched the woman by her shoulders and sank his new fangs into her neck as Billy put a hand over her mouth. She sagged against them a minute later.

Edward went to Alexa, holding out the tweezers.

"We need a new den—somewhere they can't burn us out, blow us up, or come at us from more than one direction." Alexa took the tweezers.

Edward went to the dark corner to think. He ran the town through his mind, mentally scanning all the basements and buildings. "The radio station has a cellar with an outside exit."

Alexa frowned. It was in open view and had glass walls on the first floor. "Tell me why it's better."

Edward sighed. "Because we can run into the tree line behind it if we need to. Our car graveyard is right in the thickest part of those trees."

"Make a plan."

Edward went to get the others working.

Alexa kept digging splinters from her hand, following it with drips of venom that sealed the small holes. She was stewing on the bunker woman. Her voice had been furious under that cool control.

It's personal for her. I need to know why. Is it magic, male slavery, or just because I'm a Mitchel?

5

“The undead are locked up.” Nancy finally came down from the tree, joining Radka. “I have no idea how they did it.”

“That helps usss.”

“Maybe.” Nancy reloaded her warm rifle, resuming her air of confident coldness. “New plan—we go straight in when your clan gets here. We rush that building and kill them all. No need to climb. They won't have enough bullets for all of us.”

“What if they change locations?”

“As we go in, we set fire to them all, except the post office. We'll save the undead for the finale if we need it.”

Radka suddenly felt as if she was on borrowed time. She opened her mouth to say she and her girls were leaving.

Nancy spun around and punched her in the mouth. She had her knife to Radka's throat before the Snake could pull her own. “You will not back out on me. We have a deal!”

Radka recovered her courage. She stared at the woman, respecting her more than she already had. “I will hold up my end.”

Nancy let her go and stepped back. “Why did you consider running? Tell me now so I can account for it.”

Radka grunted, standing. “It’s not my clan anymore. I left, without permission, to take vengeance on the Mitchel for the death of my sister.” Radka glowered. “Alexa has a leadership token that she did not earn.”

Nancy chuckled coldly. “If she has it, she earned it.” Nancy’s mirth vanished. “But I understand. What will your clan do when they arrive?”

“Kill me. Then I hope they will attack the Mitchel anyway.”

“We can work with that.” Nancy ran it through again. “If you get the token back, will they spare you?”

“No.” Radka brightened. “But they might if I give them the Mitchel.”

“You need her alive.” Nancy decided to be honest. “So do I. The bunker reward for that is incredible.”

“We can’t split her.”

“No, but we can play two ends against the middle.” Nancy stepped closer. “You give her to your clan and get your pardon. Then you help me steal her from them so I can turn her in to the bunker. Your people will torture her and then the bunker will hang her. Everyone gets justice.”

Radka immediately nodded.

Nancy’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t be thinking about a double cross, would you?”

Radka hissed.

Nancy laughed. “Good. If you started acting trustworthy, it would worry me.” Nancy walked toward the camp where the Fanatic women and Snakes were waiting. “Let’s get fed and warm up. When the sun rises, we’ll make our move.”

6

“Set up right here.” The red robed woman pointed. “When the real power comes, they’ll pick this spot.”

The gate hunters unloaded their truck. They didn’t speak or joke, or even appear to have emotions or opinions. They followed Rachel’s orders without looking down at the ravaged town. This group was bonded in their single goal to reset time. They didn’t waste energy on other fights.

Rachel wiped sweat from her short hair and neck, then drew her hood up. She moved into the dark woods and began to evaluate the others who had already gathered. She had to decide if her group would join these rebels to challenge Alexa. So far, Rachel didn’t think this was the time.

These groups were determined and pissed, but they were also weak. The Snakes and their new Fanatic friends were harder, but not nearly enough. Most of these groups just wanted a target for their anger or men for feeding and breeding. The Fanatics who had joined the Snakes had been turned out of Rachel’s group. Rachel recognized several of them. They’d been kicked out for not being serious about

the goal. They didn't follow the rules, and they rebelled against authority at every chance. Rachel doubted the Snakes would tolerate them for long.

Rachel made her way back to her small campsite. She didn't need to circle the entire town to take stock. She'd gone to the best places for an attack and found most of them still open. These people knew nothing of tactics or strategy. Rachel motioned her crew back to their vehicles. "Leave the campsite set up; get us out of here. We'll try again tomorrow."

The two trucks drove through the predawn shadows without attracting attention. Rachel hoped leaving the campsite set up might convince someone to take over the site. If so, Rachel would consider joining with them because they knew the spot was good and they thought they were strong enough to claim it and keep it. If the site was empty when she returned, it would be a sign that she needed to keep waiting. *One of these outcasts, hunters, or scavengers will have the magic we need. I'll wait until earth freezes over if I have to.*

The lead truck stopped suddenly, throwing the passengers around.

In front of the truck, a sickly woman with a blue headscarf stared in shock. Carolyn had stepped into the road at the wrong time. The engines on the trucks were quiet and she'd been distracted. The man she was trailing had slipped away while she slept. She'd been in a hurry to find him.

Rachel studied the woman, seeing her fire and her illness. She waved a hand at her truck.

Carolyn knew better than to refuse the invitation. She slid into the warm seat with a fake smile and bubbling gratitude. Fanatics didn't like it any other way.

Rachel wasn't sure why the woman drew her, but she never ignored her instincts. That bell in her head was saying this woman had come in contact with someone special. Rachel began asking questions.

Carolyn answered most of them truthfully and began the wait for her freedom. She would sneak away while they slept. Staying with the gate hunters wasn't an option. They were crazier than she was.

There were three types of women in Afterworld. Those like herself only wanted Safe Haven's light to return and chase away the darkness. The bunker females wanted men in chains.

And then we have these guys. Carolyn kept her expression clear, though her mind was troubled. The gate hunters wanted those barriers resealed so time could be reset and they could have their old lives back. They didn't realize it wouldn't work. Many people had already tried it, with no success. Carolyn didn't know what it would take to close those gates, but she suspected it rested with Safe Haven. These people were never going to get what they wanted and that made them dangerous to everyone.

Chapter Nine
I'll Be A Queen
December 8th

1

Jason clutched the thick, damp branch between his thighs and held tight as he got set in the moldy tree. There were a lot of people in this area now. The radio exchanges were drawing massive traffic. Jason doubted many of them would survive. *When you hunt a Mitchel, you don't rush in blindly just because someone offers a nice deal.*

Jason opened his notebook, enjoying the rising sun on his skin. Names glared at him. One glared brighter than the others.

Alexa Mitchel—alive or dead.

Jason scanned the trees, making a hard choice. He'd begun moving south after the first bunker call, but not in a hurry or with determination. He didn't want to capture the Mitchel. He wanted her help.

Jason didn't feel eyes on him anymore. That had vanished yesterday and hadn't returned. He was almost sorry. It had been nice to have company around, even if all he could do was imagine what they looked and sounded like. It was still better than constant isolation. Now, he was alone again.

An engine echoed. Jason watched the headlights of a single Army transport truck come up the road. When it stopped a few hundred feet from his tree, Jason tensed to fight. He saw four soldiers in the truck and one captive in the rear. His mind buzzed angrily with plans to help the female. He couldn't sit up here and let her be abused.

Jason ignored the part of his mind wanting to leave her to her fate just because she was female. The bitterness was always present in his mind, but he refused to give into it. He wasn't made that way, despite his anger at how the world had changed. He didn't mind handling a job, but he did it fast and with mercy. Rape and torture were uncalled for.

The soldiers got out and began to set up a small camp in the middle of the road. Jason was glad they seemed calm and only eager to be out of the truck. He quietly stored his book and waited for the right moment to act.

Green opened the rear of the truck. "Do you want to get out and stretch your legs?"

The bruised, furious woman kicked the door. "Slam you!"

Green shut it and went back to the fire. She was tied up and she would stay warmer in the truck anyway. He joined his men around the weak fire. "Let's get a meal and coffee done, and then we'll sleep for a while."

"Are we really taking her back to camp? She'll never help us."

Green grunted at his new XO. “We follow orders.”

Sergeant Smith scowled. “Ulysses is wrong this time. These women out here hate us. They’ll turn on us right when we need them most.”

Green believed that, too, but he wasn’t the type to speak bad about their superior unless it was to the man’s face. “Just make the coffee and shut up.”

“Yes, sir.”

The men worked or sat in silence, all unhappy with the duty they’d been given. Come dusk, they would start out again to find their other targets. Women were more active at night when they thought no one was watching. Green hoped the rest of their captures went better than this one. Two of his men needed stitches and they were all exhausted from trying not to be rough with her. Green sighed. “I’m sorry.”

The other soldiers brightened. They quickly spoke up.

“It’s cool, man. Been a long run already.”

“You got that shit right.”

“Yeah, no worries. We know you don’t agree with command on this one.”

Green shook his head. “No. I think these women are dangerous to the cause. I told Ulysses that, but he’s sure of himself. If something goes bad, we’ll just have to cover it.”

Smith met his eye in sympathy and fading hope. “We’ll be okay. Slavery is wrong. Justice will side with us in the end.”

Green hoped that was right, but he wasn't sure anymore. He'd seen too many atrocities to be okay with trusting a woman again and most of their brigade was the same.

Jason stayed still, watching and listening from the tree branch above the soldiers. He decided against attacking them, despite wanting the woman freed. *Maybe there's a better way to handle this.*

2

"That's not a good sign." Ulysses tapped his driver on the shoulder. "Pull over. Tell the troops to keep going." He'd sent Lloyd ahead with a few men to scout the nest, but that man was riding toward them, alone, as fast as the horse would carry him through the icy wind and light snow.

This road was broken, with dying weeds and pot holes that would probably never be filled in. The trees on each side of them were thin and molded. Ulysses didn't like it. *We have no protection here.*

Lloyd rode straight to Ulysses. "They're gone. Entire site is clear."

Ulysses frowned. "Say that again."

"We went in. The Snakes are gone. The tracks imply the entire clan packed up and headed west. Looks like we missed them." Lloyd grabbed a quick drink from his canteen, shivering at the icy water. He felt like he might never be warm again after that ride.

"No traps?"

“No. We canvassed the entire area. I’d guess they’ve been gone for at least three days.”

“Before Alexa made the call.” Ulysses frowned. “Someone warned them we were coming.”

Lloyd shrugged, rubbing his cold hands together. “Maybe, but they have a few hundred, based on the prints we found. And I’ve never known the Snakes to run, even when they’re outnumbered or outgunned. They usually fight to the death for any site, and this was a nest.”

Ulysses turned the heater to high. Being stationary was colder than if they were moving. It let the wind come straight through with no resistance. “Is it usable?”

“Oh, yeah. Great spot with the entrance to a big cave right behind it. We can fix it up and have shelter for the rest of the winter.” Lloyd brushed snow off his horse’s dark mane. “I left our three men there, hidden, with radios.”

“Good. Get our troops moving faster. I want camp set up there before nightfall.”

Lloyd saluted and rode off to encourage their men.

Ulysses stayed where he was, working through it. The Snakes fleeing made no sense. “Unless it’s the weather. We’ve been told they slow down in the cold.” Ulysses decided that had to be it. He considered warning Alexa that she might be in the path of a retreating Snake army, but he chose not to. He didn’t want to alert the bunker with a call that would come in loud and clear. He was roughly one

day from that bunker now. He hoped to hide right under their noses while strengthening his men over the winter. Come spring, they would be healthier and have months more training to help them win. “Get us back in line.”

His driver immediately obeyed.

Ulysses studied his thin men as they drove by the riding and marching troops who alternated modes of transportation every six hours. “We need more meat.” The commanding officer set his mind to finding a reliable source for the winter. Game was always scarce now. It had been for the last two years. None of the ranches or farms were still going, and most of the supplies they found now even in undamaged places had gone bad. If not for the large stock of MREs they’d brought from the other bunker, they would have already starved. At some points, they’d been forced to hunt rats and dig tubers to supplement the heavily salted government rations. “He said there was a cave. What can we get out of that?”

“Bats, mushrooms...” The driver fell silent as Ulysses shook his head.

“Too small and too many dangers with those. Anything else?” Feeding their army was his top priority because it was the hardest part of his job now.

“Salamanders, crickets, Snakes.”

Ulysses chuckled. “Snakes, huh?”

The driver also laughed as he realized they were already hunting the human form.

Ulysses made a hard choice. “We’re going to start fishing.”

The driver’s amusement faded. “Things come out of the water.”

“And we can eat them. There are no new radiation sources bleeding into the waterways. They should all be starting to clear. As long as we can find a safe way to pull it, we’ll have meat.”

“We could also try breeding some of the animals we catch. The rabbits reproduce fast, like the rats.”

“Rabbits have almost no fat. People have starved to death trying to survive on them.” Ulysses kept working the problem as the driver slid back in front of the long convoy. “We could hunt bears. They should be hibernating right now.”

“That’s good! We have those knockout darts still, and that would be large amounts of meat at one time. Nice, Boss.”

Ulysses didn’t smile at the praise. Hunting bears would be dangerous. *It will also give us big hides to use for winter coats and clothes.* “What other animals hibernate?”

“Uh...ground hogs, skunks, turtles. Some of those really only slow down, but they might still be in the area.”

“We’ll do all of those. When we get settled, find the books on tracking, fishing, and hunting. Hopefully we have the knowledge we need. If not, we’ll try to find a library that hasn’t been destroyed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ulysses felt a little better with more options, but he didn't relax. He wondered if the Snake clan had left because they were starving. If that was the case, then the area they were going to might be as dangerous as the actual bunker fight. *I have to find a way to keep us all fed for at least five months.*

It seemed like an impossible task unless they resorted to cannibalism and he refused to do that. *What good is surviving if we become animals?*

3

Time to go.

Carolyn eased out of the bedroll she'd been given, grabbing her backpack. She slipped to the flap and ducked out, sensing Rachel about to wake behind her. The leader had grilled her for hours, but without a magic user, she hadn't been able to get much information. It was dawn and time to go.

Carolyn took off into the darkness, glad the guards on this camp were passed out. The camp was only a few miles from Bridgeport, but Carolyn detoured back to where she'd lost the trail of the man she'd been following. She knew from his path that he was headed to Alexa, too. Carolyn wanted to travel with him, not the gate hunters. Rachel had promised her protection if she helped with that, but Carolyn had refused to agree. As a result, she'd been put in Rachel's tent until morning, when the woman was supposed to make a choice on Carolyn's life.

I'm not staying here. I have to find a man without a dog in this fight.

4

“It’s almost noon. Are we ready?” Alexa held her rope, kneeling right below the window where icy wind ran down her body and tried to freeze her in place. They’d rested and prepared for a daylight attack. Many of their enemies now knew her crew had vampires. They would expect her team to be sleeping.

The men nodded or grunted. They were packed and prepared, but the sniper was still out there. Whenever they lifted their heads, slugs came.

Alexa stiffened, ears straining. “We have more company coming.” She waited until the sounds grew louder, closer. She quickly rose to look. “Snakes.” She settled back down, blowing out a disgusted sigh. “Their scales are shiny. I should have caught that clue.”

Her crew waited for orders. Each of them had a frozen rope end in hand.

“Jacob, blow out the window of the post office. On my count.” Alexa stood up, giving their sniper a clear shot. “Now!”

Jacob also rose, guns crashing. Glass shattered. Icy wind rushed in.

Alexa grunted in pain.

They both dropped back under the window line as Snakes began to fire at them. They listened to the

new fight below as the undead swarmed through the broken window to attack the Snakes and their horses. Anything living was a target.

Edward saw blood drip down Alexa's side. He scowled at her as he dug out the medical kit again.

Alexa waved him off. "Later. Get ready to go."
Thud! Thud!

They all looked toward the door.

"Someone's breaking it down." Alexa hurried down the steps, drawing her guns. The men followed.

"Gather the rope!"

Mark ran back up at her call, ducking shots and flying pieces of glass and brick. The Snakes arriving had ruined a great escape route. He was disappointed that they wouldn't get to use it.

Alexa yanked the last chair from the door and opened it. She stepped back as her men opened fire on the three Snake women using axes to get through. They fell, screaming.

Undead rushed toward the noise.

"Mark!"

"Coming!" He turned to the last rope, grabbing it. Bullets slammed into the wall by his head. He left the rope and ran down the stairs as Alexa led them out into the snow.

Stiff forms in black cloaks that covered them from head to toe appeared behind the undead. They grabbed them, snapping necks or ripping rotting limbs from weak bodies.

Zaro slid in front of Alexa. His men surrounded them, leading the way. They tolerated the sunlight that tried to burn holes through their clothes and masks.

“The radio station.” Alexa reloaded, then began aiming for the Snake women who hadn’t been prepared for the army of undead. They were being dragged from their horses. The animals were also going down, unable to run from so many. Alexa picked off the Snakes still on horses while keeping an eye out for their sniper.

Zaro led the way straight through the middle of the town that was on fire again. The snow was still coming down, but it wasn’t heavy enough yet to put out the new flames.

Alexa assumed Snakes had set the fires to flush them out. Only the radio station at the end of the lot was untouched, but it was surrounded by Snakes and undead locked in combat.

Bullets hit the ground and walls as they ran through the mob. Vampires were pulled away. Snakes were shot and drained. Undead snarled and swiped, barely missing the crew in the center.

Alexa fired at a bright flash in the nearest trees, then ducked to reload. Her men stayed close around her as the vampires herded them across the body littered courtyard.

Zaro kicked open the front of the station. “Get ins—” He fell forward as a hole appeared in his neck. Blood rushed over his body and the ground.

All the vampires on the site turned toward the sniper in the trees, hissing. Their eyes lit up as they rushed toward the lone woman.

Powerful shots rang out.

Nancy got them as they came closer, now accounting for how fast they moved. She emptied her mag and slammed in another to bring her weapon up and resume firing.

Trisha did the same in the tree next to her, but she wasn't as fast. Her hands were frozen and fear was taking up the space in her brain.

The Snakes and remaining Fanatics concentrated their fire on the vampires, forcing them to stop.

The vampires took shelter in the shade of the alley next to the burning post office, glowering at the Snakes.

Alexa and her men went down into the cellar and locked the door. Above them, undead and Snakes flooded into the radio station, still fighting.

Gunshots came through the wooden floor. Alexa waved her men to the cold concrete corner where they would be protected. She joined them, leaving a thin trail of blood.

They listened to the ugly sounds as Mark distributed the ropes he'd collected, leaving himself short the one that he'd missed. He didn't tell Alexa. He did kneel at her feet and pry her cloak open to check on her wound.

Alexa grimaced as his big fingers dug into her hip and forced the bullet out. It clattered to the floor,

making everyone frown. Fresh blood gushed down her leg.

Daniel cauterized it with his venom, watching in fascination as it burned the hole closed. He had no idea how it worked, but now that he'd seen it, he would let his mind figure it out.

Alexa shut her eyes as the pain ran over her in thick waves. It hadn't been deep due to her thick cloak. She wasn't going to die from it, though the loss of blood might weaken her if she didn't get a chance to replace it.

Edward eased back toward the door as the noise upstairs began to fade. He opened the door to Zaro's two granddaughters. Their eyes overflowed with red tears.

Edward opened his arms.

The girls cowered against him, crying.

Mark shut the door while Edward comforted Zaro's family. Mark could still hear fighting outside, but the radio station had been cleared. He assumed the two girls had done that and was impressed. They were dotted in blood and gore, but appeared to have no injuries. *I can't wait to be like them.*

Both girls turned and hissed at him.

Mark sighed. "I meant no disrespect."

Edward patted their shoulders. "Zaro died defending us. He gained his honor. Do not deny us your bond. We now love him, too."

The girls relaxed. More tears came.

Alexa couldn't take their sadness. "You should go now, before the other hunters come. The fighting isn't over yet."

"Grandfather said to stay with you."

"We caught his last thought."

Alexa sighed. "I'm sorry he died for me."

"He wants us freed from the threat of elimination."

"He died for that, not for you!"

Alexa grunted. "Perhaps, and maybe he came to care for us in the short time we knew him. Who are you to say different?"

Both girls hissed again.

Alexa hissed back, eyes glowing bright red.

The girls shuddered, fear returning.

Alexa went to the door, listening. "The rest of your tribe is returning now. Go with them. You are not safe with us."

The girls clung to Edward.

"He wanted us to stay!"

"We will honor him!"

Alexa didn't want to forcibly remove the girls. She opened the door to make their clan do it.

The somber, bloody vampires waiting on the other side regarded her without sympathy. They didn't want responsibility for the hybrid children either.

Alexa spun away. "Fine. If they die, it's not my doing." She didn't want the girls here. *I can't be responsible for deaths of children, no matter how changed.*

The vampires filled the cellar with their stench as they entered.

Edward shut the door and secured it, gut churning. He realized he was hungry. He looked at Billy, then Daniel. All of them nodded to him. It was the same. *Then Alexa must be famished.*

Alexa nodded, as well. “But it will hold. Right now, handle their injuries and feed the humans among us. Then sleep if you can. The day isn’t over.”

5

“Do you think she counted on Zaro’s clan helping us?” David felt the instant hostility, but he didn’t take it back.

The vampires were piled together near the door, some sleeping, most mourning. Everyone else was lying near Alexa, trying to rest now that they’d eaten and tended injuries, but it was cold, making it hard. David was stewing over everything that had happened since they’d come to this cursed town.

Jacob shrugged at David’s question. “Probably, but she didn’t need their help, not really.”

David wasn’t sure that was true, but he didn’t say so. He was certain Alexa could hear them. He knew the vampires could. Edward’s hearing had become amazing since his change.

Jacob frowned at him. “It was only undead. We had it covered.” Jacob had no doubts about their abilities.

“What about the Snakes?”

“You mean the ones the undead are still ripping apart right now? We didn’t need Zaro’s people for them or the undead. They actually got in the way. I think the boss was going to clear the town right then.”

The vampires in the room frowned or tensed at that revelation.

Jacob glared at David. “If you start doubting her, this won’t work.”

David blanched. “I’m just curious.”

“No, you’re thinking we were trapped and she almost got us killed.” Jacob stood up and moved away. He was surprised any of the crew was feeling doubt, let alone speaking it. He refused to continue the conversation.

David dropped his head, able to feel Alexa’s stare now. “I’m sorry.”

Alexa rolled over and tried to rest, but she made a mental note to spend more time with David so he wouldn’t have to be removed from her crew. If he doubted her, that problem could get them all killed.

Edward went to sit by the former blacksmith. He offered his cold canteen. “Feel like talking?”

David grunted, waving off the drink. “I’ve already said too much.”

“That’s why we should talk.” Edward waited until David looked up at him. “He’s right. Zaro got himself killed. He wasn’t needed, but he wanted to prove they would uphold their end of the deal. We don’t need their help.”

David waited, hoping Edward could prove that. He didn't want to doubt their leader.

"There's only one way to prove it." Alexa's hard voice echoed. "It's dusk now. You can go safely. Leave us."

The vampires rose, taking the two girls against their will. They didn't look at Alexa now. Unlike David, they'd recognized the truth as soon as they heard it.

Billy locked the door behind them. Tense silence filled the room.

David regretted his words and thoughts, but he couldn't help the doubt. He didn't think they needed to do this at all. He wanted to leave all these groups to their own misery. *We're already on a quest. We shouldn't have stayed to help weaken the soldier's enemies.*

"Maybe, but what's done is done." Alexa curled against Mark's warm back and went to sleep.

The other men glared at David for breaking the harmony of their team.

David tolerated it, forcing his mind to the lessons he'd been taught, but inside, he continued to worry.

Edward and Daniel gestured for the others to leave him alone. They'd both had their moments of doubt upon joining her crew. David was having his now. Edward thought the talk of Safe Haven had reminded David of bad things and planted the doubt. Time would prove it to him. When the next attack came, the vampires would not be along.

David would see that their leader knew what she was doing.

Billy held a grudge. He wanted the Snakes and Fanatics gone, and this fight was giving that to him. He finally felt like he had true justice and he wasn't about to let David bring it to an end. If he spoke out again, Billy planned to ask Alexa to let him go.

The Snakes had taken a huge loss that was still continuing. They could hear the occasional gunshot and scream as the undead found hiding survivors or prevented escapes. Some of those women would be hiding in cellars and basements, like they were. Come full dark, Billy hoped Alexa would go root them out once and for all. He hoped none of them walked away. *And if it takes my life to accomplish that, so be it.*

6

"I'm going back to the bunker soon." Trisha pulled her coat closer and dipped her chin inside the neckline.

Nancy didn't answer. She was studying the small clan of Snakes who had survived the invasion attempt. They were also using trees to avoid the undead, even the new clan of arrivals. Nancy didn't see any vampires, but she could feel them out there in the shadows, watching for a chance to kill her.

Trisha also studied the surviving Snakes. She could feel their anger. "They're pissed none of your plans worked."

Nancy snorted. "I didn't tell them to go in yet. That was their mistake."

"I doubt they'll see it that way."

Nancy knew Trisha was right. She began making plans to vanish from this side of town. *They'll see Trisha leaving and follow her, assuming I'm with her. When that happens, I may be able to get into that radio station.*

"Aren't you worried about being alone?" Trisha was scared, but she still wanted protection. "You could come with me."

Nancy's lips thinned. "You could stay and finish the job you accepted."

Trisha flushed. "You're going to get us killed."

"Maybe." Nancy looked over. "Or we'll have success where the others failed."

Trisha sighed. "What's the plan? I'll decide after I hear it."

"I still want to storm their hiding place."

"The Snakes just tried that at the market. Are you nuts?"

Nancy shrugged. "A little, but they won't be expecting it. We'll go in to talk and use the smoke grenades I brought from the armory."

"And then?"

"I roll in two real grenades, and we take cover on each side of the door. As they come out, we shoot them." Nancy smiled coolly. "If no one comes out, we collect heads as proof and go home."

Trisha examined the plan. "Unless she shoots us on sight."

Nancy shrugged. “What’s life without risk?”

Trisha chuckled, confidence restored. “Fine. Radio call first?”

“I think that’s best. We’ll probably have Snakes or Fanatics who want to join our little talk, too, but I’m done with them now. Just follow my lead.”

Trisha nodded, but her guts continued to churn. *I should have stayed in the bunker.*

7

Jeanie hurried by the town, glad she didn’t need to go down there. Shadows were moving through the rubble and destroyed buildings. Jeanie refused to call them vampires. Her mind would only bend so far. She labeled them as deadly predators and moved on.

It wasn’t the first time she’d encountered something odd. She often traded with humans who were strange. Some had giant ears with hair that seemed alive. Others had ferried her over terrain that was too damaged or dangerous to traverse on foot. Several of those encounters had turned deadly for her fellow travelers and companions, but she’d come through unscathed.

Jeanie stayed to the tree line, listening for them to come her way. She hoped the predators were occupied with whatever was going on in that town. If they did approach her, she would handle them the way she always had—a bright cross, her belief in God’s protection, and a warning that hurting her

would trigger Safe Haven's anger. *I'm protected by association.*

Jeanie lifted her chin and moved a little faster. Despite her list of protections, she didn't want to face the predators. She'd had to fight one a couple of years ago and the experience had lingered. If it hadn't been weakened by starvation, she wouldn't be alive now.

Jeanie saw shadows of a large campfire behind the town. She assumed the Snakes were also after whoever was barricaded in there. Again, she didn't care. It wasn't her fight. *My goals are more than the supplies in a town or females to fight my battles, or even a male to satisfy my yearnings. When Safe Haven returns, I'll be a queen. What's a town of supplies compared to that?*

Jeanie vanished into the trees, moving steadily east.

Chapter Ten
Rotten Perfume

1

“How does it feel?”

Daniel knew what Billy meant. “A little odd.”

The rest of the crew, other than Edward, was sleeping until sunrise, or trying to. Edward was patrolling the small cellar, listening for trouble. He knew more was coming soon. He just didn’t know from where yet.

“Yeah. But cool, right?”

“You know it.” Daniel grew serious. “I was thinking about it. I’m not sure that vampires are fantasy creatures.”

Billy frowned. “Why not?”

Daniel rubbed his new fangs with his tongue. “Our incisors were already sharp and pointed.”

Billy shrugged. “So?”

“So we evolve to fit our situations. At least, that’s what they taught us before the war.”

“Go on.”

“What if this is the next evolution? The longer teeth and the ability to consume food that has to be broken through is new for us. None of our factories are running anymore and the farms are gone.”

Daniel rubbed his new teeth again. “These fangs allow us to eat.”

Billy was now intrigued by the conversation. “What else have you added up?”

Daniel lowered his voice. “The speed really isn’t that fast. I mean, it is compared to normals, but they don’t have the need for it, so they don’t have that ability. Now we can move as fast as the animals we need to hunt.”

“Interesting observations.” Edward joined them. “Keep going.”

Daniel did. “Because the food is becoming so scarce, in a few decades, we won’t even have to eat. Remember how Zaro told us he didn’t have to consume anything anymore? His body hardened.”

“But he still needed the blood...right?” Edward wasn’t sure now.

“He said he didn’t need it. He did want it. I think that means if society recovers, we could switch back to normal food.”

“And you think we’d slowly lose the speed and the fangs?”

Daniel nodded at Billy’s guess. “I think vampires are normal for this situation.”

“What about the aversion to sunlight?”

Daniel shrugged at Edward. “The sun heats the chemicals in the sky. It’s poisonous to all of us. If we only go out at night, when it’s colder, we’re not being poisoned. And if we hunt at night, the normals can still use the daytime game sources.”

Edward considered it. “Wait. Why doesn’t it poison the normals?”

Daniel had thought of that, too. “I think it does. They still get sick, get cancers and stuff, but they need a bite from us to force that evolutionary jump. Darwin’s theory of natural selection is still in effect. When the normals figure it out, they’ll start hunting vampires to force it.”

“What about the strength?”

“And the ability to go dim?”

“I’m still working on those.” Daniel fell back into his thoughts.

The two men left him alone, eager to let the biker finish his mental research. The topic was fascinating and soon, all of them would be vampires. It was need-to-know information. It was also interesting to see how Daniel’s mind worked. He hadn’t been a scientist before the war and yet he was often brilliant. Edward considered the biker to be one of the smartest members of this crew.

“Hey! In the station! Turn on your radio!”

Everyone looked up or woke up at the voice yelling outside the station.

Alexa checked her watch. “4 a.m. She’s early.” Alexa motioned them to comply.

“Hey! In the cellar of the radio station!”

Edward keyed the mike. “If you keep yelling like that, you might wake the dead.”

Alexa and the others snickered as the radio crackled.

“Very funny. Get your boss.”

Alexa shook her head.

Edward settled down next to her. “She’s sleeping. Can I take a message?”

There was a long pause where they could feel the woman deciding how to respond.

“She’ll try to get under my skin now, so I come out.” Alexa began to roll a smoke from the butts Edward had been collecting. “Make it backfire.”

Edward grinned as the radio lit up again.

“Your father also liked hands-on training. It got a lot of his men killed.”

“Those men must have forgotten their training.” Edward began pushing random buttons. “Is that why you’re here? To prove you aren’t a failed Eagle?”

“I’m here to talk to your boss, funny man. I’m at your door. Open up so we can talk.”

Alexa shook her head again.

Edward pushed harder as the rest of the crew got away from the door. “Like I said, she’s sleeping, and I suspect you’d be a rude guest anyway. Maybe one of your Snake friends can keep you company. I’d love to see a pillow fight if you have a slumber party.”

Fury came through the radio even though the woman’s voice didn’t change. “I’m going to kill you.”

“Maybe, but you’d better enlist more help. Perhaps the Fanatics.” He grinned again. “I happen to know they’re short a leader.”

Silence came back. Edward waited patiently, enjoying the oral fight.

Alexa motioned him to put away the radio, running through the woman's answers and tones. The bunker hunter was mad, but she hadn't snapped.

Edward was disappointed. He keyed the mike to try one more time. "You have a sexy voice. Are you for rent? I could really use a blowjob."

Gunshots echoed. Slugs slammed into the cellar door.

Alexa nodded approval. "If your enemies lose control, they'll make a mistake."

Edward stored the radio. "What happens now?"

Alexa's voice hardened. "Shortly, we'll go out and clear the entire town to prove to David that we don't need help."

David winced as the others glared at him, but he didn't apologize. The time for that was over. Now, she would prove it and he would get to carry the shame for the rest of their time together. It was his punishment for doubting her.

Alexa began checking her guns. Her crew followed her lead.

2

"Loot that last body and we'll rest until sunset. Vampires don't usually come out in the daytime."

Trisha nodded without reminding Nancy that it had already happened.

Nancy swept the town slowly, pinpointing threats and items she could use. There wasn't much of either. The fires were burning the buildings before she could loot them, and the undead were gathered around those fires. She didn't spot anyone alive, but she could feel eyes on them. She assumed it was the remaining Snake clan waiting for an opportunity to come down from the trees. Many of them had died in the fight, but at least a hundred had escaped the undead trap.

Trisha knelt to search a gory Snake woman, grumbling. *None of Nancy's plans worked. And I'm very cold. She's got one more chance and then I'm out of here.* Trisha didn't want to go back to the bunker emptyhanded despite being afraid she was going to die. Marcella punished hunters harshly for failure. Going back there now didn't necessarily mean she would live.

Nancy went toward the market, stepping over corpses in the blood streaked slush. It was the only building not burning or smoldering, other than the radio station. She listened for Trisha to follow, not sure if she would help the woman if the undead noticed her and attacked. Standing still, with heads cocked, they were making low noises of sadness that gave Nancy chills. *I don't care how I die, so long as I'm not like that afterward.*

She went up to the top floor of the market. It only took a minute to see she'd never had a chance to hit Alexa. The brick walls were perfect protection.

Wait... She knelt to examine a tacky blood spot under the first shattered window. *I did hit one of them.*

Nancy dropped down with her back to the wall and began sorting through the loot she'd gathered. She was low on ammunition now, thanks to losing her temper. Having a man talk to her that way had been infuriating. It had triggered her illness. Need was running up and down her body in a constant reminder that she had the rage disease.

Trisha came up the steps, storing loot in her pockets. "Should I block the door somehow?"

"No. If the undead come up here, we'll handle it. There's only a couple dozen left." Nancy dug in her pockets for her last box of ammunition.

"That's enough to rush us."

Nancy snorted. "To rush you, maybe. I'm faster than that with my gun, and those steps will make a great slide and block as they fall."

Trisha leaned against a wall, watching. She didn't share her loot.

Nancy reloaded her rifle, then stored the few remaining shells in her pocket. She didn't share hers either now that she was low.

Nancy got her radio out and tuned it to the private bunker channel. "I'm calling for my check in." She waited, taking a protein bar out to chew on.

The bunker responded right away. "Go ahead with your report."

"I've had five losses. Requesting backup."

"Standby for an answer."

Nancy hated the smug voice who would now get to spread her failure through the bunker.

Trisha also ate a protein bar, almost sure the answer was going to be negative. No one else had wanted to challenge this target before the newest losses. Now, even the offered reward wouldn't be enough to tempt them out of safety.

The radio lit up. "The boss says she can't spare more warm bodies. Find your own."

"Copy." Nancy changed the channel on the radio. "I just found a Mitchel in Bridgeport, at the radio station! She's wounded and trapped! Who wants to help me kill her?!"

Trisha winced at the shouting. She went to the window to see if the undead were responding.

They weren't. It was like the fires had them hypnotized.

The radio lit up in garbles, though not as many as Nancy had hoped for. She waited for it to clear. "They can't have much food or water in that cellar. They'll have to come out for that or for fresh blood."

Trisha believed that was true. She just didn't want to be here when Alexa decided to reclaim the town. *I should have said no. The reward can't be enjoyed if I'm dead.*

Nancy keyed the radio. "Anyone who comes here should hide at night and travel by day. I lost my crew to night fighting." Nancy didn't want to say vampires and zombies. Despite the odd changes in their world, many people still refused to admit those creatures existed.

Nancy shut off the radio while responses were still coming in, and stored it. Her mind went back to the man who'd been so rude, so arrogant. *I want that one alive.* “Stop wasting energy with your pacing. The undead are drawn to fire like old malls. They won't move until the flames are gone or unless they scent blood.”

Trisha believed her. They'd looted bodies all around the groups of undead and none of them had reacted. She stopped pacing and studied Nancy instead. “Tell me about Safe Haven.”

Nancy shrugged, willing to spend the wait talking instead of staring at the destroyed town. “What do you want to know?”

“How long were you with them?”

“Most of a year.”

“Why did you leave?”

Nancy frowned. “Leadership changed. I couldn't handle that adjustment.”

“Was it really as good as the stories say?”

Nancy sighed. “For a while. Then the leader was replaced and everything changed.”

“You mean Adrian.”

Nancy nodded. Her mind went to the nights in his tent. Her face tightened. “When they left, he went with them. I couldn't.”

“Why not? You obviously love him.”

“He didn't understand that leaving was wrong.”

Trisha grunted. “You still think they should have stayed.”

“Yes.” Nancy gestured in annoyance. “They ran and our country deteriorated.”

Trisha zipped her coat up the rest of the way as a fresh draft blew in through the broken windows. “I wanted to go with them. I couldn’t get to the shore in time.”

Nancy wasn’t surprised. “So why are you fighting with us instead of joining the few who believe Safe Haven are the heroes who will come back to rescue them?”

Trisha glared, voice dropping to sarcasm. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“Because I’m not a convert. I never have been. Answer the question.”

Trisha slid down and leaned against the wall. “I saw one of them kill an entire beach of refugees. I know they can’t be trusted. And I think male slavery will be good for everyone.”

Nancy snorted, but she didn’t say more on the subject. She also liked the slavery law. *When Safe Haven comes back, Adrian will be enslaved. With this reward from the bunker, I’ll get to claim him and then he’ll be with me forever.* “You should sleep if you can. The next battle will be just as ugly as what we’ve already faced.”

Trisha shut her eyes, but she didn’t go to sleep. She continued to regret her decision to assist on this run. *I don’t think I’m getting out of this one.*

“Let her go!”

“We will shoot you!”

Abigail’s eyes turned red.

Marcella choked as the mental grip on her throat tightened. Dark bruises in the shapes of small fingers appeared.

The main door opened. Selma hurried in, carrying a cup. She’d caught Marcella’s cutoff call for help and knew what had happened. Nancy had requested help and been denied. Her daughter wasn’t happy about it. “Abby, you have to let her go.” She stepped between the guards and the child so they couldn’t shoot. “I’ll help your mom. I promise.”

Abigail let go. Her eyes faded to brown sadness. “Want my mommy.”

Marcella fell to her knees, coughing and gasping.

Selma held up the colorful sippy cup. “Chocolate powdered milk?”

“Yummy!” Abigail snatched the cup and began guzzling it down.

Marcella let Selma help her up. Neither of them spoke. They listened to the child slurp while watching the slave who was still cowering in the corner to avoid coming bullets. Abigail had been happily playing with him until the call came in from her mother.

Abigail let out a loud belch. She dropped the cup and clapped. “Play more!”

Selma waved at the slave. “Keep her happy.”

The nervous man went to the playpen and resumed their game of Pattycake.

Selma handed her boss a bottle of water to soothe her throat, able to see hatred in her expression. There was also fear. Selma rubbed Marcella's shoulder, then left.

Marcella rubbed her throat and pretended to study the slave. He was branded and wearing their new slave clothes. His head had been shaved and his tongue had been cut out. He was also kept hungry to make sure he couldn't overpower any of them. All their adult males were being handled that way. She saw the little girl yawn.

Abigail's eyes drooped. "Nappy now."

The male slave gently laid her down and covered her up with the thick quilt, remembering doing it for his son before the war.

Abigail grabbed his wrist. Her eyes lit up bright red. Magic settled over him. *Protect me.*

The slave smiled at her as the charm took effect. Abigail drifted off.

The male curled up in front of her playpen, listening for Marcella's footsteps. If she threatened the child, he was going to kill her even if he was shot in the process. No one would be allowed to hurt the little girl.

Marcella left the room, glad Selma had thought to drug the milk. She wanted to kill the girl, but they needed her too much. That type of power was rare and the fight against the soldiers was sure to be ugly.

Marcella went to the plush side of the bunker, where the descendants lived.

There were luxuries here that people hadn't enjoyed since the war, like televisions with VCRs and stereos with unlimited music. She kept the magic users happy to ensure their cooperation. She didn't usually come to this side of the bunker, to avoid the temptation of using it herself, but she needed someone to charm the child or lock her gifts until they were needed and it had to be before she woke up.

Ten descendants stood up in respect as Marcella entered. One of them stepped forward. They'd already read the boss's thoughts and decided who would be best to handle it.

"I can do either." Lorey made sure her voice was emotionless. "The lock is more effective, but it will cause her to get angrier. The memory charm will only hold until the next time Nancy is in danger or until she dies."

Marcella motioned the woman to go on. "Do both."

"As you wish."

Marcella scanned those remaining, then joined two of them at the large card table. "How is the training coming?"

"Good."

"We're almost ready."

Marcella heard the doubt in their voices. She sighed. "Work harder. The soldiers have three times our number, confirmed now with a sighting of their

camp. If you fail, we all fall. Every female will become a slave, including all of you.”

The descendants immediately got up and returned to the training room despite just finishing their daily workout.

Marcella stayed at the table, cooling off. When the alarm blared, she wasn't surprised. Abigail had charmed the passive slave right in front of her. All his retraining hadn't meant anything against magic. *If the soldiers convince enough descendants to fight for them, I'll probably lose my life. Everything I have planned for the future will be buried under the rubble. I can't let that happen.*

Marcella continued to stew on her plans and everything that could go wrong.

Selma joined her at the table a few minutes later. She waited to be spoken to, also considering their weaknesses. She had ideas, but she wasn't sure the boss was ready to hear them.

Marcella finally looked up.

Selma sighed. “We removed the male. The child has been charmed and locked. She's still sleeping.”

“And?”

“And it's not going to work. Unless we think of something else, that little girl will kill us both.” Selma drew on her courage. “But if you send me out to help her mother, we're good for a bit.”

“I need you here.”

“Maybe. I have an idea.” Selma leaned closer. “I can kill Alexa, then infiltrate the soldiers and learn their plans. Or maybe just kill their leader. Our

reports say they hate magic, so they won't have anyone who can read me to know what I'm doing."

Marcella immediately liked the plan. "Don't tell me any more. My order is for you to help Nancy bring in the Mitchel. What else you do during that run is your business."

Selma smiled. "It'll be better this way. You'll be safe and we'll find out what our enemies are doing."

Marcella didn't want the woman to leave. *And that's all the more reason that she should. I can't afford attachments to anyone.*

Marcella stood. "Happy hunting." She left without looking back. *It's time to release my hounds for backup. I don't like how this is going.* The hell hounds were in the escape tunnels in the bottom of the bunker, ready and waiting to be used. Marcella headed that way, pretending a coolness she no longer felt.

Selma went to gather her things and gear, only thinking about helping Nancy. True thoughts weren't safe in here. Once she was outside, she could think of the real reason she wanted to leave. Until then, she was too vulnerable.

4

"That's four." Green made sure the ropes were tight around his captive's wrists. "We'll go out in the morning for the last one."

He swept the women huddled together in the rear of the small cave. This area was littered with the rock shelters, though they always had to be cleared before use. Nature's army also liked caves.

So far, they had one Fanatic, two Snakes, and a farmer who'd been trying to keep her greenhouse plants alive instead of leaving the area. All of them had minor injuries and wore glares that promised retribution.

Green turned to his twitchy men. He'd brought five of them along. He had already lost one to the Snakes. The others had injuries and frowns that said getting them to go out tomorrow would require a clever plan or a great bribe. It was cold and dangerous outside, but in here, they had a small fire and now, females.

Green sighed, rubbing blood off his arm. The Fanatic had stabbed him when he pulled her from the shed where she'd been hiding. The Snakes had been out in the open, but they'd spotted the patrol and decided they needed new slaves. *Or meat.* He didn't know which, but it hadn't worked out for them. The farmer hadn't tried to fight or run, like she'd been expecting them. Green doubted finding a fifth captive would be as quick.

I can help you with that.

Green spun around. "Who's there?!" He stepped to the entrance of the small cave, drawing his gun as his men did the same behind him. They were all wearing heavy gear, but they didn't have bulletproof vests anymore. Those had run out as

they crossed the Midwest. Once a plate cracked, it was no longer usable.

A tall shadow stepped from behind a tree. A struggling female was under his arm.

Jason smiled casually. "Hello."

Green frowned in confusion, gun lowering at the sight of a man. "What do you want?"

"To assist in your quest." Jason tightened his grip on the woman. "You need a fifth captive, do you not?"

Green slowly nodded, not trusting the magic user who had gotten into his head so fast. Still, it was better than a female. "In exchange?"

Jason stepped closer. "Consider it my contribution to your cause." He shoved the woman forward.

Green caught her out of reflex. He wrapped her up tight, dropping his gun. "Sergeant Smith! Get out here!"

Smith was already behind him. His gun was pointed at the stranger.

Jason held up his hands. "I just came to drop her off and wish you luck. I want males free, too."

"Hold still!" Green jerked the woman around and shoved her into Smith's arms. "Tie her up."

The other men hurried to subdue her.

Stephanie saw the four other captives and ran back toward the entrance.

Green tripped her. She fell at his feet. "You won't be hurt. Calm down."

Jason nodded. “Be nice to them, especially this one. She has a missing husband. She isn’t really a man hater—yet.”

Stephanie looked up at the descendant, glaring. “You’ll pay for this!”

Jason sighed. “I am sorry, but male slavery cannot be allowed. These men will treat you well. In return, you will perform a chore for them come spring.”

Stephanie crossed her arms over her ample chest. “No, I won’t. I’ll turn them in the first chance I get. I’ll poison their food or kill them while they sleep.”

“Even if I rescue your husband?”

Stephanie gaped, hostility fading a bit. “Why would you do that?”

“I told you many times already during the walk here. I want men to be free.”

She slowly added the clues. “You want me to convince the other females.”

Jason nodded. “Yes. In return, I will rescue your husband and deliver him to the main group of soldiers. He will be with you all winter. Come spring, you and the others will do your duty to our cause.”

Stephanie looked around the cave, seeing the headshakes and glowers of the other women. She also saw their fear of being alone with the men, of being hurt by them. “I might.”

Jason sighed. “What else do you want?”

She pointed. “Heal their injuries. I know you can because you took care of mine.”

Green frowned. “We were going to tend them. We haven’t had time yet.” They’d just secured the cold cave and made a fire. He’d been about to evaluate their captives when Jason arrived.

Jason walked by him without fear. “Save your supplies. I’ve got this covered.”

“Who are you?” Green holstered and followed the tall, thin man who had arms twice the size of his own. It was an odd mix.

“Jason Pruett.”

Green knelt by the fire to fill his cup. “We were told the Pruett family was fighting with the bunker women.”

“The females are. The men are in hiding.” Jason’s face darkened. “Or they’re dead.”

Jason sat down in front of the captives. He stared at each one of them as he connected. Then he began to show them awful memories of how he survived the war, of how his wife had sold their newborn to the Snakes, of losing his other son to the Fanatics. Each memory was awful.

The women tried to resist feeling anything for him, but his pain was too strong. Even the Snakes were saddened by his story.

Jason broke the connection. He held out a hand. “Can I heal your injuries? I need your permission.”

All of the women nodded. They had everything from minor scrapes and bruises to bleeding slices that needed to be cauterized.

Green was impressed and grateful. Jason had begun the bonding process for him.

It only took a minute to heal them all. Jason had perfected his skills since losing his family. He stayed with the women as Green watched and drank his coffee. “I’ve made a deal with Stephanie. What can I offer to the rest of you?” He looked at the farmer first. “Do you also have family I can track?”

The older woman shook her head, marveling at how good she now felt. He’d healed her old injuries, too. “All dead in the first war. I just wanted to work my farm and be left alone.”

Green cleared his throat. “You could stay with us when we take the bunker. We need someone to teach us how to grow food.”

Her green eyes brightened. Hope came into her voice. “I’ll get to be a teacher?”

Green nodded. “And protected.”

She slowly nodded, wild golden hair bobbing. “I could do that.”

Jason moved to the BLM agent next.

The dirty, thin woman lifted her chin. “I can’t be bought so easily.”

“But you do have a price. I smell the greed. It covers you like a rotten perfume.”

The agent grunted, fingers picking at her chipped pink fingernail polish around the rope. “I want what the bunker women promised us for helping them.”

“Ah. Leadership, men, safety.” Jason looked up at Green.

Green sighed. “Men and safety aren’t a problem, but I doubt my CO would give any female leadership after everything we’ve been through.”

The agent glared. “Then no deal.”

Jason thought about it. “What about leadership of the women?”

The agent’s brown eyes lit up.

Green nodded. “That I can give, providing she leads them with honor and doesn’t start a new uprising.”

“Deal.” The agent was tired of the fighting and the constant struggle for survival. She also hated not being able to wash her hair. The long black ponytail was full of matts and tangles. If the world got back to normal, women would be given items for washing. *Men liked us clean and smelling good.*

Everyone looked at the Snakes.

Both scale covered women hissed at the men with forked togues. Of the five women, they were the only ones in good shape. Their cloaks weren’t torn and dirty, and their bodies weren’t thin. They hadn’t been starving. They couldn’t be bribed with food or shampoo.

“They won’t be allowed in the bunker.” Green sent the next part silently so only the descendant caught it. *Our CO will kill them once they’ve gotten us in. We hate them too much to make peace.*

“I see.” Jason found another solution. “What if they went west, with an escort to make sure they really go? That environment is perfect for them and terrible for you.”

“Maybe.” Green wasn’t sure. “Just these two or all of them?”

“All of usss!”

“Yesss! All!”

Green shrugged. “If they give us something else, maybe.”

Jason kept going. “Like what?”

“No more hunting men or eating human flesh. Those will be forbidden after we take the bunker.”

Both Snakes hissed again at Green’s demands.

Jason negotiated. “Unless they’re attacked?”

Now the Snakes hesitated.

Green nodded. “Self-defense can be allowed. And they can hunt anyone who supports male slavery. They’d have to spare all males and children, though. My CO will go for that.”

“Dealsss!”

The Fanatic laughed at all of them. “Make deals all day long. You’ll never defeat the bunker. They have descendants and all the weapons left over from the war. They spend hours training every day.” She sneered. “I can’t be bought at all.”

Jason dug into her mind. He spotted a single memory of happiness and grabbed it. “One of the descendants will give you another child so you can have our power for that nine months.”

The Fanatic froze.

Jason pushed harder. “*I’ll* give you a child.”

“Deal!”

Jason held up both hands, gathering energy. “We will seal this deal in magic. If you break it,

ladies, horrible deaths will chase you and anyone you love.” He cast the powerful spell. Then he stood, long cloak dragging through the dirt. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a man named Frank to rescue. Thank you for your hospitality.” He looked at the Fanatic and sent a wave of heat. “We will see each other again.”

The Fanatic blushed.

Jason left.

Green motioned to his shocked men. “Get them fed. Find them coats and gloves.” Most of the women were shivering in the torn clothes they’d been wearing upon capture. “We’ll head for our camp as soon as the snow stops.”

Green didn’t say they would also be rolling by Bridgeport. If his men found that out, it would cause new problems. *But I’m going there, even if I have to do it alone. I need to know that Alexa can handle everything that’s coming for her.*

Chapter Eleven
Testing My Honor
December 9th

1

Jason moved south at a steady pace, not minding the cold wind or the light sleet falling over the dirt path. He'd pulled enough information from Stephanie's mind to know the descendant holding her husband captive was gunning for Alexa. It made sense that hunter would go to the town and try to trap her. He'd also heard the radio calls and felt the magic use. It would only take him half a day to get there. He'd decided to stay on foot to attract less attention even though it meant being on the tree lined main roads.

Jason enjoyed the weather. It made the apocalyptic landscape seem beautiful. Hardly anything else had that effect now. *I've been alone too long. I'm growing bitter.*

Jason refused to think of the past. He'd used it to reach the scared women, but he didn't want to waste time on it now. *I'm already depressed. No need to make it worse.*

Jason heard engines and kept walking. They were ahead of him. The noise was fading, telling him the vehicles were heading south. He expected

to arrive after that fight. *Alexa Mitchel doesn't need me. I need her.*

He planned to join Safe Haven's fight when they returned. With that force, men would be freed and the country would slowly start to regain normal life even if they couldn't put it all back the way it had been.

The offer to join her crew did appeal to him, but Jason didn't plan to try for that coveted spot. It would mean leaving America and he wasn't ever going to do that. *I was born here. I've been here all my life. I'll die here when it's time. Until then, I'll fight to free men from slavery and put the world back the way it was. Alexa can help me with that. I just have to convince her that she should.*

He was certain many of their kind were now considering her offer or were already on the way to claim it. There would be battles for it. Jason already knew none of those would be accepted. Killing their own kind wouldn't earn her loyalty. Only helping the innocent, like she'd stated, would earn that slot. The problem was that this part of the country didn't have many innocent people left. Jason didn't know about the west or the north. He hadn't been there yet. *But I'm almost certain I will go at some point. I'm too restless to keep prowling the same states much longer. Come spring, it might be time to head west and work on the cause there...or maybe I'll just hunt down my wife and strangle her.*

“Can I travel with you?”

Jason flinched at the voice. His shield came up before he considered the consequences.

“Sorry.” Carolyn dropped from the tree next to him. “I assumed you already knew I was here.”

Jason studied her, not lowering his protective barrier. Her worn black coat hid weapons that he wasn’t scared of, but he was ashamed and angry he hadn’t known she was there. “What do you want?”

“I told you that already.” Carolyn stayed ready to run in case she’d judged him wrong. Any magic user was dangerous and this one had a build that said he didn’t need the guns in his tool belt. Add that to watching him bury a body and caution was common sense.

Jason scanned the woman, picking out her thin body and bright eyes. She wasn’t a threat to him, but she felt familiar. “Who are you?”

“A survivor.”

Jason snorted. That was obvious by the scars, the bald head, and sores that looked old. “Why do you want to travel with me? You don’t even know where I’m going.”

“I’m hoping you have food to share. I have bullets to trade for it.” Her gaze narrowed. “Though you probably don’t need them.”

Jason could see bones poking through her skin. He felt bad for her, but he didn’t relax yet. “You have a name?”

“Carolyn.” She didn’t hold out her hand to shake. That form of greeting wasn’t used anymore. “You’re going south, right? To Bridgeport.”

Jason tensed again.

Carolyn didn't make any sudden moves that might trigger the dangerous anger she could feel building in him. "I'm going to help her."

"Why?"

"I owe Safe Haven a debt. I'm trying to pay it."

Jason didn't read a lie in her tone or her mind. He did catch flashes of Safe Haven that made him believe her. He didn't dig deeper. "The Mitchel doesn't need help from outsiders."

"Then why are you going?" Carolyn got it an instant later. "Oh. You want the job she offered."

Jason didn't confirm or deny. He stared at the thin woman, running through the options. He picked one, then braced to kill her if she revealed herself a liar. "There's a small group of soldiers near here. They could use your help to infiltrate the bunker. The women they have for it aren't very willing."

Her eyes lit up, sparkling. The hope faded just as fast. "They wouldn't be able to do that for a while—maybe not until spring, now that it's snowing." She sighed.

Jason was surprised she knew that. "Why can't you wait that long?" As soon as he asked, he knew what was coming.

"I'm dying." She shrugged off his instant pity. "I've earned it. Save that shit for someone else."

He frowned. "You really didn't come to see if I can heal you."

“I already know you can’t.” She forced a cheery smile. “I came for food and company I can trust on the road.”

“How do you know I fit that bill?”

She shrugged. “I was at the cave. I heard it all. I also saw your story with everyone else. I’m sorry for your losses.”

Jason lowered his shield and began walking. “So am I.”

Carolyn fell in next to him, relieved. She’d learned to live with a meal every few days. Water was much easier to find than food, but good company was almost a myth.

“Cancer?”

“Yes.”

Jason sighed. He really couldn’t heal that as far as he knew. *But that doesn’t mean I can’t try it after I eat and rest.* “There’s a turkey ahead of us. Keep walking when I move.”

“You got it.” Her stomach growled loudly. She flushed.

Jason drew his bow and notched an arrow. He took off running an instant later.

Carolyn kept walking, hoping he wasn’t ditching her. Unlike him, she didn’t have the ability to read his thoughts and know for sure that he was trustworthy. She was basing it on his actions and not the body she’d first found him burying. That person might have deserved it, or it could have been a friend or family member. She wasn’t comfortable asking.

Five minutes later, Carolyn was almost sure he'd left her. She kept walking, hoping to find something edible on the way. When she'd told him that she was trying to pay on a debt, she'd been telling the truth. The stomach cancer eating at her had taken years to get really bad, but she felt death coming to her soon. If she died helping one of those Safe Haven had left behind, she could go in peace.

I'm coming up behind you.

Carolyn's heart thumped in happiness at his voice in her head. She quickly smothered it. Hope was for others, not her.

Jason finished tying the turkey to his belt, letting it drain while he walked. He matched Carolyn's speed, fighting the feeling of welcome she'd first sent out. Like the other descendants, he wanted to be needed, but he'd sworn off being part of a group or crew years ago. One quick encounter with a doomed survivor wasn't going to change that.

Carolyn found another burst of strength as she considered what dinner would be like tonight. She hadn't had meat in weeks.

Jason dug in his pouch and came up with a piece of dried deer. He took a bite to prove it wasn't poisoned and handed the rest to her.

Carolyn didn't eat it yet. "The price?"

Jason grunted, thinking fast. "Help me cook. I burn things."

Carolyn began chewing, stomach churning. *He's too nice. I can't stay with him long or I'll get attached.*

Jason nodded. "Same here. When we reach the town, we'll go our own way."

"Agreed." She finished the meat, already dreading that moment. *How the hell did these feelings happen so fast?* She thought about leaving now. The piece of dried meat would keep her going another day or two.

"Please don't." Jason looked over at her. "I'm sorry."

She frowned. "For what? You haven't done anything wrong yet."

Jason sighed unhappily. "My kind draws people. We don't always mean to."

"Did you mean to this time?"

He nodded, voice uneasy. "I've been lonely."

"Did you charm me?"

"No. I didn't need to. Did I?"

"No." She settled into the walk. "This won't end well."

"No. It never does." Jason smiled at her. "But we'll enjoy the good while it happens and face hell later."

She smiled back, unable to resist. "Agreed."

Jason put a hand out.

Carolyn slowly did the same. She hadn't touched another person since before the war.

Magic floated over her as he grasped her hand. The sores on her head and neck healed.

Jason let go, glad he could help her a little.

“Wow.” Carolyn felt her head. The pain was gone there. She sent out gratitude without meaning to.

Jason stumbled. He caught himself, frowning. Her happiness hit him hard. *I’ve definitely been alone too long.*

“I have to pay for that.” Carolyn sucked in a breath of courage. “Sex? Slavery?”

Jason scowled, eyes lighting up.

Carolyn put space between them, but she refused to back down. “Nothing’s free in Afterworld.”

Jason didn’t answer. She was right, but she didn’t have anything he wanted except her company.

Carolyn wished she could read his mind. “I mean it. Name your price.”

“Can’t you just accept a gift?”

She frowned. “No.”

“Well, you have to. I can’t take it back.” He walked faster, hoping she would let it go.

Carolyn began trying to think of a way to pay the new debt. *I don’t believe in gifts.* She scanned his long cloak and the clothes under it. She also spotted ragged hair and jagged fingernails. “I can sew your clothes. And give you a haircut and stuff.”

“Fine.” He was willing to let her do those things if it made her feel better.

“I’ll clean the turkey, too. And cook it. You can tell me what to do.”

Jason stopped, turning to face her.

Carolyn froze, hoping he wasn't about to tell her to get lost. *If he does, I'll follow him and still try to pay him back.*

"If I accept the sex, will you let this go?"

She slowly nodded, heart starting to pound.

"Fine. When we make camp, you'll pleasure yourself and I'll watch. Then we're even."

"That's not..." She assumed he liked to watch. She also assumed she was too scarred for him. Her sadness reached a new level.

Jason rolled his eyes. "It's a no-win with you."

"I'm sorry."

He sighed. "So am I." Jason removed the turkey from his belt and thrust it at her. "Sewing, cooking, haircut. No sex unless you're willing and it's not to pay a debt." He took off walking at a fast pace.

Carolyn hurried to catch up, not sure how she'd insulted him. "Please don't be mad."

Jason shook his head. "I hate this new world."

"Me, too." It was another thing they had in common. She saw his red cheeks and understood what he wasn't saying. *He does want the sex, but willing matters. Interesting. Most people now don't care about anything but a fair trade.*

"I follow the old ways." His cheeks turned even redder. "And I have pride. I've never paid for it and I refuse to start now."

Carolyn snickered. "That's cute."

"It's not cute! It's called honor."

Her smile faded. "You're dangerous."

“Because I have honor?”

“Yes.” She didn’t tell him that was attractive. She wasn’t with him for that. *I have a goal. I’m not going to be distracted from it.*

“Same.” Jason heard her tie the turkey to her belt. “We need wood for the fire.”

Carolyn immediately began grabbing small logs and placing them in her pockets so they would thaw by the time they made camp.

Jason kept watch over her, smothering the desire she’d caused with her offer. He wasn’t turned off by her scars or bald head, or even her disease. He couldn’t catch any of that. He was bothered because he already wanted to accept her offer and hear her moaning his name. He hid his shame and kept moving south. *I’m an honorable man. I do not take advantage of the weak, no matter how sexy their eyes are.*

Jason scanned for a place to camp and sleep. He chose a shallow cave set into the side of a short hill. “Stay out here and keep watch.” He went in before she could protest.

Carolyn listened for trouble, ignoring her clenching stomach. The meat had been needed, but it also hurt to have food in there after it had been empty for so long.

The cave was long, narrow, and taller than it looked from the outside. The dust said no one had been in here for a long time. There were no animal prints either. Jason was relieved. Bears liked caves.

“You can come in.” He began making a firepit in the rear.

“Why are we stopping now?”

He dug faster. “I walked all night. I’m tired.”

Carolyn stood watch at the entrance, not believing him.

Jason erected a simple spit for roasting. When he finished, she went a few feet away and began to clean the turkey.

Jason stood watch this time, taking quick glances to be sure she knew what she was doing. When she yanked all the feathers, then began rubbing the carcass with wild sage leaves, he smiled. *She knows how to cook. Excellent.*

Carolyn felt his pleasure. She refused to respond as she finished the seasoning and then rammed one of her sticks through the bird. She took it inside and placed it on the spit he’d built. Then she went back out and collected the innards.

Jason watched her mash them and wrap them in leaves, assuming she would place them near the fire. Nothing was thrown away. In an apocalypse, people didn’t have the luxury of picking only the parts they liked.

Carolyn dug in her pockets for the tubers she’d been digging every morning. She cleaned them with the last of her water, then took it all in to the fire.

Jason’s stomach growled this time.

Carolyn chuckled. She used her only pot to combine the tubers and a few other greens she’d found. She put the pot on the edge of the fire with

the wrapped innards, then went back outside. “I’ll find some water.”

Jason pointed behind the cave. “I can hear it.”

“I can smell it.” She went without expecting an escort.

She found the small creek without trouble. Carolyn filled both canteens, eyeing the clean water. She sniffed her pits and grimaced. A quick bath wouldn’t hurt. She quickly stripped and jumped in, smothering a shout at the chill.

Jason worried the entire time she was gone. He knew it was irrational, but he couldn’t help it. He hadn’t been responsible for another human being in years. He hated the feeling.

Jason waited impatiently for her to return. When ten minutes passed, he began to stress. At fifteen, he started to get angry. When twenty minutes had gone by, he went looking for her.

2

Carolyn shivered as she dried off with her dirty shirt. The water had felt great and terrible at the same time, but now she was freezing. She tried to hurry into the only clean clothes she had, teeth chattering.

Jason stopped in shock at the sight. He was frozen in place.

Carolyn felt his hot eyes on her. She pulled on the long grey shirt and worn jeans before turning around.

He was gone.

She frowned. *I know he was here.*

She pulled on her shoes, grabbed the two canteens, and hurried back to the cave.

Jason didn't look up from the book he was reading.

She glared at him. "You don't need to check up on me. I've been fine on my own for years."

"I'll remember that." He turned the page, not seeing the words. All his mind had room for was the memory of her perfect naked ass.

Carolyn hunkered down by the fire to warm up and put the canteens in it to boil them. "I'm sorry I took so long. I didn't mean to make you worry."

"I wasn't worried."

She glanced over. "The why did you come looking for me?"

Jason refused to respond. He didn't think he could without sleazing on her and he refused to do that. *Willing matters. As long as she views it as a trade or payment, I'm not doing it.*

Carolyn began digging in her backpack for scissors. "Are you ready for that haircut?"

He flinched at the thought of her touching him right now. "No."

She sighed. "Take off your cloak. I'll sew it."

Jason did it reluctantly.

Carolyn stared at his thin body and huge arms, eyes not sure if they were being tricked. “How do you do that?”

Jason scowled at her. “You talk a lot.”

“I am a female.” Carolyn shrugged, assuming it was something painful that he hadn’t shown to the captives with the soldiers. “Give it here.”

Jason held out the cloak, mind now in the haze of his survival. “I had to dig out of a lab. It took months while I starved. Now my body sends all protein to my arms first.”

“Oh. That sucks.” She flashed a smile. “They look good, though.”

Heat flared in his eyes.

Carolyn settled down with his cloak and her sewing kit. “My offer still stands.” She didn’t think it would be as hard now to give him a service.

Jason snarled. “Stop testing my honor!”

Carolyn shut up and got to work. *He’s so odd.*

Jason caught the thought. He snorted, but didn’t make the awkward situation worse. He went back to his book and tried to ignore her clean smell. He refused to think about the sleeping arrangements.

It only lasted a minute before he opened his mouth. “Where are you from?”

“New Baltimore.”

Jason’s brows drew together. “I’ve been through there. Not much of a town.”

Carolyn grunted. “Just trailer parks and meth labs.”

“Is that why you haven’t gone back there and tried to rebuild?”

“There’s nothing to rebuild. It was destroyed even before the war.” Carolyn switched the limelight to him. “Where are you from?”

“Tennessee.”

“Ever go back?”

Jason’s face fell. “Many times. The graves of my sons are there.” His mood plummeted. The headstones were there. The bodies hadn’t been recoverable.

Carolyn felt bad she’d asked. She resisted the urge to find out if his wife was also dead. “Who was the body in the woods?”

She was the one following me! Jason didn’t glance up, not wanting to see the fear on her face. “An innocent woman whose sister didn’t want the competition.”

She scowled. “Doesn’t it bother you to kill people?”

“Not if they’re bad...or female.”

Carolyn understood he was scarred by her kind. After what she’d done to her own son, she thought he was probably right to feel that way. Women were often brutal now. All the misery from before the war had turned into incredible bitterness that was being driven by the rage illness.

“Do you have it, too?”

Carolyn shrugged. “I’ve never been tested.”

“But?”

“I feel sane, so I don’t think so.”

“I wonder if the cancer counteracts it somehow.”

“Maybe. Maybe I just didn’t have contact with an infected person.”

“I think it’s in the air.”

She shrugged, not wanting to talk about it. “About three hours on that bird.” She rolled over into her bedroll. “Wake me when it’s done and I’ll serve.”

Jason watched her get settled, mind spinning. It felt wrong to be around people again. It also felt amazing.

3

“This is really good.” Jason took another big bite of the drumstick. “Great.”

Carolyn nodded, but her mouth was too full to talk. She had the other drumstick. It was almost gone.

The fire between them crackled soothingly as the wind blew harder outside the small cave. Jason had decided not to worry over a guard since the snow was falling heavily now. He doubted anyone would be traveling through it.

Carolyn tried not to enjoy the moment, but that was impossible. She found herself hoping it never ended. She was warm, had a full stomach, and she was with good company. It was so much more than what she’d had for the last four years that it was a struggle not to cry.

“You okay?”

She nodded and took another bite of the turkey leg to keep from babbling.

Jason watched the emotions fly across her face. He wasn't reading her thoughts now. It was an invasion of privacy that he doubted she would keep allowing, so he was trying to get to know her the old fashion way. It wasn't going well, but she seemed pleased by the moment. He wasn't going to push her into leaving.

Carolyn belched, wiping her greasy mouth on her shirt. She snapped the thick bone and began sucking out the marrow.

Jason followed her lead, shuddering at the taste. He knew it was healthy, but he didn't like it.

Carolyn laughed at his action. The sound rang through the cave, snapping his head up.

Carolyn blushed. The shocked heat in his gaze was exciting.

Jason dropped the bones into the fire and wiped the grease over his hands as a moisturizer.

This time, Carolyn followed his lead and did the same.

Jason smiled at her. Thick tension sparked between them.

Carolyn scowled. “Keep that shit to yourself!”

Jason sighed. He moved to his bedroll and laid down without responding.

Carolyn felt bad for yelling at him, but romance during the apocalypse was the last thing she needed.

“Were you following me this whole time?”

Carolyn swallowed a gag as the last bite hit her stomach and the cancerous mass lurking there. Pain shot through her gut.

Jason felt bad for her. *Maybe I can find some stomach calmatives somewhere.*

“Yes.”

“I felt you as far back as the riverboat.”

Carolyn paled. “They’re all dead.”

Jason realized she knew that group. “What happened?”

Carolyn forced herself to swallow again, bracing for the pain. Hurting when you ate was a cruel joke. “One of your kind killed them. He wanted their kids.”

“How did you escape?”

“I’d stepped out. I guess because I’m not a magic user, he felt I wasn’t a threat.” She shrugged bitterly. “I’m not. I was throwing up and couldn’t help them at all.”

Jason now understood more of her pain. He switched the topic back to his question. “So why follow me?”

“I told you—food and company.”

Jason didn’t believe her, but he didn’t snoop through her mind to get the truth. He assumed she’d thought of robbing him and changed her mind.

Carolyn finished the painful meal in silence, trying to enjoy the taste. The cancer was making life harder for her by the day now. *I have to hang on. I have to be here when Safe Haven returns. I can last that much longer for a last glimpse of my son.*

“Good night.”

“Yeah.” She tried to go to sleep, but the smile he’d given her kept replaying in her mind. *It’s going to be a long trip.*

4

Carolyn shivered on her side of the fire that had burnt down. She was regretting the bath. Her damp clothes were making it hard to get comfortable. She lifted her head to stare at Jason. His light snores were comforting, as was the full stomach. If not for the cold draft coming in through the entrance, she would be content. He was putting off more heat than the fire.

She crawled over to him and tried to ease down against his warm body without waking him up.

Jason tensed as a cold back pressed against his. He immediately knew who it was and why, but his heart thumped at the contact. He wasn’t used to it.

Carolyn heard the silence and knew she hadn’t been successful. She stayed still, hoping he would let her stay. The heat radiating from him felt wonderful.

Jason tried to fight the feeling and lost. He rolled over in a quick move and wrapped her up against his chest.

Carolyn froze. His hard body pressed against hers, sending delicious warmth into her skin. His huge arms held her close, making her feel safe.

Jason rested his head against hers and tried to go back to sleep.

Carolyn slowly relaxed, tears pricking her lids. It had been half a decade since she'd felt another person against her in comfort and warmth.

Jason felt her sadness and her mental fight. He rubbed her arm, fighting the sparks now flying between them at the contact. "Sleep now, stress later."

She nodded, feeling his warm breath against her neck. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Jason fought the emotions, but he knew he would be scarred again when this went badly. They hadn't been together for a full day yet, but he would want this every night now. When it was gone, he would miss it.

Carolyn felt his sadness this time. She wrapped her hand through his. "Sleep now, stress later."

He chuckled. "I've heard that somewhere." He shut his eyes and followed his own advice.

Carolyn followed him into sleep, no longer cold.

Chapter Twelve
I Need A Killer

1

Jason woke with a woman on his chest and a hard-on in his pants. He slowly opened his eyes to find Carolyn staring down at him.

Jason didn't move. He barely breathed. After her fast shut down while they were eating, he was surprised she hadn't already moved away from him. Sleeping together for warmth didn't count.

Carolyn read the desire. Her body responded, nipples hardening. *I want him. What an amazing feeling!*

Jason kissed her quickly, softly. He drew back, expecting her to flee.

Carolyn smiled. "That was nice."

Jason's body throbbed. "If you don't move, I'll do it again."

She shivered at the heat in his voice. "This won't end well."

"It never does." He refused to move.

She leaned down to meet his lips.

Jason groaned as she kissed him. *It's been so long!* He clutched her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"Well, isn't this sweet."

Jason rolled them over and came up on his feet with his gun in hand, cursing himself for not hearing the intruder.

“Drop it.” Brenda entered their den with a gun in each hand. She was flanked by a bald man with dazed eyes and a thin jacket covered in snow.

Jason did a fast scan and didn’t like what he found. The descendant in front of him had no compassion and no mercy, even for her own kind. Her mind was full of past fights that she’d won.

Carolyn stayed behind Jason. She drew her gun and her knife, preparing to fight for their lives.

Brenda brought up a shield.

So did Jason, including the woman behind him inside it.

“I see.” Brenda holstered. “I’m Brenda. Let’s talk. You can slam your slave later.”

“She’s not a slave.” Jason waited to see what she wanted, angry at being interrupted.

“Sit down, Frank.”

The bald man did, gazing up at her in adoration.

Jason’s eyes narrowed. He matched the man to the target he’d been sent after. He chuckled mentally. Fate was being incredibly kind to him today. “What do you want?”

“Shelter.” Brenda eyed their leftovers. The half a turkey looked wonderful after weeks of dried meat and squirrel soup. “A meal.”

Jason didn’t like her attitude or her confidence. Her heavy clothes were pristine, though he was sure *she* hadn’t cleaned them. Her perfect hair and nails

suggested she was a prissy princess who only cared about her appearance. She would be perfect for the bunker. “How will you pay?”

Brenda gestured. “A new slave.”

“No!” Frank cringed back. “Please don’t make me go!”

“Done.” Jason nodded at the food. “Help yourself.”

Brenda scowled. “I thought she wasn’t a slave. Why do you want mine?”

“Men are slaves.” Jason dropped down across from her, still keeping his shield up.

“You’re not.”

“Descendants are never slaves.”

Brenda’s eyes lit up. She leaned forward. “Maybe we should stay together for safety. We can hunt the Mitchel together. She offered me a job, so I have a way in to her. She’s expecting me in about nine hours.”

Jason knew better than to say no and trigger a fight he wasn’t ready for. “I’ll consider it.”

“Good.” Brenda lowered her shield to take a piece of the turkey.

Carolyn stepped to the side, lifted her gun, and shot Brenda in the chest.

Frank screamed, flying to his owner. “What did you do?!”

Jason stared in shock as Brenda fell over. He turned to look at Carolyn.

Carolyn shrugged, reloading. “What?”

Jason shook his head, lowering his shield. He waved a hand and broke the charm on Frank.

Frank blinked, looking around. “Stephanie? Where’s my wife?”

Carolyn holstered. “We’ll take you to her.”

Frank flinched back from the body he was kneeling by. “How did I get here?!”

“It’s a long story.” Carolyn began to drag the body outside. “Jason can fill you in.”

Jason had never wanted any woman more. He’d been bracing to fight one of his kind. Carolyn had handled the problem for him, sparing him the guilt of killing a magic user.

Frank came over to him, voice breaking. “Is she okay?”

“Your wife is fine. She’s close by.”

“How did I get here?”

Jason settled in to tell the man what he knew, but his mind stayed on the woman dragging the body away from their den. *I have to court her or something. If I can make her willing, I can have her. If I can’t, it’s already time for us to split up.*

Carolyn was thinking the same thing. *I would have slept with him willingly! And then he’ll join Alexa’s crew and leave me alone again. I can’t do that to myself. I’ve survived alone and it works well because I don’t disappoint myself. If I get attached to him, he’ll just hurt me.*

Carolyn left the body under a tree a quarter mile away and headed for the creek to wash up. When

she went back to the cave, she settled into her cold bedroll and ignored both men.

Jason got Frank fed and settled in his bedroll, then sat by the fire, eyes lingering on Carolyn while he kept watch in case there were other intruders. *After I talk with Alexa, maybe I can get Carolyn to stay with me. We can roam the wastelands together, freeing men and fighting crime.*

He sighed unhappily at his fantasies and kept his mouth shut.

2

“Open it.” Alexa waited for Edward and David to remove the barricade and push the cellar door open. Then she took the front position with both guns in hand. “Rookies in the center.”

Jacob and David moved to the middle. Jacob stayed in front of David, still angry at his lack of faith.

The rest of the crew lined up according to their seniority, enjoying their shadowy views of the fading sun as it retreated across the town.

Alexa walked out calmly, head swiveling to find the nearest threat. The buildings were no longer burning. The snow had dampened those fires, releasing the undead from their spell. They were now roaming the town again, hunting for more warmth. There was no sign of anyone else, including the vampires. Alexa was sure her

dismissal after their loss meant they were gone for good now.

Alexa went straight to their old den in the market. She tugged on the broken door. It creaked open to reveal a new barricade of furniture. She began kicking her way through.

The men in the rear turned to guard their backs.

Undead lumbered toward the noises. It drew more of them from the buildings and trees.

Alexa kept breaking through, letting her anger grow.

“Shit! She’s coming!” Trisha moved into the far corner of the attic, gun coming out. Fresh from sleep, her vision didn’t want to clear. She rubbed her eyes repeatedly.

Nancy listened for a few seconds, then headed for the window. She’d spotted the single rope left dangling. She grabbed the icy cord and swung out.

Alexa broke through the last of the barricade and ran up the steps.

Trisha fired repeatedly as Alexa hit the top of the stairs.

Alexa took a trim from the volley of panicked shots and kept coming. She fired once, opening a hole in Trisha’s forehead.

The body fell.

Alexa hurried to the window, but didn’t peer out. The rope was still moving. “The front!”

Edward ran that way, firing at undead trudging toward him through the snow. He paused at the corner to reload, then moved into view.

He spotted the woman on the rope, gun aimed upward. He fired as the wind gusted, missing the shot.

Nancy let go of the rope and fell the ten feet into the snow. She scrambled to her feet as Edward fired again.

“Ugg!” The shot went through her arm and dug into the brick wall.

Nancy took off running into the alley, leaving a clear trail. She’d been sleeping, not expecting Alexa’s open attack.

“But I thought we were going to be friends!” Edward saw Alexa sliding down the rope and gave chase. “I still want that service!”

Alexa followed on his heels.

“Stay with me. Clear the town.” Daniel took over the rest of the crew, satisfied Alexa and Edward would get their target.

Jacob stood in the doorway, firing at the undead. He knew to hit them in the head so they stayed down and he didn’t waste bullets.

David stood outside and to the right of the door, doing the same. Bodies began to pile up on this side of the market.

Mark went to the attic to pop off rifle shots from the front. He spotted the blood below and grinned. The bunker woman was running from a real hunter now and she was leaving a trail that Alexa would never miss.

Alexa waved Edward to follow as she went into the alley.

She ducked a shot that slammed into the wall. She ran faster at the woman who was now shooting undead in her path.

Nancy lifted her rifle and fired again. Rushing, she missed.

Alexa dove, pistol whipping Nancy in the cheek. Blood dripped as the women went down.

Edward watched from the end of the alley. He shot two snarling undead who were covered in snow, then rotated to watch the rear as he reloaded.

Alexa and Nancy rolled, each trying to get the upper hand. They hit the wall and rolled again.

Alexa slammed her head into Nancy's cheek, splitting it open wider. Blood poured this time.

Nancy did the same to her.

Fresh blood flew into the snow. Rage filled the alley.

Edward backed up. *She's at that point. I almost feel sorry for the bunker hunter.*

Alexa's hands slid around the woman's throat. She squeezed, bringing her knee up at the same time.

Nancy grappled for her knife, running out of air as Alexa strangled her.

Alexa leaned into her thumbs. A crunch echoed.

Nancy stabbed forward with her knife, gasping for air that couldn't get in.

Alexa twisted to the side to avoid the blade, not letting go as she increased pressure.

Nancy sagged. Her throat collapsed. Her face turned purple.

Alexa kept going until she was sure the woman was dead. Then she slit Nancy's throat with her own knife.

Edward fired at a small group of undead now entering the other end of the alley.

Alexa rolled onto her ass and drew her guns. She fired with him, removing the targets.

Edward reloaded as she handled the next threats to enter the alley.

Mark and the others picked off the undead who were drawn to the noise and the scent of blood, trying to get them before they could enter that alley.

Bodies once again littered the town. The fresh snow began to turn red.

3

"I have to go." Carolyn stared at Jason as the gunshots continued to echo.

"We're only a couple hours from the soldier's cave." Jason stopped because she had, tugging Frank back next to him when the man would have kept walking. "As soon as I drop him off, I can come with you."

Carolyn wanted to, but there was a strong sense that she needed to go right now. "You can meet me there."

Jason nodded, unwilling to force her to stay. He could. He knew the charm to use, but as always, his sense of right and wrong wouldn't let him. "Be careful."

She smiled. “You, too.” She turned around and marched away to keep from kissing him goodbye.

Jason was torn. He almost changed his plans and went with her. But the man at his side was still dazed from being charmed by Brenda. He needed to be cared for, and his wife was the best one to do that.

Jason started walking again, hoping Carolyn would stay out of sight. He also hoped she didn’t get in Alexa’s way. That was just as dangerous as running across Snakes or Fanatics.

Carolyn broke into a run as soon as she was out of sight. The clock ticking in her head was getting louder. She was sure Alexa had won the most recent fight, but she was also sure the Mitchel needed help for the next one and she was supposed to be there to give it. *Except I don’t want to die as much now. I want more time with Jason. He’s a good man.*

Carolyn increased speed as she neared the creek. She jumped the shallow end and kept going, legs already starting to hurt. The cancer wasn’t the reason for it. She wasn’t used to running. She’d learned to conserve her strength while alone because she was slowly starving and too much expenditure of energy would kill her faster than any enemy.

Her heart thumped in her chest, forcing her to slow. She searched her pockets for one of her last few aspirin and then resumed her previous pace. An hour of running would get her to the town in time, but she would be exhausted.

Carolyn thought of the weapon in her kit and moved faster.

4

Alexa reloaded as Edward covered them, coming to stand next to her. She quickly looted Nancy's bloody body, then stood. She led the way over the body pile to the center of town.

Edward ignored the need to give her praise for the win.

Their crew joined them for the final walk through the town. They didn't pause as Alexa took them into the ruined buildings, clearing out all the threats. The shots echoed for a long time. Alexa went into every structure still standing, including their cellar under the radio station in case anyone had gone in there while they were busy. They also looted bodies of Snakes and the few Fanatics. There wasn't much to find.

Alexa finally halted them as they made it back to the center of town. She turned to look at David.

David dropped his head. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Behind you."

David spun and found a large group of Snake women on scale covered horses near the tree line. They were all staring in hatred or fear.

"They'll come down to talk or they'll leave. If they leave, we'll let them go. If they come down,

not one leaves alive.” Alexa waited. All of the crew reloaded guns with their looted ammunition.

The Snake elder studied the bodies, picking out her people as well as a number of others who’d tried to catch the Mitchel. Seeing Alexa out in the open was a huge temptation. The rewards for her capture would be amazing, but the Snake elder didn’t want to sacrifice her remaining clanswomen to do it. She had no doubt Alexa would go through most of them. “Move out!” She turned her horse to the west.

Alexa shrugged. “Maybe we are done for the day.” She stayed still until the Snakes were out of sight. Then she glared toward the tree line.

Her men stared in anger as another group came out of the shadows. The surviving Fanatics were alone now and without their leader. They hadn’t been invited to join the Snake clan. Several of them ran in the opposite direction. The rest waited for Alexa to execute them.

Alexa pointed southeast. She sent the order with that single motion.

The Fanatics fled, grateful to have been spared.

Her men were surprised and a little disappointed even though they were so low on ammunition. Billy especially wished they’d chosen to fight.

Alexa understood. “We’ll see them again.” She smiled coldly. “Or maybe the soldiers will catch them and they’ll hang.”

The men chuckled as they realized Ulysses and his group were southeast. The fleeing Fanatics would not find a welcome in that direction.

“Well done!” Loud clapping echoed.

Alexa sighed. “Do not fire on this one unless I do.”

Her crew frowned, staring at the handsome blonde man walking out of the trees with a short red cloak billowing behind him like an old Halloween cape. The Snakes and Fanatics clearly hadn’t known he was there.

Alexa moved forward to meet him, signaling her crew to stay where they were.

She met the man in front of the radio station that had three charred walls and the tall steel tower left.

“The infamous Alexa Mitchel.” The man slowly lifted a hand. “I’m Farris.”

Alexa shook with him, sensing great power and the ability to use it. She didn’t feel him trying to get into her mind. That pleased her. She didn’t try to read him either, automatically obeying the ways of their kind.

Farris looked over her shoulder at the frowning men. “Nice crew. You obviously don’t need me. Why did you call?”

“I have a mission that requires special skills. When it’s complete, there will be a space open on my crew.” Alexa refused to think about that ugly moment.

Farris studied her from head to toe. “You’re injured. I’m not a healer.”

“I need a killer.” Alexa stepped closer, bringing deeper frowns to the men behind them. “Before I

tell you what it is, prove you've met the requirements."

Farris jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I rescued a kid on the way here. He's in the center of your vehicle graveyard." His grin widened. "You're beautiful."

Alexa blushed at the heat he put off, playing the role, but she didn't feel it. Only her crew drew an honest reaction of desire anymore.

Farris stepped back so her team would relax. He could hear them thinking about disobeying her to come closer and provide protection. "I've fought the usual enemies and saved no less than fifty men, women, and children from death. Many of them are in hiding now, waiting for your father to return and save the world."

Alexa saw and heard no lies. She frowned at him. "Then why are you covered in guilt?" Her hand slid to her gun.

Edward marched toward them. The others followed.

Farris stared at her in regret. "I fought against your family during the war."

"Why did you answer my call?"

"I'm ready to die." Horrible loneliness filled his face. "I can't take being alone anymore. If I can't be with my kind..."

Alexa understood that feeling. She turned to glare at her men.

All of them froze.

Alexa swiveled back, making her choice.

When she sighed unhappily, Farris knew he wouldn't like her decision.

"I can't give you a reason to go on living, and suicide by descendant is...unpleasant, as I'm sure you know. Pick something else."

Farris's big shoulders slumped. "I'll go to the soldiers. They'll figure out what I am and hang me. Or worse."

Alexa smiled. "Perfect. Go there. Make friends. Convince them they need you on their side."

Farris realized that was the job. His spirits lifted. "I've never been a spy."

Alexa chuckled without humor. "It's all I've ever been."

Farris stared at her. "I assume when you return with Safe Haven, I'll need to kill the soldiers if they decide to fight against you."

Alexa nodded. "If they win the spring battle for the bunker, many of them will return to their old ways. Mark those who remain loyal to me so that they may be spared."

"I can do that." Farris looked at her men again. "It's a shame to lose even one of them. They're magnificent."

"Yes, they are." Alexa motioned. "Let's bring the boy in. You'll stay a day and then go when we do."

Farris led the way to get the innocent kid he'd rescued from a clan of Snakes. He thought about that quick fight and nothing else.

Alexa whistled, bringing her men to her. They didn't ask questions, but she knew they wanted to. Alexa chose not to fill them in. One of her men needed the reminder that he could still be replaced, even now. It would also give her the opportunity to see how Farris reacted to tension. There would be a lot of that where he was going. It wouldn't be easy to convince the soldiers he was good enough to fight with them. And he was, she was sure of it. Time with her crew would prove it.

Her mood lifted at the thought of hours with one of her own kind. That loneliness was present in her soul, too, but unlike Farris, she could withstand it for as long as she needed to because she knew in the future that would change. At some point, she would be with her father again. *And that's all I've ever wanted. These quests and people matter, but that future dream is what keeps me going no matter how ugly things get and it always will.*

Alexa felt a cold chill that was stronger than the wind. She scanned, but found nothing. Her attention centered on the descendant in front of her. *He's lying about everything.*

Alexa's tension transferred to her crew. They surrounded her as she walked, hands going to their guns.

Alexa let fate play out, hating what would probably happen next. Killing her own kind was always harder than killing others.

Farris waved toward a dented wagon. “He’s in the trunk, hiding.” He pulled out the keys, smiling over his shoulder.

Alexa smiled back. Inside, she braced.

Edward moved in front of her to take the hit from whatever was coming. The rest of the crew joined him.

Farris opened the trunk and peered down. “It’s safe now. Come on out.”

Alexa was dismayed to see a head pop up and look around. She’d been hoping there wasn’t really a child involved.

Her crew hurried forward to help the kid.

“Stop!”

Her call was ignored.

Farris brought up his shield and hit the button on his watch. The car next to them exploded.

The wave hit Farris’s shield and kept going, leaving him unharmed. Alexa’s crew was knocked off their feet and thrown backward.

Flames and smoke rose into the air.

Alexa was hit by the weakened wave. Her ears popped. Her vision blurred.

Farris ran toward her. He dropped his shield as he tackled her, taking her to the ground. He began to strangle her as he tried to take her lifeforce.

Alexa wanted to fight back, but her injuries made it hard. His hands around her throat prevented her from casting oral charms. She tried to roll over, but her body refused to respond. Her hands clutched at the snow, missing her guns.

Bang!

Farris fell over. Blood pooled on the frozen ground under him.

Alexa rolled over, gasping for air. She scanned for her men. All of them were down. She tried to get to her feet and fell, balance gone. She could feel blood trickling from both ears.

Footsteps ran by her to help the boy in the trunk.

Jason drew up, face twisting. The boy was dead.

Engines sounded. Refugees and hunters flew toward them, eager to attack while Alexa was disoriented and her men were down.

Carolyn fired the big gun she'd liberated weeks ago, thrilled that Jason had followed her instead of delivering Frank. The grenade flew through the air and hit the front line of vehicles rushing through the trees. One of them flipped and smashed into two others, creating a small block.

Carolyn fired until her ammunition was gone, then she tossed the smoking weapon to the ground. She ran to Alexa and grabbed her arm. "We have to go!"

Alexa let the woman help her to her feet. She staggered toward her men, heart pounding. None of them were moving.

Carolyn began shooting at those who were going to reach Alexa first, using the last bullets in her rifle.

Jason began to heal the fallen men and Alexa before he reached them, sending huge streams of

colored orbs. There wasn't time to handle them one by one.

Alexa fought the pain to grab Edward's arm and pull him toward the cellar.

Jason used his huge arms to drag two of the men, eyes on the crowd coming from the trees. They were going to get here before he could grab the other three.

Alexa stopped. She stood up and took off running toward the people. Fire flew from her hands.

Jason realized she was buying him time to help her crew. He moved faster, dumping the men at Carolyn's feet as she continued to fire her rifle. He went back for another load, not thinking, just acting.

Alexa sent flames in huge bursts as her rage reached boiling.

“Kill her!”

“Kill the Mitchel!”

The crowd surrounded her with fists and knives, but they were no match for her wrath. Bodies melted as she spun, sending fire in all directions.

Jason got the last man to the cellar and whistled.

Alexa ignored the call. She kept firing, now hitting people in the back as they ran. She followed them, determined not to miss a single survivor.

Chapter Thirteen

Torpedoes Ready

1

Jason and Carolyn got Alexa's crew into the cellar and shut the door.

Carolyn stored her gun. She stared at Jason. "Where's Frank?"

Jason stared back, admiring her more now than he already had. "I sent him on. All he has to do is keep walking down that road and the soldiers will find him."

"Or Snakes."

Jason shrugged. "Then we'll rescue him later."

Carolyn smiled at his wording.

The cellar door opened. Alexa came down and shut it. She went straight to her crew, ignoring everyone else. "Edward! Wake up!"

Edward opened his eyes in stages, mind blurry. "What happened?"

"You broke a rule and almost died. Get up now. Nap time is over!"

Edward chuckled, fighting the disorientation. "I can always tell when we've had a close call. You get snippy."

Alexa moved to Daniel and repeated the ritual.

Each of her men responded. They were bloody, with torn clothes and burnt hair, but they were alive and that was all she cared about.

Jason and Carolyn stayed out of her way, not eager to face her yet. She was clearly still upset. Smoke was rising from her skin as if she was on fire inside.

Alexa was furious that she'd been fooled. *I recognized the threat too late and it almost cost me everything. I'll never trust another descendant.*

Jason winced. "We aren't all bad."

Alexa didn't answer as she faced him.

Carolyn looked back and forth between them, frowning. "He helped save your life, and theirs."

Alexa grunted. "At what cost?"

"He's not like that." Carolyn smiled at Jason. "He's a good man. We can trust him."

"What about you?" Alexa was dismayed by what she found in the woman's mind. She stared at Carolyn. "You're damned."

Carolyn nodded, sadness returning. "I know. I didn't come here for absolution. I'm repaying a debt."

"To whom?"

"Your father. He rescued my son. He's still with them."

Alexa hated the situation, but the woman had saved her life by killing Farris. "Consider your debt repaid...and thank you."

Carolyn understood how hard it was for Alexa to say that, to admit that she'd needed the help. "I'll

go as soon as you tell me to. I don't want anything from you."

Alexa sighed, anger starting to ease. "We'll share a meal and talk. Tomorrow will be soon enough for us to part ways."

Carolyn glanced over and found Jason staring at her in surprised disgust. Sadness hit her again. *Now he knows what I did.*

Jason wanted to hate her for it. He was revolted by her actions. But he still wanted her. They'd formed a fast bond that he was helpless to resist. "You're not that person anymore."

"That doesn't absolve me!"

Jason realized she would always hate herself for what she'd done. He tried to put it from his mind. *She's torturing herself. I don't need to help her.* He patted the ground next to him. "You were trimmed. Come over here and I'll heal that."

Carolyn went to him, grateful that her one friend wasn't turning on her even though she deserved it. "Thank you."

Jason sighed. "Everyone deserves a second chance. If not for that, Safe Haven wouldn't exist and we wouldn't be here right now."

Alexa looked at her hurting men, heart aching. She hated herself for what had happened. She sat next to David. "You were right. I wasn't prepared for the threats I called. I'm sorry."

David flushed. "No one can see everything. I was wrong to question you. Don't apologize to us. We're your crew. We go where you lead." David

felt her unhappiness grow. He put a bloody arm around her shoulder, not sure how to make it better.

Alexa let a few tears roll out, showing more emotion than usual.

David kissed the top of her head. “I love you. Stay strong.”

Alexa clutched at him, almost broken at how she’d endangered them by trusting one of her kind. Farris had been a Firewalker, like her. For a minute, she’d been so lonely for that contact that it had almost killed her crew.

David held her, soothed, and yet upset that she was feeling so bad. “What can I do for you?”

“Forgive me?”

“Always, Boss.” He hugged her tighter. “Always.”

“We should get gone before the next wave of hunters and hopefuls arrive.” Jason ignored the frowns from Alexa’s men. “It’s going to get crazier here.”

Alexa considered his suggestion. She’d just learned a hard lesson about sticking to a plan when it felt like something had gone wrong. She didn’t want to repeat it.

Her crew was wary when Jason didn’t immediately push her on the choice. That said he was smart enough to know better.

Carolyn didn’t care about their macho games and clue digging. She looked at Alexa. “I watched them leave. Safe Haven sailed south on November 27th, 2013. You don’t have to keep going to that

cursed mountain. Head south. We'll escort you as far as you want us to."

"No."

"But—"

Jason put a hand on Carolyn's shoulder. "Stop."

Carolyn fell silent, retreating a step from both of them. Her face disappeared behind her scowl. "We don't have time for this!"

Jason locked eyes with Alexa. "Our kind makes time to do what's right."

Alexa nodded, mind spinning as she dug through his mental secrets. He was opening certain doors for her, and not letting her see everything yet.

Sadness filled the cellar. Alexa grunted. "This is how you'd have it?"

Jason's eyes flicked briefly to Carolyn and then back. "That was before. Things now are..."

"Complicated? Confusing?"

Jason nodded. "Exactly."

"Then I'm going to try to change that future, for all of us. If you survive the next siege, we'll discuss the terms I require."

Jason leaned forward and placed a respectful kiss to her cheek, then stepped back. "Thank you."

"It's my honor." Alexa pointed at the door. "You have first watch."

"And her?"

Alexa sighed. "She'll fight with the rest of us when the time comes. For now, David will make her a warm drink so she can rest."

Jason went to his new post, refusing to think about the deal they'd just made. He'd asked Alexa to use his lifeforce to heal Carolyn and she'd agreed.

"I don't want to sleep." Carolyn's hands came up to her hips. "And I don't need a warm drink. I'm not a child you need to care for! I saved *your* ass, remember?"

"Do what you're told." Edward gave her a full glare. "Or he'll be kicked out."

Carolyn blanched. "He's not responsible for me."

"And yet, what you do will hurt him." Edward pointed at her backpack. "Get your bedroll put down and get ready to sleep."

Carolyn spun away, muttering as she did what they wanted. "Not a child!"

Jason snickered, giving Edward a nod of approval.

Edward decided to like Jason. He had his hands full with a rebellious woman who was dying. The man was having a rough afterlife. *And a healer on the crew is exactly what we need.* Edward joined Jason on door duty.

David was already working on heating the water for a pot of tea. Carolyn would get a cup with a sleeping draught in it. Everyone else would get a double caffeine tea to keep them alert for the next few hours of waiting.

"After we finish here, nothing else will take us away from the quest. In two days, we'll roll out and find a new den. When winter breaks, we will not

join the soldiers. We will head to the mountains and find our next Safe Haven site. From there, we'll go to the ocean. By the time spring comes, we will no longer be on this soil."

All the men liked hearing Alexa's decision. Jacob and the others found things to do before she could give them something. Alexa liked it when they were occupying time wisely. There were guns to clean, blood to wash off, rips and tears to mend, and mental replays of battles waiting.

Alexa sat in the center of the dank room and tried to get her emotions under control. The most dangerous part of the battle had just happened, but they'd survived it. Now, the ugly fighting would begin.

2

"Why is she doing this?" Jason immediately wished he hadn't asked because it showed weakness.

Edward had expected it sooner. They'd been on door duty now for three hours. He was impressed with the new man's control. "She has several reasons. The biggest is that we claimed this town. If we can be run out, what does that say about her?"

"That she's reckless, dangerous, a little nuts, unpredictable?"

Edward nodded, smiling. "It's great."

Jason frowned. "I meant those as bad things."

“I know, but it’s exactly the impression she needs her enemies to have.”

Jason considered that, then moved on. “What are the other reasons?”

“Population control.” Edward picked dried blood from under his short nails while he explained. “These are bad people. We’re removing them. They won’t bother anyone else.”

“...leaving less enemies for the bunker battle and the final fight when her father returns.”

Edward grinned, impressed again. “Being quick mentally is a rare skill in Afterworld. How are you with the others?”

Jason laughed lowly. “Already sizing me up?”

“Of course.” Edward grew serious. “If you can’t match the worst of us in guns, you won’t make it.”

“She hasn’t offered me a place yet.” Jason shrugged before Edward could say it was coming. “I’m good enough. I expect I’ll be better after a few lessons from her.”

“That’s a safe bet. How good?”

Jason drew in a blink and had his gun at Edward’s chest in a second.

Edward motioned. “That matched Billy’s draw. We’ll see how you shoot in the next wave.”

Jason realized Edward was giving him an evaluation. He holstered, brow lifting. “What else?”

“Knives, hand-to-hand, ability to follow exact orders.” Edward’s grin changed to the leer of a deadly wolf. “All tested in the field.”

“And cooking.” Alexa slowly sat up, hand wrapped around her stomach.

Across the cellar, Jacob flushed as her hard gaze landed on him. “I’m sorry, Boss.”

Alexa grimaced at a fresh, harder cramp. “Jacob will cook every meal for the foreseeable future. He’ll improve or we’ll die.”

“What?”

“Boss!”

“What did she say?”

Alexa belched, letting out a groan and a drifting green cloud.

Daniel recoiled from the odor.

Jacob tried to disappear into his bedroll.

Billy was hit. “Oh my God!”

Mark covered his face with his blanket and rolled, avoiding the cloud.

Next to him, David farted.

“I’m surrounded, Boss!” Mark stayed down, shouting through the blankets. “You fired first! Do something!”

Alexa staggered to her feet. “It was self-defense.” She clutched her stomach. “They have an inside man. He got me with lead soup.”

Laughter echoed, waking Carolyn. She blinked at them with heavy lids and blurry vision. “What’s for breakfast?”

Jason felt the bonds of connection slowly sink into his skin as the team laughed. His mood lifted. He suddenly felt like he could handle any challenge that came to this town.

Edward leaned closer to Jason. “That’s the other reason. The bonds we’re creating on this trip are unbreakable. There’s no feeling like it.”

“Even the sex?”

Edward snorted, resuming his post. “The first rule about paradise is we don’t talk about paradise.”

Jason laughed. He quickly picked out a matching movie quote and delivered it in a test to determine Edward’s intelligence. “You’re funny.”

Edward’s eyes lit up. “Funny how? I mean, funny like I’m a clown? I amuse you? I make you laugh? I’m here to fuckin’ amuse you?”

Both men burst out laughing.

Alexa stumbled toward them. “You’re relieved.”

Both men tensed, turning toward her.

Alexa stopped between them.

Edward smiled at her. “We’ll be quiet, Boss.”

Jason nodded. “We won’t make any more noise.”

Alexa belched, long and loud. Another green cloud began to fill the space.

Jason ducked, going low for air. He scooted by her, eyes watering. “There used to be laws about this!”

Edward’s face was green. “Direct hit. We’re reporting damage to all sectors! Orders, sir?!”

Jason rolled onto Carolyn’s bed, sucking in fresh air. “Dive, man! Dive!”

Edward rolled forward and ended up in his waiting bed.

David farted again.

Edward wrapped up in his blanket like Mark. “She can’t take much more of this, Captain!”

Jason pointed. “Damn the torpedoes and full steam ahead!”

Alexa belched again.

Everyone looked at David.

“I’m out.” David shrugged. “Short ammo supply. I only ate half my bowl.”

Jacob groaned. “Please change your mind. Every night will be like this!”

Alexa nodded, leaning her head against the cold wall by the door. “Brace for it.”

Half the men assumed she meant those nights. The rest of them knew she meant right now. Mark and Edward burrowed deeper into their blankets. David rolled over and covered his face with his cloak hood.

Alexa groaned, letting out the longest fart any of them had ever heard. It echoed in the cellar, bringing horror to exposed faces. People dove for cover, realizing her ass was pointed at all of them.

Alexa grunted in relief. “I need ten more of those.”

Carolyn quickly slid over Jason’s body and claimed the spot between him and the drafty wall.

Jason laughed. He curled up behind her and got comfortable, ignoring her sudden tension.

Edward groaned, staying down. “We have faced the abyss, men, and we are hers.”

Alexa's lips twitched. "There is no sweeter sound."

3

The remaining Snake clan moved slowly west through the darkness, mourning their losses. Radka was in the rear, bound, and waiting for them to make camp. She expected to be executed then. After surviving all of Alexa's blows, it was poetic that she was going to die at the hands of her own people. She'd witnessed Nancy's death, and the Fanatics running instead of helping, but it didn't matter. *I lost the battle. I'm not worthy to be a leader now.*

The hair rose on the back of her neck. Radka turned in the saddle, studying the darkness. Nothing moved. There were no sounds. *But I feel someone watching us. Did Alexa change her mind?*

The black trees swayed in the wind, mocking their effort to distinguish threats from the natural landscape.

Radka kned her horse into the center of their group.

The Snake elder's personal guard slid in front of her.

Radka kicked out, knocking the guard off her horse to reach their leader. "We have trouble coming!"

The Snake elder felt it, too. She lifted a hand to stop the group, listening as wind whipped through the trees.

Radka held her hands out. “Let me die fighting!”

The elder nodded.

The guard Radka had kicked sliced through her ropes and then punched her, knocking her off the horse.

Radka slowly rose, nodding to the woman. She wasn’t holding a grudge.

The guard snorted as she went to stand in front of their leader.

The entire group of two hundred Snakes went still, listening for their attackers.

Fifty furious vampires stepped out of the shadows.

Radka paled. She moved next to the guard and drew the woman’s extra knife. “Save your bullets. They move too fast.”

The vampires spotted Radka. They flew toward the center of the group.

The guard glared, retreating to stand directly in front of the elder. “Why are they targeting you?!”

“I don’t know!”

The elder pointed at Radka. “Let them have her.”

The vampires didn’t pause even when the Snakes put Radka by herself. They attacked all the women. Scales quickly littered the bloody, muddy snow. Two-sided cloaks flared out as Snakes ran. They were grabbed by those cloaks and snatched back into hungry teeth. Screams of agony and pleas

for mercy echoed across the battlefield as the vampires headed for Radka.

Radka ran. She'd never been scared of a fight until now. *I'd rather face the Mitchel!* She took off into the abandoned town that lined these woods.

Two of the vampires gave chase. The rest slaughtered her clan. Screams filled the night.

Radka kicked open a shed door and ran to the rear, then turned to face her enemies.

Two vampire girls appeared in the doorway.

“You killed our grandfather!”

Radka shook her head. “Nancy did that! It was the bunker woman!”

The girls flew at her, fangs ready.

Radka's screams echoed to the rest of her clan, but they couldn't have helped even if they wanted to. The Snakes couldn't match the speed of the vampires. Their knives missed targets, their bullets and arrows sailed by running forms. There was no avoiding the death that overwhelmed them. The Snakes also had to fight the cold. The low temperatures and falling snow made them sluggish. They hadn't been ready for an attack.

The ugly battle was over in less than five minutes. The only survivor was the elder.

The Snake elder was still beautiful under her fear and coating of blood. The scales on her tan pants and shirt were hanging by threads. Her long red hair was matted in mud and gore. Ugly scratches ran down one arm from the shoulder to wrist. She'd fought fiercely and lost anyway. She shuddered as

the vampires surrounded her with glowing red eyes.
“What do you want?!”

Two bloody girls came through the small clan that had only sustained three losses.

Yani glared. “You will leave these lands or die.”

“No!” The youngest girl still wanted justice.
“She killed grandfather!”

The older girl denied her. “You heard the other one. It was the bunker woman.”

The vampires muttered. The bunker people had already been a threat. Now, they were a target.

The elder stayed still and quiet while she waited for the choice on her life or death. She stared at the strange children in open regret.

Yani gestured. “Let her live. She will make sure her clan never again fights our kind.”

The Snake elder nodded quickly. “You have my word!”

“She will die alone.” The younger girl tried again. “Give her mercy with a fast death.”

“There are other Snakes, just as there are other vampires.” Yani placed a hand on each girl’s bloody shoulder. “Zaro would have wanted us to honor our deal with the Mitchel. And the Mitchel would have shown mercy.” He led the girls away, murmuring more comfort.

The other vampires followed, leaving the Snake elder surrounded by the bodies of her clan.

As soon as they were out of sight, she coaxed a twitching horse to let her mount up and fled west, determined to never return.

“I knew it!” Selma observed the large camp of soldiers through her night vision glasses, heart pounding as she sat on her bike a mile away. She’d made sure she wasn’t in view to do this, but Selma was tempted to step into the open and unleash all the weapons she’d brought from the bunker.

She scanned their gear, dismayed by the hardware. If the soldiers had ammunition for those big guns and their cannon, they could be a real threat. The sheer numbers were the biggest problem, though. If the men got into the bunker, the women would be overwhelmed. Even starving, the men were still stronger.

The smell of their fires and food should have drawn attention from the Snake tribes in this area. Selma didn’t know why the men weren’t being attacked. It was possible the soldiers had conquered the reptile worshipping women and the bunker just hadn’t heard about it yet. Communication was unreliable in the apocalypse.

Selma stored her glasses and forced herself to roll away. She’d been drawn by the multiple fires. Now, she was glad she’d checked it out, but she was also torn. If she called it in, the soldiers would hear the call and move, and then they wouldn’t know where the enemy was. If she died during the fight with Alexa, then the bunker would never know

where the men were or how many had gathered. That was also dangerous.

Selma gunned the bike to life and sped west, deciding to stick to her original plan. “One fight at a time.”

Selma had come from the western bunker with Marcella and her scientists. It had been a long, ugly trip where she’d witnessed the harsh realities of their country. America needed help and Marcella was it. If she gained control here in the east, she would rule this land and bring back the light of society and organization. She would also keep the men from resuming power once society recovered.

Selma’s past life hadn’t been bad, but she’d watched the suffering of her fellow women and developed a hatred that would never fade. If Marcella died, Selma would find someone else to drive those goals through. She didn’t want the lead herself, but there was a chance she would take over anyway. She wasn’t going to be Invisible for much longer. When that changed, everything else might change with it.

Excitement filled her mind. She was about to accept her gifts and become a descendant. Or the demon she accepted would immediately betray her and take control, forcing her into a lifetime of mental slavery with no way to reclaim control of her body. “Either way, I’m knocking on your door, Hell. Time to open up.”

Carolyn rolled over, waking from the cold on one side of her body. She bumped into Jason, waking him. “Sorry.”

Jason lifted his arm. “No problem. Get closer.”

Carolyn slid over, staying on her back. If she curled against his chest, she would want more and this wasn’t the time for that.

Jason leaned down. His lips slid against her ear. “Everyone’s out except the door guard. It’s the perfect time.”

Carolyn shook her head, flushing.

Jason kissed the corner of her mouth, hard body pressing into her hip. “Let me please you. I only need five minutes.”

Carolyn snorted softly. “Five minutes? You can’t get me there that quick.”

Jason kissed her neck. “Challenge accepted.” He slid a hand down her arm and between her legs.

On duty over the door, Alexa rolled her eyes and left them alone. Young love was sweet to those who’d enjoyed theirs, annoying to those who hadn’t, and bitter to those who’d never felt it. Alexa was a mix of all three, though she’d felt love. She cared deeply for her team and her father, though it wasn’t the same thing.

Edward would be a good match for her when she decided it was time to settle down, but she doubted she would survive until then, so she’d never made concrete plans for that future. She was

bitter because she had it right here and she couldn't enjoy it without wrecking the future.

She looked over to find Edward staring at her in lonely contentment. She let him in for one second, showing her misery at their fate.

Edward gave her a soft smile of understanding. His eyes blazed with heat for a brief second, and then he locked it back up.

Alexa sighed, turning away. There was no future for them. Even if they all survived that final battle, with no quest left to bind them, the team would split up and they would try to adjust to normal lives in the aftermath. That alone would kill them all, not to mention the emotional toll of being split up. *I'm not ready to be alone again.* "I need all of them."

Jason and Carolyn tensed at her mutter. Carolyn tried not to squirm under his hand. Jason tried not to rock against her hip. Desire grew thick.

Alexa snorted. "Now or later, I guess it doesn't much matter." She could quit and take her men somewhere, but the battle would happen anyway and then the aftermath of having no purpose would still kill them.

Jason licked Carolyn's neck. His hands and hips resumed pace.

Carolyn swallowed a groan, shuddering, body arching.

Jason moaned lowly in her ear as he squeezed her breast and clit at the same time.

Carolyn cried out. She mashed her lips to his to muffle the noises as they climaxed together.

Alexa rolled her eyes again and scanned her men.

All of them looked back at her. Carolyn's pleasure had filled the cave with thick sexual tension.

Alexa grimaced. "Torpedoes are ready."

Everyone took cover under a blanket or bedroll.

6

William scanned the group of soldiers. He found tired normals with little hope for their own survival. He could take their lives and consume a few of them, but he wasn't feeling the rage right now. He was hunting. One of the children he'd come for was close. He could feel her.

The sensation vanished. William resumed his fast walk. The small traces he'd picked up were further east. He let the soldiers sleep, unaware that death had come within a hundred feet of them.

William moved faster as the wind sharpened. He thought of Ciemus, where he'd come from, and of Brandon, who'd stolen his woman. They were expecting a child. It may have been born for all he knew. If this eastern hunt didn't work out, he would go back there and see if that forbidden baby had the gifts he needed. As long as he stayed away from the water there, he was fine. William had tried to make his own deal, but that spirit had refused.

The feel of magic sparked again, drawing him faster. He was almost certain the child was with the bunker women.

William began to run, not caring who saw him. The restless energy burning inside drove his legs until his lungs threatened to burst. He slowed until the pain receded, then did it again. He'd considered another vehicle when the fuel ran out in his bike, but the effort to keep finding more evened out the time spent on foot. He was in the best shape of his life. Only when he finally headed west would he relent and pick a vehicle. Even he couldn't cross the Borderlands without protection.

The longer he traveled, the surer William became of where his target was located. The short streams and big groups of people now moving over these roads and paths were all headed to the same place. William began working on a plan to get into the bunker. He doubted he would pass as a slave even if he had the patience to play the role, which he didn't. If he just attacked, someone could disappear with the child. He wouldn't be able to handle that many challengers and still keep track of her. She could also be hurt in the fight. The easiest way would be to convince someone to bring the child out to him.

William stewed on it as he took off running again, drawn by a golden spark that hinted at the power to manipulate time.

Chapter Fourteen
Almost There
December 10th

1

“**A**re you feeling better?”

Alexa tucked in her cloak to make room as Edward joined her. “Most of it has passed.”

Edward snickered. He poured a cup of the strong coffee and stood near her as he woke, estimating it to be near dawn. The faint odor of rancid gas lingered in the air. Even the smoke from their cooking fire couldn’t kill it completely. Men were still under their blankets while they slept.

The cellar was warm with so many bodies and the smoldering cook fire. Alexa wished she could strip naked and get into the springs. Their few peaceful weeks there before hell broke loose had been wonderful in ways. “We’ve had scavengers near the door.” Alexa went to her bedroll between Daniel and Mark. She wasn’t in the mood to talk.

Edward understood. Stomach trouble wasn’t fun. It left you worn out and grouchy. “I’ll keep an ear on it.” He watched her drop and crash. It happened quick.

For a moment, Edward tried to remember his other life. He wanted to compare it to this one, but

the hazy images didn't seem real. *Almost nothing about my old life was satisfying.*

Alexa fell into a deep sleep that immediately took her into the future. She welcomed the sight of the island and the happy people calling it home. She teared up at seeing the lone man living in a hut on the other side of that paradise. "Father."

Adrian smiled, also misty eyed. "One more season and then we'll be together."

Alexa nodded, wiping away the tears. "Grandmother was right. This is the hardest part."

"For me as well." Adrian swept her from boots to braids, pride showing. "You'll make it here. You've done well."

Alexa longed to hear those words in her ears instead of in her dreams. She fought the frustration and the urge to spill all of her mistakes.

Adrian knew. His tone softened. "All great leaders suffer failures. Without those, you'll never learn a new way."

"*Your* ways are perfect."

"No. My ways work..." He sighed. "But there are always prices to pay."

Alexa stood in front of him, seeing the age lines, the fresh injuries, and the scars. His shirt covered his arms, but she was suddenly sure he now bore the mark of an outcast on one of them. "You need me."

Adrian sighed in misery. "So deeply, only you will ever know." His hand lifted. "You are my one

true weakness. To cover it, no one knows how much I love you.”

Alexa shivered as he stroked her cheek. She could feel his concern, his fears, his doubts. “What have you done?”

Adrian’s hand fell. “I changed.”

“You’re corrupt.” Alexa’s heart filled with pain. “I can help you, father.”

“No.” He smiled again, sadly this time. “You have to kill me. I’ve become the thing that stalks the alpha in the night. No one else has the strength to do it.” He started to fade from view. “Watch out for your brother. He does not want you to cross the ocean.”

Alexa’s eyes snapped open.

She smothered the need to shout for him. The connection was gone. He wouldn’t hear it now.

Alexa slowly shut her eyes and let sleep pull her back down.

2

Selma lowered all her mental walls and shields, ignoring the icy wind and the eerie woods around her. “I accept you for what you are.” Selma braced. “Will you accept my control?”

Power flew through her mind, lighting up the door that was there and bringing several others to life. Selma grinned at the feel of the magic. “Thank you.”

It is my honor to serve you.

Selma couldn't see the demon she'd invited in, but it felt powerful and cruel. She hoped it was. The job she had waiting wouldn't be accomplished with anything less. Accepting gifts was a simple affair that she'd refused to do for a decade. Now, she was ready to control them and not the other way around.

"I would have done that for you."

Selma spun around to find a handsome redheaded man leaning against a nearby tree.

He grinned at her, flashing charm. "Selma, is it?"

She nodded nervously, not trying to defend her mind against him. His power was staggering compared to her own.

"You're very new. More power will come to you in time." William studied the stocky black woman. She looked good in her calf-high black boots and fur coat. It was hard to place her with the image he had of the bunker women. "Whose side are you on?"

Selma glared, finding her courage. "Not yours."

William wasn't offended. "Because of my gender or my vendetta?"

"Neither." Selma waved a hand and brought an end to the drizzle putting out her campfire. She laughed in delight. "I'm on *Nature's* team. All of you had better beware her wrath."

William was intrigued. "I didn't know she had any humans."

Selma swirled her hand around and brought the campfire to blazing life. “Her power is growing now that most of humanity is gone. Soon, those who remain will be loyal to her, as well.”

“Not Safe Haven.”

Selma stared at the handsome descendant, taking in his cute freckles, his sexy hair, and straight white teeth, but she had no interest in him, for anything. He wasn’t her type.

“Because I’m male on that one?”

Selma nodded, seeing no reason to lie. “Your kind is too wild for me.”

William chuckled, not offended. She was right. He was too wild for most women.

Selma shivered at the wind.

Her nature demon brought up a shield to protect her.

William walked away. Nature was the one force he hadn’t challenged directly yet. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be on either side of that coming war. He had his own goals, but he knew for sure that he didn’t want to strike the first blow and certainly not now, while he was alone. His goal was to take over Safe Haven and force a reset. He didn’t want to bring the Creator’s ex-wife into the mix.

Selma read his thoughts as he left, but she wasn’t surprised. She was amused. William thought he understood what would happen in that final battle. A lot of people thought they knew, but Nature hadn’t been idle over the last four years. She

also had a plan and a reset wasn't part of it. Nature wanted Safe Haven to make that forbidden call.

"How can we kill the Creator if he isn't called home?" Selma began playing with her new gifts. She didn't try to hide it. If someone hostile found her, she would take their lifeforce and grow stronger. It would also be practice she needed for the fight with Alexa. "I'm the only Nature controller in this country. Fire Walker spells are powerless against me." Selma clapped her hands together eagerly. "I feel a storm coming."

3

"Frank!" Stephanie smacked Green on the shoulder. "Stop! That's Frank!"

Green pulled over next to the man walking down the broken street.

Stephanie was out of the truck before it came to a stop. She flew toward her husband.

Frank couldn't take both their weight. He fell over, wrapping her up tight. "Steph!"

"What happened?! How did you get here?!" She kissed him before he could answer.

Green waited impatiently. The sense that they needed to keep moving was hard to ignore.

Stephanie helped Frank up. "Where were you?!"

"In a cave." Frank's brows drew together. "There was a man with red eyes, and a dead woman."

“He kept his word!” Stephanie hugged her husband again. “I can’t believe he kept his word!”

Green motioned them toward the truck, adding up the clues. If Jason had killed the man’s captor, but hadn’t delivered him like he’d agree to, then something had happened. *And I know it’s connected to Alexa.* “Come on! Get in!”

Stephanie helped Frank into the truck.

The other females realized Jason had kept his word. They realized their deals would be kept, but their loyalties didn’t change.

Green hit the gas as soon as they were inside, heart thumping. *I have to get to Alexa! She needs help. I don’t know how I know that, but I do.*

4

“It’s time to eat.”

Everyone looked at Alexa in confusion. They’d all just finished a bowl of porridge that Carolyn had mostly made while Jacob helped. It had eased their stomachs and the awful gas effect.

Alexa looked at her changed men. “Don’t get distracted.” She didn’t wait for their promises. She strode toward the door, checking her guns. “Tie those hoods down or the sun will burn you.”

Her crew lined up behind her. The fire was left to Carolyn with a quick gesture.

Alexa flipped the lock. Mark shoved the door open and knelt to clear room.

Edward and Jacob stormed up the stairs first, ready to clear a path.

Mark rose and fell in alongside David, covering his rookie.

Alexa and Billy went up next, ready to provide backup to the first two lines.

Daniel brought up the rear. He stayed at the cellar door to guard until it could be shut and secured.

Alexa saw nothing near them. “It was a good run. Shut the door and fall in.”

The men were a bit disappointed that they’d gotten the moves right, but hadn’t gotten to shoot anything. They grumbled as they shut the cellar, almost trying to draw attention.

Alexa’s lips twitched. True craftsmen wanted to practice a new skill when it was learned.

She and her crew scanned for distant trouble. The town was a shock in daylight, even to them. They’d done more damage here than just about anywhere they’d been so far. Not a single building was still standing, and only two even had a charred frame. Piles of debris and fly covered corpses littered nearly every inch of the town. Winter insects sounded like tiny engines as they enjoyed the feast. Cold wind blew over the site, making their cloaks flare out. The smells it brought were as bad as what was in the cellar.

“We now have a double ranking system, my pets. Rookie order works well for our human side.

For this new part of our lives, blood matters.” She motioned. “Fill out the V by blood order.”

The men who hadn’t been changed hesitated, not sure where to go.

Edward grinned. “Line up and tell her the order you think it will happen.”

Alexa laughed at the mad dash for the closest slot. “Place your wagers, gentlemen. Only blood rank can bet in these sets. Who will join us next?”

Surprise, then excitement filled the air. Edward, Billy, and Daniel began eyeing their three normal companions and deciding on bets.

The normal men were still shoving to get the best slot.

Alexa did a fast sweep. *Two undead turning our way... And that’s it. We’re good for another minute.* “Edward?”

“Mark.” Edward grinned. “I’ll wager one of my nights at your side.”

“Wow.”

“He set a high bar.”

“I don’t have anything to match that.”

Alexa held up her pen. “Noted. Billy?”

Billy realized she’d used the blood rank again and grinned at getting to go second instead of fourth. “David. I’ll wager my best rifle.”

“Damn!”

“Is that the M4A1?”

Billy snickered at Edward’s longing tone. “It’s still not as good as sleeping with her.”

Edward snickered. “Agreed.”

Alexa looked at Daniel.

Daniel shrugged. “I have to pick the rookie. Sometimes he catches things just a hair quicker than the rest of us.”

Jacob heard a crunch and spun around, drawing in a blur. He fired two shots, hitting both of the undead behind him.

David and Mark flushed as the other men laughed in approval.

Daniel waved. “That’s my rookie. I’ll wager a private batch of chili, made from *my* stash.”

The men who couldn’t bet groaned about missing out.

“Noted.” Alexa stored her book and pencil. “It’s time. Clear the town again, and drink your fill. Normals stay with me. The rest of you stay in sight of each other.”

Fresh excitement filled the air as they realized they would get to sweep the town alone.

Jacob, Mark, and David all mentally swore to be next. The perks were amazing.

5

“Do you think we should go help them?”

Jason snorted, watching her stretch. “The shots are sporadic. They aren’t being swarmed. They’re hunting.”

Carolyn frowned. “Okay. Coffee?”

“Not yet.” Jason grinned at her as she sat up and looked over. He was already throbbing. “Five minutes?”

Carolyn wanted to, but she was embarrassed and feeling too needy.

Jason was horny and he knew what she needed right now. “Pull your pants down so I can slam you.”

Carolyn started to stand up, fighting the crude lust.

Jason grabbed her arm.

Carolyn stiffened, looking down into his hot green eyes.

Jason was horrified by his response. “Please?!”

Carolyn gave a curt nod.

Jason sat up and kissed her. He explored her mouth with his tongue, grinding against her.

Carolyn allowed him to slide a hand under her shirt. She sucked in a breath when he flipped a hardening nipple with his thumb. Pleasure shot through her gut, making her arch in stunned delight.

Jason played with her titties and kissed her, moaning and shuddering against her. It had been years for him, and even then, it hadn't felt this good.

Carolyn's arms went around his neck as he kissed her again. His almost rough fingers went back to her breasts, stroking and squeezing in an alternating pattern that kept her moaning against his lips.

Jason tugged her pants down and did the same to his own, breathing harsh. He used one hand on her breasts now and slid the other between her legs.

Carolyn hissed as he shoved a thick finger into her. He began slow strokes in and out while rubbing her clit with his palm. She gushed onto his hand, giving them lube.

“Perfect.” Jason kissed her lips, then licked them. “Spread your legs.”

Carolyn did, nipples now hot rocky peaks under his still playing hand.

Jason grasped her clit and began to tug.

Carolyn arched, crying out. “There! Almost there!”

Jason flipped his hips and managed to center his dick against his hand. He tugged her clit again and thrust upward.

Carolyn shuddered, arms clutching his big shoulders. “Please!”

Jason shoved into her as he pinched her clit, groaning.

Carolyn spasmed, sobbing against his neck. “Yes! Oh, yes!”

Jason tugged and rubbed until she stilled. Then he shoved in deep and used her orgasm to oil the path. He shuddered this time as her hands found his hair and pulled him close for a kiss. He bucked furiously into her hot body, grunting. He grabbed her ass cheeks and held her in the air, pounding.

Carolyn held tight and rode the rest of her waves. She enjoyed the flares as his breathing

increased and his strokes became harder. He was almost out of control and it was sexy because she'd caused it. She nuzzled his jaw. "Turn me around."

Jason gasped. He quickly stepped back and spun her around. He was back in her an instant later, hands clenched against her cheek to keep from slapping her ass.

Carolyn chuckled. "Go on."

Jason smacked her in a light tap... He climaxed, holding onto her hips as he forgot to breathe.

Jason gasped in air as he turned them so he was leaning against the wall. He pulled her back into his arms and sent a hand to her breasts and the other between her legs.

Carolyn let him give her a second dose of pleasure, amazed at how fast he was able to do it.

Jason stayed nestled inside her and concentrated on making her feel great. The first time had been an appetizer. Now, he wanted her to have the meal.

Outside the cellar door, Alexa and her men shared grins and patient sweeps of the cleared town. The sounds from Jason and Carolyn were hot. When the woman moaned again, loud enough to ring through the alley next to them, half the men decided to ask Jason if he had any tips. None of them had ever gotten Alexa to make noises that loud.

Alexa snickered, looking forward to their practice. She stomped on the cellar door twice to give them warning. "We're done up here. In ten seconds, I'm coming in."

Carolyn moaned in response.

6

“Creepy place.” Selma stayed on her bike as she scanned for trouble. The river here was almost frozen. Big chunks of ice were slowly crushing their way downstream. Out in the center of the wide, foggy river, a frozen riverboat bobbed heavily in the cold water.

Selma studied the frozen boat, picking out the hands reaching for weapons or mercy. “Not normal.” Her mind placed it with magic an instant before the new voice inside confirmed it. Selma immediately assumed it had been William. She was on his back trail. Which meant he’d passed Alexa at some point. Selma didn’t understand why he hadn’t attacked the Mitchel woman, but it was too late now. She wasn’t going to hunt him down and ask—not after seeing what he was capable of. She hated him for that fear.

The riverboat was slowly crunching through the ice as it made its way downstream. It was a sailing horror show. Selma wanted it gone. Not because it scared her, but because Marcella hadn’t ordered it. She didn’t want the world afraid of William. She wanted women to be the ones who were feared.

A low growl echoed.

Selma glanced at the weeds and found pairs of eyes watching her, waiting for her to get closer. The icy weather hadn’t stopped the lean predators. Their

matted fur and sunken eyes said food was just as hard to come by now for animals as it was for humans.

She turned the bike off and left the keys in the ignition. “Let’s have a training session.”

Selma tossed her weakest spell.

Three wolves leapt at her while the rest took off, yelping at the pain charm.

Selma lifted her other arm. Harsh wind hit the three remaining animals and slammed them into the ground. All of them scrambled away, whining and whimpering.

She waited for more attacks. When none came, she fired a last blast. It slammed into the riverboat and shattered it into a million icy pieces that quickly sank below the water.

The noise faded into rushing, crunching ice.

Selma went back to her bike and sat on it as she dug through her kit. When she had what she wanted, she stored the kit, then did another sweep to check her surroundings. The missing riverboat made her feel glad and guilty. She shrugged it off and turned on her radio. “This is Selma, calling Nancy. You missed your scheduled check in. Are you there?”

Selma didn’t expect an answer right away. She kept track of her surroundings and waited patiently for an answer.

The radio stayed silent.

Selma sighed, repeating the call. She needed to get this out of the way before evening listeners tuned in. “Come in, Nancy.”

Static crackled. Then a cool male voice laughed at her.

Selma knew what it meant, but she still had to confirm it. “She’s dead?”

“Very.”

Selma decided carefully on her response, not sure who the man was, but suspecting. “Tell your boss she has bigger problems coming.”

“My boss is sleeping. Perhaps you’d like to call back later with your useless threats?”

Selma controlled her anger at the reckless male. “If you survive, your tongue will be removed.”

Selma shut off her radio and brought the bike to life. She’d found out Nancy was dead and Alexa was still playing the game or she would have answered herself. Or better yet, there wouldn’t have been an answer at all. Alexa was using herself as bait. “But I’m not coming alone or even in a small group.”

Selma headed slightly north, eager for the coming radio address. Marcella would trigger a new migration. With those desperate, angry people, Selma would be able to surround the town and move in together. There was no way Alexa would escape. “I do this for my country, because none of you cowards will do it for yourselves!” Selma gunned the engine and flew toward destiny.

“Duck, then fire. Duck, then fire.” Alexa circled the four men who were crouched in the center of the cellar. “If you can’t duck, you don’t get to fire!”

Jason and Carolyn minded the small fire and meal while Edward and Daniel watched the door and the lesson. Later, they would offer suggestions to the four men Alexa was drilling. Once every few weeks, she spent a day going over the basics with those who needed it the most. This time, the two senior men had outperformed the others in her short opening set. Jason had been ordered to watch and learn, like all Alexa’s men had been upon joining.

“Duck, then reload! Duck, then reload!”

Edward flashed back to doing this during their first month together. The best times had been right after Daniel joined them. The biker had been recovering from his injuries and hadn’t been able to participate, leaving Edward under Alexa’s full attention.

“Check your six! Check your six!”

Daniel also flashed back to that month before Mark and Billy joined them. It had been special to him in ways that he didn’t know how to put into words. The thin rivalry between him and Edward had added excitement to what could have been a very boring, demoralizing time for him. Edward had excelled in the training sessions that were physical, but Alexa had forced Daniel to use his brain while his body healed.

The best times had been around the fire, right after she and Edward had finished a workout. She

had drilled him on everything in that lesson, then she'd pitted them against each other with questions that were followed by some amazing rewards.

Edward gave him a knowing leer.

Daniel flushed, swallowing a chuckle. It was great to have a full team, but his favorite time would always be that first month.

"Now repeat it in one move! Repeat!"

The four men jumped up in tandem, repeating the moves she was showing them while trying not to hit each other in the confined space. It was perfect for training in close combat that usually had to be handled by hand. Men grunted, twisting, turning, dropping.

Edward let his mind wander. Alexa was alert right now. During training sessions, she listened to everything, including their surroundings. Now would be a very bad time for anyone to disturb her.

Edward had been jealous of Daniel for about three days. Then Alexa had started the training sessions and they'd found a magical close to their evenings that Edward still missed. *Did she do it because I was jealous or because that's the best way to train a crew?* Edward didn't have an answer. He suspected it was both.

"Too slow!" Alexa crouched as she prepared to repeat the demonstration. "You have to make it all one smooth motion. Duck, then reload as you check your six."

Jason watched Alexa, surprised that her lessons were so in depth. Most hunting or questing crews

fought together, but they didn't bother to spend time training. He was sure that gave this team an advantage.

Alexa finished the demonstration, then motioned. "Again!"

Carolyn also watched Alexa. She was enjoying her time around the infamous team, but the things she was picking up from Alexa were priceless. Alexa knew how to handle men. Carolyn didn't care that she wouldn't ever have a use for it. She still absorbed the details and tried not to stare at any of them for too long. She didn't want Alexa and her men to be uncomfortable.

Carolyn dumped the small baggie of long grain rice into the pot. She was using Alexa's supplies.

Carolyn smiled when Jason immediately stirred the pot for her, but she didn't make eye contact. Their moments together had been wonderful, but she didn't need to get even more attached to him. This time was to be enjoyed in full, then left in memories when they parted.

Jason frowned.

Carolyn sighed. "I'm sorry."

Jason turned away. "Yeah."

Alexa kept track of the couple without them realizing it. She understood they were good together, but doomed to split up. She just didn't know why yet. When she did, maybe she could help them. "Squat, then fire!"

The four fighters grunted and groaned as they went through the session, but they were all glad to

be doing the special workout. None of them wanted to be rusty in a fight that required them to move a lot.

Alexa and Daniel stilled at the same time.

Everyone else followed their lead, heads tilting, hands sliding toward weapons.

Daniel shrugged at Alexa. “Scavengers again?”

She nodded. They were all well fed from the quick trip out. There was no reason to go up until they were hungry again or there were better targets to aim for. “Resume set, from the beginning!”

Edward nodded to Daniel, showing his approval of the biker hearing it at the same time as Alexa. Most of them couldn’t do that.

Daniel fell into the past. He’d only been able to do that a few times so far, but all of them were marked in his memory. The first time glowed the brightest and always would.

6 Months Ago

Chapter Fifteen
I'm Not Crazy

1

“How did you know where to find me?”

Daniel wasn't sure she would answer. He'd been with Edward and Alexa for almost a week now, but that wasn't long enough to judge her moods or her mind.

Alexa paused. She'd been about to start the evening lesson with Edward. “I sent out a call, years ago. Those who answered are either here now or on our path forward. We will not be alone together for long.”

Daniel frowned. “Will there be a lot of us?”

“As many as I need and no more.” Alexa refused to give an exact number, but she was almost certain there would be nine total in their group. From what she'd foreseen of their long trek, two of those wouldn't spend much time with the crew until most of the quest was over.

Daniel's frown grew. “How will you know them?”

“They will know me.”

Neither man wanted to share her any more than they already were. Being told an unknown number

of partners were coming was disappointing. The mood plummeted.

Alexa let it go. They were right to cherish this short time. The beginnings of a crew were always the best, the strongest. They also hurt the most when a senior member died. She'd watched it happen repeatedly with crews around her, and within her own family. It took an amazing leader to keep a full crew alive through any quest, let alone one as dangerous as this one would be.

Daniel's lip stuck out, giving him the appearance of a sullen teenager. Alexa swallowed her smile. The biker hadn't asked these questions before now out of respect for her saving his life, and for being allowed to join her despite his suicide attempt. He didn't understand that his depression was perfect for a mission that would likely end in his death anyway. Alexa's stomach tightened at the thought. *I'm already attached to them. It feels like a crew now.*

Edward caught her mood shift and leaned against the hard stone that lined the rear of their site, content to wait. Alexa had them camped not far from where they'd found Daniel. Their fire was against the side of a cliff, with a small clear area around it that fed into thick woods. Flies buzzed through the dry, dusty air. In the distance, birds called and lightning occasionally lit up the gritty sky.

It was peaceful to Daniel. He knew it was because of the company. If he'd still been alone, it

would have been maddening to be so far from where he considered home. "I need some answers."

Alexa's lips twitched. "As you would."

Daniel drew in a breath and then let it out. "Where are we going? What's our true goal?"

"We are following the remnants of Safe Haven. When we find them, we will bring them home so they may spread the light of rebirth over the land."

Daniel stared. "Oh."

Alexa chuckled. "We're looking for my father."

Daniel brightened. "Cool. I can do that."

Edward snickered, impressed with how Alexa had gotten agreement using different words for the exact same mission.

Daniel realized what had happened. His lip came out again. "I grew up with a girl like you. She was too smart for me, too."

Alexa laughed, but didn't rub it in.

Edward saw Daniel's eyes glaze and assumed he was delving into his past. "Was she a bookworm?"

Daniel slowly shook his head, smile starting. "No, she was..." Daniel frowned. "Crazy, reckless, and probably dead now. Let's get rolling."

Alexa and Edward both caught the evasion. Edward assumed it was a bad memory. Alexa dug for Daniel's real thought.

She relaxed, withdrawing. It didn't surprise her that Daniel had known another descendant. She liked it that he refused to talk about the girl even after all these years. The bonds formed in that trailer

park were powerful to this day. Alexa was a little jealous. She pushed it away as female pride. “You heard him. Let’s get rolling.”

Daniel stayed in the past a few minutes longer. His mind flew him through hot summers on his dirt bike, of riding with the lonely, haunted girl with black hair and glowing blue eyes. When his family moved away, she was the only thing he’d missed about Ohio. *Is that connected to my jump? Have I spent all these years in mourning for her?*

Edward and Alexa rolled across the dirt and came up mock firing with their hands. They dropped to one knee in tandem, then rolled. Alexa went left. Edward went right. They rose and pretend fired again to finish the set.

Daniel was ashamed of his body as he watched Edward go through the sets. Edward was bulked out, strong, tall. Daniel hated his lean, scarred frame right then. Edward was perfect. *I’ll never live up to that. Why does she even want me?*

He stared at Alexa, admiring her body, too, but not in a sexual way. He just thought she was the second most beautiful female he’d ever seen. Her blonde braids swung around her hips as she spun, demonstrating the next move. Her long, slender legs accented her thin waist and an oval face complemented her full chest and sun weathered skin. She looked wild, free, untamable. Daniel hoped she stayed that way forever.

Daniel stiffened suddenly.

Alexa’s head cocked.

“Do you hear something?” Edward stilled at their simultaneous action.

“Whistling.” Alexa straightened, pulling her real gun. “You do what I do.”

Edward nodded, moving over to cover Daniel as she’d already taught him.

Daniel frowned as the whistling grew louder. He prepared to grab his gun.

The whistling stopped. “I came for the job.”

Daniel and Edward watched Alexa for instructions, but they also scanned the thick trees for the intruder.

Alexa waited for the man to show himself, a bit annoyed. He’d interrupted their training session, and he’d been whistling a song she hated. *Don’t worry, Be Happy* had no place in the apocalypse.

The leaves parted. A tall man with a wide chest and hands on his gun butts emerged. He stopped after two steps, flashing a cocky grin. “I’m Jim Livingston.”

Alexa’s lips tightened. “Famous family.”

Edward and Daniel began to study the man like a rival instead of an enemy.

Jim was almost as scarred as Daniel, with marks up and down his hands, neck, cheeks, and arms. His multicolored hair was slicked back in a surfer’s wave over cruel two-toned blue eyes. Daniel wasn’t jealous of him. *He’s fugly compared to us and it isn’t his looks. He feels bad, like he has no honor. I hope the Boss doesn’t bring him into our group.*

Jim nodded. “We get around.”

“So does the damage.”

Jim shrugged, grin never changing, never fading. “We usually have a little help with that.”

Alexa snorted. “Mitchels carried out the plans. Livingstons enforced those assignments.”

Jim sighed sadly despite the grin. “No enforcers for centuries now. Our line changed when yours betrayed us.”

Daniel and Edward began to realize the man was a serious threat. Both fighters palmed their gun butts, ready to draw.

Jim sent a contemptuous glance over the men, then turned his attention back to Alexa, dismissing them.

Alexa’s face darkened.

That’s sign two. Edward had been keeping track just for moments like these. *First, her lips thin. Then, she sort of frowns with her entire face. When she hits the third sign, someone dies.*

“Your brother Joel was insane. He wanted to take over the world and keep the normals as slave labor.”

Jim shrugged, eyes glinting. “It built the old world.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“Says you and your uppity family.” Jim mocked her openly now. “*We have to be part of the light. We were put here to protect them.*” He gestured angrily. “You couldn’t just stay out of it!”

Alexa watched him, waiting for the moment of life and death. Her men were out of the line of fire

and her gun was loaded. That was all she needed. This delay for him to talk was a chance for the man to walk away.

Jim glared at her now. “You owe my family a debt! I’m here to collect it.”

“Through a job?”

“Yes. If I’m one of your crew, you’re sworn to defend me.”

Alexa grunted. “Who did you piss off this time?”

Jim flushed. “An older relative.”

Alexa snorted. “Joel’s coming home.”

Jim shook his head. “Joel died at the international detention center. He fought some reckless, crazy woman and lost.”

Daniel stiffened.

Alexa also caught the copy of his words, but she didn’t have time for Daniel’s ghosts right now. “Your father, then.”

“Worse.”

Alexa’s lips curled. “You want me to kill Laura Livingston, the oldest member of your family.”

“Yes. My grandmother is furious with me. She’s on her way here.” His eyes slid to the weeds behind Alexa and Edward.

Alexa spun around, both guns coming up. “Now, Edward!”

Edward drew and fired at Jim, aiming for his hands so he couldn’t shoot Alexa in the back.

Daniel drew, scanning for more threats.

Alexa shot a tall, thin shadow that immediately began to scream. She ran forward.

Edward fired again, getting Jim in the chest this time.

Daniel made it back around to Jim and fired once, adding his shot to Edward's.

Jim fell backward at the impacts, gun flying from his hand without firing. It had happened too fast.

Alexa fired once more into the woman's head, then scanned for the next threat. The dead woman was Jim's twin, just with stubby breasts and longer, greasy hair. Her age was hard to determine through the wrinkles and scars. It was clear she'd had a rough life.

Daniel and Edward waited for her to call it.

Alexa reloaded and holstered.

The men did the same, sharing grins. They'd handled it like she taught them. It was progress.

Alexa knelt to loot the woman, also proud of them, but she refused to show it yet. She was training them like her father and others had her. Waiting for the reward would strengthen their patience—something fighters had to have.

When she finished, Edward dragged the bodies away from their campsite. He wasn't sure if Alexa would move them because of this. There was surprisingly little blood, so the site itself was still in good shape. The noise might have drawn attention, though.

Alexa was more confident in her new crew now. “We’ll stay. If someone else wants the job, we’ll handle the interview.”

“Who were they?” Daniel was still in the mood to ask questions.

“An old partnership that went bad long before the war.” She wiped dust from her pants. “It’s over now. If he was telling the truth about Joel dying, Jim and his grandmother were the last of their family.”

Daniel leaned back against the hard tree, easing the pressure on his shattered, healing legs. “Why would they come out to hunt you if they were desperate? It would have been easier to pick a soft target.”

Alexa shrugged. “Their minds didn’t feel right. Maybe they snapped. Afterworld is no place for the mentally weak.”

Daniel grimaced.

Alexa shook her head. “Depression and crazy are two different states. One only leads to the other when the situation that caused it doesn’t change.” She grunted. “Or if it changes for the worse. People can only take so much abuse.”

Edward noticed how Alexa had redirected the topic, but he didn’t comment on it. She had a right to her privacy so long as it didn’t interfere with their quest. Since the two attackers were the last of their line, that family wouldn’t be a problem in the future. He saw no reason to grill her on it.

Daniel was lost in his thoughts now and missed it all.

Alexa was satisfied with their progress. Edward was a steady right hand and Daniel was working through his mental issues. By the time they added the next member, both men would be levels above where they'd been when she'd found them.

"I'm not crazy..." Daniel let go of that fear at her nod.

"You were sad. You didn't harm anyone else in the attempt. You still care about right and wrong, and honor. Crazy people are the opposite. They don't have the capacity to care."

Daniel felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders. He gazed at her in adoration.

So did Edward. Safe Haven was a place of second chances. It was comforting to know Alexa believed in that, too.

Daniel snapped back to the present. He did a fast scan to verify things in the cellar were okay. The movement was so ingrained now that he didn't realize he was doing it anymore. Back then, it had been a conscious effort to improve. He glanced at Edward.

Edward nodded to him. He whispered lowly in the new pitch that only the other vampires would be able to hear. "We got the best of it."

Daniel smiled. "I think so, too."

“Attention to anyone in the Bridgeport area. I have found a large food stash and I need help to unearth it. Can anyone assist? It’s under a radio station in Bridgeport, Alabama. A small group of armed rebels have claimed it for themselves.”

Selma could hear people tuning out, connecting the dots. She added a lure that was irresistible. “There is enough powdered milk and powdered eggs in that cellar to last for a year. Seven people are claiming all of it.”

Selma hung up the mike and ate her ration, listening to the calls now offering support. Flour and powdered milk made the foods of the past. Murders happened over those items even in small amounts. Canned goods could still be found, and bread could be made if you wanted to wait for the wheat to grow, but packaged products just waiting to be used were useless without milk or eggs. “In this case, it’s a complete myth.”

Selma had no problem lying to achieve her goals. “I want that town surrounded and I’ll get it.”

She turned off the radio, sure the word would spread. It would go faster after Marcella’s address, but for now, the flames had been fanned to life.

Selma felt eyes on her and scanned the area again. She found a normal sneaking by and ignored it. She had bigger fish to fry.

Selma finished her evening meal, then got back on her bike. She was almost to Bridgeport now. By the time Marcella’s call went out, she would be

picking a vantage point and deciding how best to terrorize her target.

Jeanie kept walking. She'd heard the woman's radio call, but it didn't matter to her. The bunker wasn't her goal, and she couldn't be tempted by shelter or even food. She knew how to hunt and when that failed, she gathered greens or went hungry. She had adjusted to Afterworld better than she'd ever expected to.

Jeanie kept her steady pace and enjoyed knowing her journey was almost over.

3

“I repeat, a large stash of powdered milk and eggs has been found in Bridgeport. The Mitchel crew is keeping it for themselves. That's why they haven't left yet—*there's too much food for them to carry.*”

Marcella paused for effect, then continued. “My Lieutenant, Selma, is there now. She's in charge of the attack. Surround the town and wait for her call. All spoils will be distributed evenly. Anyone who fights for me will also have a chance at being allowed to live inside one of my bunkers. I have two now.” Marcella could feel the anger at that, and switched it back to where she needed it. “Any men who fight for me will be exempt from the slavery law. Go to Bridgeport and earn your share of the food. Then come here and be given a home.”

Marcella shut off the radio and left the room, eager to check on her guest. They were all assuming Nancy was dead. When Abigail found out, it would be ugly. Marcella wanted to be there to direct the response to her temper. And to bond by promising to kill the woman who had murdered her mommy.

Marcella hurried into the main waiting room where Abigail's empty playpen glared at her in brightly colored warning. She scanned and found nothing. The baby was gone. So was the new, mind altered slave she'd assigned to care for the girl.

Marcella opened her mouth to call for Selma. She snapped it shut, marching to the console. She slapped her hand over the button. "Who has Abigail?"

No one answered.

Marcella hit the alarm code. Loud blares of sound pierced the air and then her ears. It paused for three seconds, then restarted.

Marcella flipped on the many screens and cameras, heart thumping. If Abigail had snapped the lock and taken over her slave, it was possible she was already out of the bunker. They'd had several arrivals and departures in the last few hours.

The monitors showed a normal day in the complex. No one ran or looked suspicious. Marcella typed in another code. "Find Resident Abigail, ID code number 13."

"*Checking...*" The computer flashed to the front entrance.

Marcella narrowed in on the form standing by the gate.

The man stood tall and straight in clean clothes meant for travel. He didn't twitch at the heavy wind or shiver from the cold flakes that were falling. He didn't flinch at the shouts of other males being brought in and there were no fast glances around to see if he was being watched. *He's not one of mine.*

A slave carrying a large bundle joined him.

Marcella shut off the alarm so she could be heard. "Front gate breach! Breach at the front gate!"

She saw the man take the baby. She watched in shock as the stranger stabbed the male slave in the throat and drained his lifeforce as he died.

William looked up at the camera. He pointed at her.

Marcella staggered back.

William tucked the baby onto his hip and vanished into the foggy tree line.

The bunker was loud and chaotic as everyone responded differently to the threat. Marcella stayed in her room and let her protectors do their jobs. It didn't matter as long as the stranger didn't come inside. *I don't want that. He's too strong for all of us combined.*

Marcella shuddered. *He might join the rebel males. And now, he'll have Abigail's power, too. I'm not safe here anymore!*

The bunker stayed active for hours. Heavier security patrolled the halls and ground around the

complex. Cameras buzzed and whirled as people watched each other. No one knew for sure what had happened, but Abigail was gone. Marcella had made a mistake. Many bunker residents wondered if she would be overthrown now. The rumors of her being found curled in a corner, shaking, weren't helping with that bet.

In the workout room, the group of descendants shared knowing looks. This is what they'd trained for.

The magic users were in black and silver uniforms now, designed by Marcella. They liked the comfortable, stretchy clothes that didn't restrict their movements. It also made them feel special. None of Marcella's other top women were encouraged to wear flashy clothes. She'd made sure they were happy, and all of them knew that treatment wasn't free.

It's almost time.

The magic users subtly headed down the dirty, loud, crowded halls to their rooms at Marcella's mental call. It was time to gather their gear and get ready for the order to leave. The residents here were on borrowed time.

The bunker workers hurried through their shifts and then hid in their rooms when they finished, hoping to avoid the crossfire. The others watched both groups and waited for Marcella to handle it. It wasn't that they had faith in her. It was how they'd been programmed to react.

The trackers and hunters tried to drop their hauls and get right back out to avoid the tension and have a chance at freedom if things went bad. All of them had made plans for moments like this.

Near the main doors, a patrol group waited for their haul to be tagged so they could be paid. The drugged males were piled at their feet like firewood.

“Wait. I know that one!” Debbie Malin hurried down the hall toward them, coming to a stop in front of Chris. “I thought you were dead!”

She dug in her pocket and held out her credit book. “Take it all if you want.”

The lead hunter scowled. “They’re not bagged or tagged yet.”

“That’s my brother!”

“Fine. Stop yelling.” The hunter took a generous payment.

Debbie grabbed Chris by the arm and dragged him down the hall. “Come on, Bubby. We have a lot of catching up to do!”

4

“What gifts do you have, little one?”

Abigail blinked through the ski mask.

William frowned slightly. “Of course, but that doesn’t mean death for you. I only want to copy it, not take it.” William had bundled the girl up in his clothes until he could scavenge for her needs. The ski mask had been too small for him, but it was perfect for the cute little girl. The weather was calm

right now, but very cold. It didn't bother him, but he refused to take chances with her health.

Abigail clutched his arm as he took off running.

William chuckled. "Why do you think I came for you? Moving time is an amazing gift."

Around them, the land was still and cold. William knew there were people in the battered homes along this street, but he didn't feel magic. These survivors had been here since the war. They weren't leaving unless they were dead. Nothing else moved. Winter was setting into this zone and it wasn't going away for a while.

Abigail held onto the strange man and mourned for her mother. *I will make the Mitchel pay, Momma. And this big man will help.* Abigail kicked his hip. "Unlock me?"

William shook his head. "Not until we get somewhere safer. You could be hurt if we're tracked." He shifted the child higher onto his lean hip and tugged his thick coat around her. "Stay warm. You're important to the future and to the past."

Abigail knew what her gift could do. Her mother had explained it in ways that she could understand, including how much other people would want it. Nancy had warned her not to trust anyone... But the man was big and strong, and he'd taken her away from Marcella, who might have killed her.

William nodded. "As soon as you refused to do her bidding, she would have."

“Will you?”

“I am on a quest to gather children like yourself. Hurting you now would prevent me from completing my goals.”

Abigail let her eyes close, sleepy. *I wonder if this is what it feels like to have a daddy.*

William caught all of her thoughts. He stored them for later use as he got out of range of the bunker. *I now have one of the three I need. Fate is clearly on my side.*

Chapter Sixteen
I'm Not Dying
December 11th

1

“We’re light three dozen men. The cook swears they all drove off together around dawn. We’re also missing the last transport truck.”

Ulysses stood up from his rickety table. He’d claimed it from the Snake furnishings that had been left behind when they fled. “The bunker calls stirred them up. They want to be inside a shelter. They don’t care that they’ll be slaves.”

Lloyd frowned. “She said men will be exempt if they help kill the Mitchel.”

“Never trust a Snake or a bunker bitch. You know that.”

Lloyd nodded. Ulysses was right. Just because the bunker woman said they would be free, that didn’t mean it would go down that way. “What do you want me to tell the men?”

The brigade was busy cooking, cleaning, repairing uniforms, and gathering their weapons. There were two training sessions taking place, as well, and all of it was being done in the icy wind and muddy slush. No one was in a good mood, but

the coming storm clouds said the day wasn't going to get any better.

Ulysses shrugged, heading for the four-stall outhouse they'd built yesterday. "Does it matter?"

Lloyd frowned. He watched his commanding officer enter the bathroom and slam the thin door. *What's his problem this time?*

Lloyd concentrated, trying to figure out the issue. Ulysses only got grouchy when there was trouble coming that he wasn't sure the men could handle.

"You ready for the hunt?"

Lloyd turned around to find Samuel behind him. The short, balding man had sores on his mouth and childlike menace in his eyes. Lloyd nodded, forcing the proper response out through a churning stomach. "Ready as rain."

Samuel sniggered and moved off to oversee the hunters. He was in charge.

Lloyd swallowed a sudden case of nerves as he followed. *Why do I think this is going to be an ugly day?*

Samuel led the group of hunters toward the large cave in the rear of the Snake site. They'd confirmed droppings and Ulysses had given them permission to try. The men were desperate for meat. A grizzly bear would feed them all for a week.

The cave was tall and narrow, and covered in a layer of vines and ice that hid what was inside. Lloyd moved to the rear of the line, not caring how the men saw it. *I didn't come here to die.* He

suddenly understood why Ulysses was in a bad mood.

Samuel frowned at Lloyd as he motioned. “Let’s go, men!”

No one moved.

Samuel’s face hardened. “Do you want to eat tonight?!”

The two dozen soldiers reluctantly stepped forward.

The bear lumbered from the cave just as the group got up the courage to go in after it.

The bear had scars all over its head and nose. Its huge paws held claws that were four inches long. The puny soldiers in the army uniforms stood no chance against the animal that was over 5’ before it stood up to roar at them for disturbing its slumber.

Samuel tried to run, screaming. He tripped, firing his gun.

Lloyd slid to his knees, breath wheezing out as the bullet went into his chest. *I didn’t come here to die!* Lloyd fell over.

The bear ran over him, big paws driving his face into the ground as it chased the other soldiers.

Samuel got to his feet and aimed this time. He fired.

The bullet got the man closest to the bear, dropping him.

The bear kept going, looking for the moving targets.

Samuel fired again.

This time, he trimmed the bear's ear and blew the head off the soldier in front of it.

One of the other men stopped and lifted his gun. He shot Samuel in the throat and then turned the gun on himself as the bear's huge teeth clamped down on his shoulder and snapped off his arm.

Gunshots and shrieks echoed through the cold air.

Ulysses listened to the chaos, not getting up from his morning dump. "We won't be trying that again for a long time."

He refused to think about the men he'd just lost. All life was trial and error.

2

"Someone is hiding a secret." Alexa dropped her spoon back into her mostly empty bowl of breakfast and put it down. "Come clean now. I've had enough of secrets."

Men shifted uneasily, glancing at each other.

Carolyn didn't move from the bedroll in the corner. She wasn't feeling good today.

Next to her, Jason kept his eyes on the dirty floor.

Alexa grunted, standing. "The hard way? Fine." She slid both hands to her guns, eyes going to Jason.

Jason didn't want to do this now. He tried to find a way to avoid it. "Can this wait? I need to look after Carolyn."

Carolyn opened her painfilled eyes. “Don’t use me as your excuse. Tell her whatever it is and face it, like I did.”

Jason flushed.

“You’re dangerous, to me.”

Jason nodded miserably at Alexa’s guess. “I’m sorry. That’s not what I’m here for.”

“Who hired you?”

“Corbin, a year ago.”

Alexa studied him while her men frowned and tensed for another fight.

Alexa surprised them by sinking down next to Jason and patting his hairy wrist. “Tell me so I can offer you a job to keep you busy until we return.”

Jason was shocked. “You’d still trust me even though I kill our kind?”

Alexa smiled coldly.

Jason blanched. “That’s the job, right? *You* want to hire me for the same thing.”

Carolyn sat up, staring back and forth. “What am I missing?”

Alexa gestured.

Jason hung his head. “I don’t just heal. I’m a tracker. I’ve been hunting my kind for hire. I have a contract for Alexa.”

The other men tensed, ready to remove Jason if he made a single threatening move.

Carolyn now understood why he’d been so quick to wave off her past mistakes. “Wow.”

Jason slapped his hand against the ground. “That’s not why I came here!”

“But it is why fate sent you.” Alexa leaned back on her elbows. “Why did you come?”

Jason had no choice but honesty. “I want my family back.” He looked at her, eyes blazing his agony. “I want you to support the reset.”

Alexa sighed deeply. “Don’t you even want to know my target?”

Jason shook his head. “Anything is worth the goal.”

Alexa held out a hand. “Shake on it, then we’ll discuss the details.”

Jason didn’t hesitate.

Carolyn watched the blue glow shine around their hands as they shook. *Jason wants his family back. He doesn’t need me at all except to assuage his loneliness.* She curled onto her side and tried to go back to sleep.

Jason didn’t offer her comfort since he was the one who was hurting her. *That’s why I don’t get involved. I’ll never love anyone the way I did my prewar family.*

Alexa understood, but she still pinned him with a hard glare. “You should have told her; you should have told me.”

Jason nodded. “I’m sorry. It’s just not something I can bring up out of the blue. I didn’t know what to say to her.”

“And me?”

Jason snorted bitterly. “I knew you’d figure it out and ask, but I thought it would take longer. I wasn’t ready.”

Alexa laid back. She put an arm over her eyes. “You’ll stay with me until this battle is finished. Then maybe you’ll go to the soldiers and live with them.”

“Until the bunker battle?”

“Yes.”

“Am I aiming for those soldiers?”

“I want an inside man who will prevent the old crap from restarting in any way he has to.”

Jason understood she suspected the soldiers would betray her if they won the bunker fight.

“Yes. They don’t really want equality either. All the horror they’ve suffered at female hands will be paid back tenfold.”

“So you do think the men will win that fight?”

Alexa didn’t answer.

Her fighters waited for more along with Jason, but she went to sleep.

Jason stewed over the cost of her support. He didn’t want to go live with the soldiers, though he did want men back in charge of the world. *But I want my sons back more than anything else. I’ll do the job and do it right. And when Safe Haven returns, we’ll reset this awful world and go back to being happy. My dead kids will be alive and my crazy wife will be normal again and love all of us.*

The last sighting of her had been two years ago, when she’d crossed into the Borderlands on her way to the western bunker, but he knew where she was now and it wasn’t in the west.

Jason wondered if the bunker women or the soldiers even knew a time reset was possible. It was an old myth that had never been proven or disproven. Jason was determined to try. All they needed was three special kids.

3

Selma left her fur coat in the tent and stepped out into the frigid noon air. Refugees around the camp turned in her direction with expectant expressions that hid their dislike. The scavengers and refugees were all thin and hard, with mismatched, ill-fitting clothes and gear, but they were also survivors. Four years in the apocalypse hadn't broken them yet. If she failed to perform, they would tear her apart.

“Let's try this one.” Selma shoved energy through the door in her mind. “Give it all you've got!”

Nothing happened.

“She's not a magic user!”

“She lied to get us here!”

“Go tell the others!”

Selma grunted in embarrassment. Dozens of people were watching her. By the time she'd gotten her camp set up, other groups had arrived. Most of them had camped close to her. Selma knew they were waiting for her to show a weakness and she just had, but she wasn't worried yet. She got set to try again.

Wind tore through the branches above them, shaking snow loose. Trees swayed in the distance, shedding the rest of their yellow and orange leaves.

Selma grinned as she recognized the feel of something big coming. “Just had to let it take effect.”

Storm clouds began to roll in from the west. Dark and thick, they blocked the sun quickly, making it seem like dusk. Lightning flashed in the distance. Thunder cracked behind it.

Selma drew her hood up as fat drops started falling, splattering the ground. “Every town needs a flood to clean out the trash.” She cackled as the storm continued to grow, rushing toward them with thick drafts of wind that blew snow off the trees and buildings. “I like my gifts.”

She spun around to glare at the people slowly moving toward her. “You want some, too?”

The people stopped, heads shaking. They hated magic. They also wanted to use it for themselves, but they were too scared to insist. Selma assumed that would change when more people showed up. Cowards together made a great mob, but she wasn't worried over that, either. She watched rain hit the ground and form a puddle, blocked by frozen earth. “There's nothing like a flood in winter.”

When she cackled again, more people backed up or returned to their own campsite to take cover.

Selma stayed out in the storm and waited for the water to rise.

Nearby, a woman in a red robe watched Selma with fanatical longing and waited for the right moment to make contact. She'd found an easier target than Alexa.

4

Alexa sat up, frown stretching across her face. "We're going to be flushed out of here—literally. Get ready."

Her crew leapt up and started gathering their things.

Jason frowned, looking over at Carolyn. "She isn't doing well right now."

Alexa already knew that. "You'll carry her."

Jason shrugged, going over to Carolyn's warm body by the fire. "Carolyn? We have to go now."

She slowly sat up, eyes hostile. "I'll cover my own ass. You just watch hers so your deal doesn't fall apart!" She shoved to her feet and drew on her long coat with shaky hands.

Jason flushed. "You have a past, too. You sold your son for drugs! Why is my past so much worse?"

Carolyn didn't answer. She buttoned her coat and went to stand by the door.

Jason sighed unhappily. "I'm sorry."

Carolyn flashed another glare. "You should be!"

Jason clamped his lips shut, refusing to give in. He did care for Carolyn, but he wasn't going to give up his dreams for her.

Carolyn knew. That's why she was upset. The magic of his touch would fade as soon as they were apart and then she would go back to the solitary criminal she'd been before. *I don't need him or anyone else. I'll be fine on my own!*

Jason didn't respond to her thoughts. There was nothing he could say to make it better.

Thunder boomed over the town. Rain came down in heavy sheets, drenching the land. Debris began collecting in the rain puddles. It swirled around, banging and thumping against buildings.

“Are thunderstorms during winter common?”

“They can be, depending on the area.” Edward lifted a brow. “Why?”

David shrugged. “Doesn't seem right to me.”

Alexa nodded. “Your instincts are good.”

“We're under attack by a magic user?” Carolyn tried to control her fear as she thought of the riverboat people.

Alexa moved toward the door. “I'd say the chances are good on it. We'll know as soon as I step out.” Alexa brought up her shield, drawing attention from everyone in the cellar, even her crew. She hardly ever used magic in front of them.

Alexa strengthened her shield and then it vanished.

Jason smiled in awe. “I can't do that yet.”

“Practice, when you can.” Alexa’s shield winked at them for another brief instant and then disappeared again.

Her men realized it was invisible. They shared grins and secret hopes that they might be able to develop that skill in time, too.

“Are you going to fight the magic user?” Carolyn wasn’t sure how she could help in that situation, but she wanted to.

Alexa shook her head. “I’m providing a target.”

Now her men frowned. They didn’t want her to use herself as bait.

Carolyn stared. “What?”

“Whoever is out there will use their energy trying to hit her.” Jason didn’t like the plan, either. “Once they’re drained, we’re back to normal fighting with guns and hands.”

“Oh.” Carolyn shrugged. “If you think that’s best.”

“I do.” Alexa motioned Edward to open the door. “Get everyone into the radio station.” Her voice hardened. “Do not come out, for *any* reason.”

No one liked the sound of that, but they didn’t protest.

Alexa strolled through the cellar door as if on a summer picnic. She blinked and wiped like the storm was hitting her and moved toward the center of the devastated town.

Edward waited thirty seconds, then led the group out and around the back to a rear window of the station.

“It’s her!”

“That’s Alexa Mitchel!”

“Kill her!”

The refugees were rabid in their hatred, their jealousy. Alexa had a pass into Safe Haven because of her family. They didn’t have that advantage and they loathed her for it.

Selma wasn’t prepared to see her target strolling through the town alone. “She came up already!” Selma gathered energy quickly, picking a spell. She fired.

The energy blast hit Alexa’s shield and rebounded, flying back toward Selma.

Selma ducked it.

The hit sailed over her head and slammed into a thin tree that splintered in a loud crack.

Tense refugees in tents and vehicles came back out to watch the fight.

Selma fired again, using a stronger spell.

It also bounced off. The wave of hate slammed into a refugee who’d gotten too far from cover. He stiffened, then fell backward into the muddy slush.

Selma fired a third time. This spell smothered Alexa’s shield in a blanket of pain.

People gasped at the displays of magic, stepping back to avoid the crossfire.

Alexa kept her concentration on her shield and moved faster toward the hill.

The witnesses realized Alexa was coming up there. They retreated, but didn’t flee. Everyone wanted to see the end of this battle.

Selma realized she would have to get through Alexa's shield to do any damage. "I have to break her concentration." Selma pulled her gun and began firing at the shadowy forms who were now inside the radio station.

Alexa's anger spun out in a vivid blast of fire, but heavy rain extinguished it before it reached the target. Alexa brought her shield back up and kept moving up the hill.

Refugees opened fire on her now. Bullets crashed into her shield and rebounded, impaling trees, cars, and people.

Alexa ducked into the trees and vanished from sight.

Edward nodded his approval, heart thumping. Watching people shoot at her was awful. "Get that last board up over the glass windows and I'll nail it in."

Billy and Mark held the board while Edward hammered. The rest of the group watched through the cracked windows and charred holes for signs of Alexa or a rush from the refugees watching them in anger. There were only about three dozen people up there, but it would still be a good fight because they were all low on ammunition.

That's why she did it this way. Jason was impressed. She's making sure they're all low, too. Smart.

Selma laughed, long and loud. "I thought Mitchels only hit from the front! Where are you?!"

Alexa appeared to her right. She fired a blast of heat and vanished.

The fire swarmed over Selma.

She hurried out of her fiery overshirt, glad she'd left her cloak behind, and dropped it as she spun around to scan. She didn't bring up a shield yet. She didn't know how to hold it and fight at the same time. "But I'll learn."

Thunder cracked overhead. Rain came down with a hard wind, extinguishing the flaming shirt, but it didn't break the tension.

Refugees waited tensely to see where Alexa would appear next.

Alexa moved back toward the station, keeping to the tree line.

Selma waited, eager to continue, but there was only the storm and her rapid breathing.

The red robed woman who'd been watching slowly approached her.

Selma scowled, not wanting the interruption.

Rachel extended a bottle of water.

Selma slowly took it, mind spinning. She twisted the unbroken cap and drank it all, not looking away.

Rachel sank down in the mud near Selma's tent, still not speaking.

Selma scanned her and found thoughts of helping to destroy all traces of Safe Haven. Selma nodded. "I want that, too."

Rachel smiled, keeping her true thoughts hidden. *I feel it. I'll help where I can.*

Selma turned back toward the town as she gathered more energy. “Let’s try this again!”

The storm broke open in full force, preventing clear sight and good aim.

Selma heaved a disappointed sigh. “Might have put too much into the first hit. I didn’t know she would come up before the flood even started.” Selma went into her tent to dry off, now ignoring the robed woman. She wasn’t a threat.

5

Captain Green paused the truck on the hill, stunned by the sight of so much damage. The soldiers and women in the truck with him also stared. The devastation was almost indescribable.

Green narrowed in on refugee camps now ringing the town’s border. There were dozens of them, all waiting to loot the bodies.

Green spotted movement in the town and found Alexa with her crew inside the radio station. It looked like they’d reinforced it, but Green doubted that would hold considering one wall was missing. “Why isn’t she running?”

Stephanie smacked the wall of the truck. “Let’s go!”

The truck stank of nervous stomachs, sweat, and hatred. Now that Jason was gone, the soldiers had no leverage over the angry women. Despite the deals they’d made, the women weren’t willing.

Being captured and forced to agree with mental persuasion wasn't the way to handle them.

Green motioned to his best man as he got out of the truck. "Get them back to camp."

Sergeant Smith frowned as he moved into the driver's seat. "Ulysses won't like this."

"I completed his mission." Green gestured again dismissively.

Smith got the truck rolling, muttering about obsessions with Mitchels.

Green waited until the truck was gone, then he blended into the tree line to make his plans. He didn't know exactly how he was going to help Alexa yet, but he was determined that he would. *She can't die. I need her.*

In the truck, Stephanie snuggled back into her husband's arms, ignoring the other women.

Frank remembered the deal. "You're supposed to convert them."

Stephanie shrugged. "I only made the deal to get you back."

Frank was ashamed of being charmed, and of cheating on his wife. He wanted his honor back. "We have to try. It's the right thing to do."

Stephanie grunted, eyes closing. "No. When we get there, you and I are leaving. We'll go find a place alone in the swamps."

Frank spoke up again, trying to be firm. "I want to help the male freedom fighters."

Stephanie sat up, eyes blazing. "Men will never be back in charge!"

“Yes, we will.” Frank slid over, away from her.

Stephanie grabbed his arm and jerked him back against her hip. “You’re mine!”

Frank tried to resist.

Stephanie punched him in the temple and kept beating on him while he was down. “I said no!”

The driver kept going, ignoring all of it. The men in this truck were outnumbered and they’d foolishly untied the females for the trip. *Let Ulysses handle this mess. I’m not dying today.*

Chapter Seventeen

Keep Dreaming

1

Jeanie approached the soldiers with slow steps and empty hands up. “Hello in the camp!”

Scared, scarred guards rushed forward to confront her.

“Who are you?!”

“What do you want?!”

Jeanie stopped, searching their faces for the one she wanted. She knew he wasn’t here, but she couldn’t help looking for him anyway. “I want to join your cause.”

The guards didn’t know how to respond.

Jeanie didn’t look at the hundreds of other soldiers, but she could feel the animosity. She kept her hands in sight and didn’t make any moves they would consider a threat. These bundled up men were terrified of her. Women had betrayed them too many times for her to be welcomed with open arms, even by those who were now thinking of sex. Jeanie had no intention of becoming a camp whore, but she wasn’t above flirting to get what she wanted. However, that wouldn’t work right away. She had to prove herself an ally first.

The soldier camp was dark and quiet. They had several fires burning, but only by their vehicles and the center command tent, giving just enough light to see where people were. Jeanie scanned for the commander and found him walking toward them. *He's alert to the changes in his camp. That's good.* Jeanie smiled and nodded at him in respect.

Ulysses marched over to them, frowning. "What's the problem?"

"She wants to join us, sir."

Ulysses scanned the woman from head to toe. Her short blonde hair in spikes said she wasn't a traditional female. The thick clothes and ragged backpack weren't encouraging, either. "Why?"

Jeanie met his eye. "I believe in freedom."

"And?" Ulysses knew there was more. There had to be. Women didn't join them. It was a group of seven hundred men.

"I want to be with you when Safe Haven returns."

Ulysses frowned at her. "You knew them?"

Jeanie nodded, voice softening. "A long time ago, long before the war."

"What will you ask of Safe Haven?"

Jeanie's head shook. "I don't care about them. I just need to talk to their leader."

His eyes widened. "You knew Angela, before the war?"

Jeanie paled. "She's with him?"

Ulysses mirrored her scowl, confused. "With whom?"

“Marcus Brady. The Ghost.”

“Ah.” Ulysses used his sharp mind to find a way to benefit from this. He quickly realized it was simple. “If you’re friends with the Ghost, you’re welcome here.”

Jeanie smiled in relief. “Thank you. I won’t cause trouble. I can cook and clean, too.” Her voice faltered. “At least, I used to be able to do those things.”

“Where have you been?”

Sadness came over her pretty face. “Protecting my family.”

Ulysses assumed it hadn’t ended well. “And now you have nowhere else to go and no one else to depend on, right?”

“I take care of myself!” Jeanie sighed, calming. “I’m sorry. Losing the last person on earth I was related to wasn’t easy. I’m still recovering.”

Ulysses had been with government when the Ghost and his mate came through their country and brought down Benjamin. Ulysses had been kept underground because leadership hadn’t thought he was cruel enough to march across the apocalypse and attack innocent Americans. “Well, if you aren’t hunting for a protector and you don’t care about Safe Haven, why are you looking for the Ghost?”

Jeanie put all her cards on the table. “I love him. He was supposed to be mine and that magic bitch took him from me right when we were about to get engaged!” Her voice hardened. “I’m going to remind him that he still has a debt to pay. Then

we're going to get married and leave all this chaos behind."

Ulysses let the plan form in his mind. Then he waved toward his tent. "You can have my accommodations. Get settled and warm up. We'll send in food and water."

Jeanie flashed a bright smile. "Thank you for your hospitality." She walked by him and went to his tent.

Ulysses waved the shocked, frowning guards back to their posts, but he stayed there, thinking hard. When he was satisfied with the plan, he went to the supply area to get another tent. "This might just be my lucky day."

Jeanie put her bag in the corner and began removing a few layers of coats and clothes. The top coat was frozen and falling apart, but it had held her for the trip. "I made it. I'm here." She smiled happily at the soldier who tapped on the flap and entered with supplies. "Hi!"

The soldier blinked in surprise, not expecting anything nice from any female.

Jeanie knew these men were damaged. She stayed back as he put the supplies on the desk. "Please ask your boss what he wants me doing."

The soldier nodded, swallowing. The blonde woman was pretty. As she pulled off clothes, he spotted well-tended skin that made his male interest rise. He quickly left.

Jeanie smiled wider. "I took good care of myself over the years, and I can fight now. I will have you,

Marcus Brady. It's just a matter of waiting for you to come home."

2

"There are more now, a lot more."

Alexa came to the boarded window at Daniel's comment. She peered through the cracks to see campfire smoke ringing the town. She did a fast count, then moved to another view to finish estimating.

Daniel had made a count of two hundred. He kept quiet to see if his count matched hers.

Alexa yawned, listening to the rain fall. There was a thick layer of water over the ground. If the rain didn't let up soon, it might reach this station. If they'd still been in the cellar, they might have drowned by now. "A little over two hundred. We'll wait a bit longer."

No one argued. A few of them assumed she wanted more targets before she went out, but they didn't know how she would defeat so many with only two magazines of ammo each. The corpses in the town had been looted. They were out of an easy resupply choice.

Alexa settled on the ragged station couch and tried to rest. Deflecting with her shield took a lot of energy, and it was a rusty skill. She'd spent too many years avoiding her gifts unless she needed them. Now, they weren't as sharp as she needed them to be.

Carolyn and Jason were at opposite ends of the back room. They hadn't spoken since moving up here. Jason was sorry she'd found out he was a killer for hire.

So was Carolyn.

Billy watched the couple, blood pounding, stomach twisting. *I'm hungry.*

Alexa opened her eyes to pin him in place. "Are you strong enough?"

Billy nodded. He forced his mind to other things. "Sorry, Boss."

The humans didn't know what he'd done. The vampires nodded to him in sympathy and went on with their scans and repairs. The normals smelled like a buffet. It was hard not to want a taste of that.

Jason stiffened as he caught the thoughts. He hadn't considered that they were in danger from Alexa.

She shrugged. "All life is dangerous now, no?"

Jason nodded, but he now scanned her changed men in wariness.

Alexa decided they all needed a distraction while they waited for the storm to abate so the fighting could restart. "Before we set sail, others will join us. Our group will be large when we leave our homeland."

Silence fell. Minds went to those moments in fear and longing.

Satisfied, Alexa settled down to sleep. "Who wants my back?"

Edward waved Billy to that honored place before anyone else could take it.

Billy knew it was to keep him from dwelling on his thirst, but he didn't care. Time holding Alexa was precious. He slid against her and wrapped her up tight.

Alexa sighed. "Nice."

They dozed together, other concerns forgotten.

Edward was impressed with how they'd handled things so far on that end. They'd adjust well to being so different. His own thirst was strong, but manageable. His body hated the sunlight now, but he could stand it for small stretches of time. At this point, he saw it as a gift of extra skills. *I do miss seeing the sun and feeling it without pain, though.* Edward sighed, and went back to watching the rear for an attack. He didn't mind the waiting between battles. He wondered if the other men did. He scanned them.

Jacob was reading his bible with a gun in his hand. David was snoozing in a chair in the corner. Daniel was watching the front with alert eyes. Mark looked back at him, making Edward wonder if the man had been wondering the same thing.

Mark grinned.

Edward snickered and went back to watching. No, the others didn't mind the waiting, either. Knowing they were out on this quest helped, but Alexa was forever giving them other things to stew on. Like setting sail. Edward hadn't spent much time thinking about being on a boat in the ocean.

Now that she'd stated it so clearly, his mind was already making plans for survival. The ocean wasn't like land. They couldn't just run if things went bad.

Mark listened to the storm. It was still cracking and pouring, but it sounded as if the energy was running out. Soon, the fighting would start up again and he wanted to do something special to earn his change. He just hoped he didn't need to save any of their crew. He preferred to do it like Daniel had—with an amazing shot or awesome fighting skills. *Maybe I can get four with one.*

Daniel snorted lowly so he didn't wake anyone. "Keep dreaming."

Mark chuckled and went back to his thoughts.

Daniel hoped the convict managed to do it. *I got lucky with mine. Let's see if great things really can be planned and carried out.*

3

"Where is she?"

"In her tent."

"Why isn't she attacking?"

"She did. You missed it. She has to wait for the storm to stop."

"It's over now. Get her out here!"

Selma listened to the conversation between the robed woman and a new arrival. Selma was in the center of her tent, sitting on the floor while she rested and waited. The robed woman was keeping people away from her, but Selma doubted that

would last for much longer. There were hundreds of people here now, circling the town edges like she wanted. Now that Alexa had no way to escape, Selma knew the time was right for the next attack, but she hadn't found a way to get through the shield. Without that, the plan was doomed. "Damn Mitchels."

Selma replayed the action. "She likes to hit and hide, but she got pissed when I fired on her crew."

"Perhaps you should only attack them. She might get careless."

Selma didn't look up at the robed woman now standing in her tent flap. "She'll hold back energy for the shield. I need to drain her so she can't use it."

Rachel was glad Selma was working on the problem. She'd watched the short battle in concern. She didn't want Alexa to kill Selma. *Selma is special.*

Selma nodded, catching the thought. *I'm the first weather controller on this soil since Safe Haven left...* "That's it!" Selma leapt to her feet and hurried outside into the remaining drizzle.

Rachel stayed by her as people in the camps closest to them noticed and moved forward. She lifted her gun and glowered.

Most of the people stayed back, also flashing guns and glares.

"Stop it! Save that shit for the target!" Selma walked to the edge of the muddy hill. She concentrated.

A low hum of power began to rise from the ground. Mud shifted. Puddles rippled.

Drawn by the feel, witnesses came from their tents and cars. In just ten hours, enough people had arrived to fill in the gaps. They were eager for some of the promised rewards, but most of them had already been on their way here to witness the death of a Mitchel. They gathered warily now, expressions desperate, furious. Their gazes went to Selma as she lifted her hand.

Wind rushed down the hill and slammed into the town.

4

“Stay down. It’s coming.” Alexa had her group in the center of the station now, where the ceiling beams still met in a sturdy frame. She didn’t bring up her shield, but she was ready to when it was needed.

“Why don’t you go out again and fight her?” Carolyn didn’t understand this waiting game.

Jason did. He tried to explain it. “The magic user out there will drain herself and the people will attack her. All they need is a sign of weakness, and then we’re back to just fighting the same normals we’ve always had to face.”

Alexa’s lips thinned, but she didn’t correct him. She doubted it would be so easy.

So did her men. They were used to the unexpected, as much as they could be. Hands stayed

on guns and eyes stayed on the boss, waiting for her call.

Heavy wind smacked into the front wall, rattling the inside. Dust fell from the boards.

A second wave of wind hit, shaking a shutter loose. It fell to the ground with a thick thud.

The third blast of wind came straight through a gap in the boards and rushed through the rooms. Cloaks flared and hair blew back.

Alexa brought up her shield.

Wind invaded the radio station and blew debris against the shield.

Silence fell outside. Objects dropped back to the ground or surface they'd been on, rocking in annoying noise.

Alexa maintained their protection, not fooled. She doubted their opponent had quit after so little damage. "No matter what, stay together. If you get split from the group, they'll pick you off." The warning was for their guests. Her men already knew not to leave her side.

Jason tugged Carolyn closer to the center of protection, ignoring her glare. "We'll settle that later."

Carolyn jerked out of his grip. "No, we won't. You and I don't have a later!"

Jason winced, but he didn't continue the argument. Now was a bad time to be distracted.

Alexa looked over at him.

Jason nodded to her unspoken question. "Whatever you need." *The woman outside doesn't*

know there are two magic users in here. That gave them an advantage even if it didn't feel like it at this moment.

Alexa didn't correct him on his count.

Carolyn smothered her jealousy and waited for the next hit.

5

“What are you waiting for?!” A scavenger shoved by the armed sentry to get to Selma. “Hit her again! Harder!”

Selma spun around and grabbed him by the throat.

“No!”

She drained his lifeforce in seconds.

The body fell to the mud. “Thanks! Now I can do that.” She used the pain of the stolen energy to fuel her determination as it lit up new doors in her mind. “Twister!”

The people around her backed away.

Rachel continued to glare. “Keep your mouths shut until this over!”

People nodded, but only to placate her. They immediately got out of range and went to spread the story.

Selma used all of the energy she'd just gained to form the tornado. It spun up from the ground at her feet and moved down the hill, growing and gaining strength as it barreled toward the radio station.

Alexa held her shield. She couldn't see what was coming, but she could feel the danger.

“Oh, shit! Tornado, Boss!”

The twister was twenty-feet high by the time it hit the main strip of town. It spun through the debris and rotting buildings, crushing and blowing pieces in every direction. Some of it flew up into the camps of people now watching in shock. It impaled flesh, but the people still refused to leave.

The twister spun down the main street, lifting rotting bodies and slush. They swirled around in its center, creating physical walls in the wind like all tornadoes did. Then it increased speed and rushed at the radio station.

Alexa stiffened as the tornado hit the building, straining to hold her shield.

Jason fed her energy, but he wasn't sure it would be enough as glass shattered, pieces of the remaining roof flew off, and floorboards creaked from the pressure. The front of the building collapsed under the onslaught. It covered the center area in dangerous debris.

Selma used the last of her energy to drive the twister forward, eyes bulging, veins popping out on her forehead. “Die!”

The tornado zigged to the left and went spinning into the woods. It destroyed several camps as it broke up.

Selma screamed in rage, sliding to her knees. She didn't have enough control yet to keep it

together. She gasped in air as the twister dissipated and then vanished.

Rachel stood over her, gun out and ready, but no one approached them this time. Watching Selma create and direct a tornado had been enough of a warning to leave her alone unless she was drained and that was hard to know for sure.

Selma slowly rose to her feet, covered in mud from the knees down. She limped into her tent and dropped the flap.

Rachel took up a place nearby where she could see anyone who tried to approach from the rear or front.

6

Alexa expanded her shield to make the debris fall off before she lowered it. Cold dust enveloped them.

Edward scanned, shaking his head. “Sorry, Boss. Our reinforcements weren’t that good.”

“Wood wasn’t meant to withstand a tornado.” Alexa grunted, energy running low. “If she’s able to do that again, I can hold it. A third time will see us blown into the hillside.” Alexa dropped to her knees, breathing heavy.

Jason handed over his canteen before one of her men could.

Alexa drained it.

Carolyn frowned. “Shouldn’t we conserve our water?”

Jason shook his head. “Water refreshes us faster. She needs it.”

Carolyn fell silent, hating it that she was wrong every time she spoke. *I can't wait to be gone.*

Jason scowled at her. “You can go now if you want to. Any of those camps will take you in for your information.”

Daniel nodded. “Then skin you alive and eat you because hey, you're already dying anyway.”

Alexa frowned at Daniel.

Daniel dropped his head. “Sorry, Boss.”

Jason ignored the silent scold. “It's the truth and she knows it.”

Alexa sighed. “Maybe so, but we all have the right to make our own choices. If she wants to go, none of us will stop her.”

Jason knew she meant him, too. He heaved out a sigh of agreement and went to help David and Jacob, who were trying to rebuild a wall from the pieces of debris.

“Thank you.”

Alexa shrugged at Carolyn's gratitude. “He's right about what will happen. If you leave us, at least go in the dark and avoid all these camps. They are not your friends.”

“I know that! I don't have friends!”

Alexa stared at the sick woman. “You do, though, even if you don't recognize us as such.”

Carolyn went to the rear of the mostly destroyed station, refusing to accept those bonds. *You don't really want me or the burden I represent.*

Alexa let her go. There were bigger things to handle right now. She waved at her busy crew. “Leave it. The next attack will force us out of here anyway. No point in wasting your energy.”

The men came back to stand around her, waiting for her next order. They were hidden from view of the camps on the hill by the debris walls, but barely.

Alexa looked up through the cracks in the ceiling, eyeing the radio tower. The light was out now. “Can we get that going again?”

Edward frowned, but dutifully went to the console to see if it was possible. He assumed she wanted to keep pulling people in.

Billy wondered if it was connected to her deal with Ulysses to hold this town and make the call to Safe Haven come spring. He didn’t ask. He was against that idea, but he refused to usurp her orders. What she said, they did, even if it endangered their lives or the quest. *That’s why she’s the boss.*

“Do you want to be?”

Billy quickly shook his head at Alexa’s murmur. “Not for any reason. Your job sucks!”

Alexa laughed. The sound rolled out of the radio station and faded into the now quiet town. Those who heard it frowned angrily and flipped ugly gestures. They assumed she was laughing at their feeble attempts to crush her. Several of the scorned survivors stomped toward Selma’s tent to insist she keep fighting for them.

Rachel stood guard, talking in low murmurs and growls to get them to understand Selma wasn’t

giving up yet. “She’s gathering herself for a bigger blast. Either donate your energy to the cause or go away so she can rest.”

The rumor of what Selma needed had already circled the ring of campsites. Rachel watched in shocked awe as one very thin, brave man immediately entered Selma’s tent and offered himself.

“Use my life and bring that family down!”

Bright light filled the tent. The man didn’t scream or resist as Selma absorbed his life force.

She remained still as his angry energy merged with her body and became part of her own hatred. The pain was secondary to the new fire in her soul.

Those outside the tent waited nervously, not sure what was happening. Rachel understood, but she doubted this mob would wait long for Selma to get herself together. If she didn’t come out fighting soon, she would probably die right here in the mud.

Selma opened the tent flap. Her eyes glowed bright red. “Everyone ready to get wet?”

A loud cheer rose from the crowd. It traveled the ring around the town.

To their surprise, Selma turned around and fired a powerful blast into open air. She followed it with two more.

The energy waves flew through the drizzle, widening as they traveled. They hit a nearby dam in rapid succession.

The concrete dam shuddered at the impacts, pieces crumbling, cracking. Water began to shoot

through the small holes. More concrete blasted free, weakening the entire structure. A few seconds later, the dam began to crumble, releasing four years of backlogged creeks and rivers.

Chapter Eighteen

Your Life

1

“I want to hire you. This is the requirement I’ve chosen.”

Jason stared at Alexa, hope sparking. “You’ll support the reset?”

“I have not made a choice on that. My information is limited.”

“But if there’s nothing that goes against your code?”

Alexa nodded. “Then I will speak on your behalf. I’m certain you’ll have support from many areas.”

Jason stood from the broken chair where he’d been resting. “Tell me when and who.”

Alexa jerked a thumb toward the hillside. “You already know who. As for the when, it’s coming shortly. No one will miss you in the chaos.”

Jason realized a new attack was coming. He looked to where Carolyn had put herself in the corner with her head on her arms. “What about her?”

Alexa frowned at his question. “She is not part of our deal.”

Jason hesitated. “I can’t just abandon her. She needs help.”

“That may be so, but her life isn’t yours to live or give.”

“I know.” Jason went to the woman who had lifted her head as they spoke. “Will you stay with Alexa, just until it’s safer to go? Please?”

Carolyn couldn’t take his begging. She gave a curt nod.

Jason smiled at her. “Thank you.” He went to the line of Alexa’s men and fell into the rear.

Carolyn stood at Alexa’s gesture. “What’s going on?”

Alexa scanned her group. They were dirty, annoyed, and ready to kill on command, but they were also well fed and well rested. Even Carolyn looked a little better. Her skin wasn’t as waxy. Jason looked the best of her group, but he hadn’t been here for most of the fighting.

The station was cold without a fire. Drafts were coming straight through the broken boards and shattered glass. Everyone had their cloaks or coats secured all the way up to their necks. The sights through those broken boards and the shattered glass were horrific, and the hillsides surrounding the town weren’t any better.

Hundreds of refugees were waiting for them to emerge, creating a ring of stinking, starving, shouting killers who were now arming themselves with anything they could find. At one end, clearly in charge, a descendant was surrounded by men and

women in red robes. Billy's rage rose again. *I want them all dead!*

A loud rumble filled the air.

Alexa tucked her cloak into her jeans so it wouldn't be caught on anything and hold her up. "We're about to run for our lives. Please keep up. We can't stop."

Carolyn swallowed her protests and got set. If Alexa was going to run from something, it was bad and she couldn't fight that on her own. "I will."

"David, are you ready?"

David nodded. She wanted him to use his gifts this time. "All the way, Boss."

"Our group knows no other approach." Alexa went to the bent, cracked boards and got ready to step outside.

A wall of water splashed down the hillside toward the town, flushing out refugee camps on the way. The people disappeared under the raging flood now hitting the town. The waves washed into the alleys and streets, lifting everything that wasn't anchored down.

"Now!" Alexa took off running toward the closest hillside, not sure if they would all make it in time. She used lunging steps to stay ahead of the longer male strides.

Water barreled toward them, scraping the ground clear of rocks, mud, debris, and bodies.

Carolyn yelped as Mark swung her up and onto his back. Carolyn tried not to gag at the smells of rotting bodies. Her stomach twisted as she bounced

on Mark's back, but she managed to hold it in. Head turned to keep from blowing on her ride, she saw that Jason was already gone. Concern flooded her throat with acid. "Good luck."

Mark grunted, moving faster. "He won't need it. Boss gave him a job and promised a reward. He'll survive to collect."

Carolyn hoped Mark was right. Despite her anger and sadness, she didn't want anything to happen to Jason. He was the first good man she'd met in Afterworld. *At least, I thought he was...*

The cold wind immediately chilled the fighters, but none of them paused in the run. Mud splashed under their boots, drenching the ends of their cloaks.

People atop the hill were watching the water and the camps that were being flooded. They weren't prepared for Alexa to rush them with guns blazing. They panicked, fleeing as she led her group straight up the hill toward the closest line of campsites.

Selma saw it. "Fight, you cowards! Fight her!"

More people got out of Alexa's way as her group reached the top of the hill. The team kept going when Alexa did, ready for trouble.

Half the camps on that side took off, not wanting to face Alexa alone. The rest faded into the trees and other cover to let her go by, except for one. The man lifted his shotgun. *Been waiting for this!*

"Now, David!"

David fired his first spell. The hatred wave hit the thin refugee and swarmed him, burning him alive.

David fired a second spell toward Selma, hoping it would reach her.

Selma ducked the spell that had weakened by the time it got to her. She narrowed in on the running man. “She has another magic user in her group!” Selma began drawing energy for a spell.

Around her, men and women in red robes took up guard positions to keep Selma safe from the sudden rush of refugees coming from either side of them. No one wanted to get in Alexa’s path.

Alexa and her group disappeared into the trees, but there wasn’t silence. While the water kept flooding the town, crushing and crunching debris, Alexa and her men began cutting through the waiting camps, slicing and dicing as they ran by. Screams filled the air and echoed to the far side of the ring.

“She’s coming this way.”

Selma ignored the robed woman at her side. She narrowed in on where she thought Alexa was now and let go of the rage spell. It swarmed across the flooded town and hit everyone in its path.

David brought up his shield around Alexa and then expanded it to include their entire group. Alexa added hers.

The rage hit both shields and broke apart, flying into the camps around them. More screams echoed.

“Let’s go!” Alexa took off again, bloody knife extended.

The men followed, now able to do what they did best.

The screams continued to get closer to Selma's campsite. Rachel was ready to use her only magazine of bullets. The other Fanatics and gate hunters formed a tight circle around Selma to keep Alexa from reaching her.

Alexa led her group deeper into the woods and allowed a thick silence to fill the air.

David kept his shield over the entire group. The thin sun fighting through the clouds was still enough to hurt several of their team. He was determined that wouldn't happen with his gifts being used. *Now, I really feel like a member of this team.*

Selma waited for another clear shot that didn't come. She finally sank to her knees to recuperate while she decided what to do next. She knew Alexa wouldn't leave this fight with so many targets just waiting to be hit. She clenched her fists in the mud. "What about an earthquake?"

Three of the men in red robes came forward and held out a hand.

Selma realized they were offering her their energy, their lives. *Why?*

Her witch spoke up greedily. *They think their deaths will have meaning this way.*

Selma slowly rose and gently clasped just one hand. "Thank you for your sacrifice." She inhaled hard and fast to make the death quick. It was the only mercy she had to give.

Selma swallowed the pain as his withered body dropped to the mud. "Spread out; hunt them down. When I hear your screams, I'll fire."

Everyone in a red robe vanished into the thin fog that was rising.

2

“Why is she stopping?” Carolyn didn’t care if her voice traveled. “Jason needs the cover. The sun hasn’t set yet!”

Mark didn’t answer. He didn’t want to upset the ill woman. He already felt bad for her being out here with them, but she wouldn’t have been any safer if they’d left her behind.

Carolyn figured it out all at once. “She’s testing him! Here, and now?!” Carolyn let go of Mark’s big arms and lean waist, dropping to the muddy, slushy ground. She turned and marched back the way they’d come without saying another word.

Alexa leaned against Edward and Daniel and tried to rest. This adventure had used her magic side more than her body or mind. She was exhausted. *It’s a weakness I need to conquer. In the future, we will all use these gifts and try to increase our energy banks.*

The waves below crunched through the radio station and took down the tower. It fell into the market and broke through one side of the brick. Weakened, the market crumbled under the onslaught. Water covered the site and began to rise.

Carolyn left them behind, moving faster as soon as she was alone. She didn’t want to be bonded to Jason. She just was. He was a hired killer, but even

those hardened men and women sometimes needed help.

Mark stared after her. “Do you think she knows they’re a perfect match?”

“Doubtful.” David shrugged. “Love is crazy like that.”

The other men grunted or nodded. They spent the short break cleaning hands and handles to be ready. As soon as Alexa got her breath back, they would attack the next campsite. Her men had recognized her plan this time without needing to be told. She was meeting Jason on the other side of the campsite ring, hopefully at Selma’s body. If he failed, Jason wouldn’t be with them when they left here. Carolyn had been right. This was definitely a test.

Alexa straightened. “Take a meal this time.” She stepped into the fog as her men followed, eager to be useful.

Now running Drag, Billy let the line lead him into the next site and started fighting. It wasn’t until he had his hands on a robed form that he realized it was a Fanatic camp. Horrible flashes ran through his brain. Hatred popped out on his muddy face.

“No! Please!”

Billy lunged forward and sank his fangs into the woman’s neck, hatred making it a bitter meal. He didn’t even want blood from these people. *I just want them all dead!*

Alexa looked at him over her own meal of struggling Fanatic. *Let's hunt.*

Billy nodded. He snapped the woman's neck and dropped the body, then strode toward the next site.

Alexa stabbed her target, then waved the others on and brought up the rear. Billy needed this outlet for his nightmares. The wounds were almost healed, until he saw a Fanatic and then the trauma took over his emotions. Until that passed, the scars wouldn't really toughen. Any woman wearing red would be his target and his mind would always go there first.

She needed him to consider her training first. Until he could, he would need outlets for that dangerous ball of hatred and pain or it would end with him putting his gun in his mouth some night on duty. He thought he was healed, but moments like this proved he was far from it.

Billy flew into the tense camp of eight men and women. They jumped up and tried to run, but their damp, dirty robe hems tripped them up. Those who did manage to run were chased through the woods by a vengeful vampire with blood on his hands and lips.

Edward stayed with Billy as he chased the terrified Fanatics without being told. Alexa was too tired for this, but he had energy to burn after so many meals in the last few days. He was no longer thirsty.

Daniel stayed with Alexa, not partaking like the others. He was already trying to master the hold the

blood had on his body, but he was also Alexa's protection when Edward wasn't with her. Second to join their quest, he was a senior man. After Billy's abduction, he and Edward had agreed to change their duties a bit to make sure a senior man was always with the main group and no one was ever alone in a fight or on guard duty.

Alexa belched, then grimaced. These people were evil and they tasted that way. *They'll probably give me heartburn.*

Edward pushed harder to keep up with Billy. The driver was hunting down the last of the site, not giving mercy at all because of who they were, what they represented. Edward was glad when the woods ended and Billy finally paused. The driver yanked his rifle free and took aim.

Edward waited nearby, gasping for air. These new bodies were great, but even they weren't a match for Billy's pain.

Bang!

Edward didn't bother to watch the robed man fall. He knew the shot was good.

Billy joined him, finally feeling the long run, the isolation of their location. He frowned. Alexa was without two of her crew. *I shouldn't have run off like that.*

Edward nodded, face hard. He didn't need to scold. Billy was now doing that to himself.

"There they are!"

Caught off guard, Edward and Billy slid closer as two dozen refugees and Fanatics came through

the trees to their left. Another dozen came from the right. Without ammunition, they quickly formed a thick circle around the two men to trap them.

A robed man whistled. “Call the bunker woman! We have two of Alexa’s men! She has to make a deal now.”

Another male stepped forward, eyes glowing bright red as he scanned Alexa’s fighters. “Their thoughts are ugly. Don’t get too close.”

“Another magic user!”

“Get in there!”

The glowing male was shoved into the center of the ring.

“I’m not with them! I’m tracking them for the bunker!”

Edward shoved the tracker away, but the crowd pushed him back into the circle.

“Tell Alexa we have three of her men!”

“He’s not our man.” Billy plunged fangs into the tracker’s neck before he could fire a spell.

Screams of horrified rage filled the air. Edward fired his last two bullets, keeping his side back, but it wasn’t enough. Fists and feet kept them in the circle.

Screams came from the rear of the circle. Bodies flew through the air, ripped off limbs hit people in the chest.

“Run!”

“More vampires!”

Billy and Edward kept fighting as the crowd thinned until they could see the rest of their team.

The remaining refugees fled.

Alexa didn't scold Billy for endangering himself or Edward.

Edward took offense. He turned around and punched Billy in his bloody mouth.

Billy hit the ground and bounced right back up, eyes glowing in fresh rage. Being hit was a trigger now.

Alexa went toward the other camps, not correcting Edward, either. *Sometimes teammates have to work that shit out for themselves.*

Daniel and David followed Alexa.

Jacob and Mark stayed between Edward and Billy, tugging on them to get them in line.

Edward brought up the rear, waiting for Billy to swing back. When he did, the man would be put down so hard that someone would have to carry him.

Billy snorted. He let the others keep pulling and tugging. *At least my anger is fading.*

"That wasn't anger." Alexa slowed a bit to be sure they were all together. "That was fear. You're afraid it might happen again any time you see a Fanatic, or the color red."

Billy had to face the truth. He refused to say it, too.

Edward's frustration faded as he realized Alexa wasn't letting Billy off the hook because he'd been hurt. *She used my fist to reach him.* Edward settled back into his usual place of awe and forgot about the fight.

Billy swallowed his pride. “How do I stop being...afraid?”

“Jacob?”

Jacob cleared his throat at Alexa’s pass of the lesson. “You don’t. You learn to control it until the fear has less power over you. I know. So does Mark when he sees a Slam. So does Edward when he sees soldiers. The levels are different, but the fear is the same.”

That helped Billy. He was able to process it and come out on the other side to an answer. “I have to see them as different people who didn’t hurt me. Then I can have mercy again.”

“Very good.” Alexa paused. “Take the lead. The rest of their group is waiting ahead, with their kids.”

Billy blanched.

Alexa was glad of that reaction, but she still stayed by his side this time to be sure he didn’t hurt anyone she thought might be innocent.

3

Piercing shrieks filled the air. Selma gathered energy, scanning to pick the right place. She concentrated, trying to bring up something too strong for Alexa to fight.

“Shake her until she falls!” The magic flew into the air.

Selma knew to be patient this time. Nature spells took a minute to work. She decided to make sure it was enough to take down her enemy. Selma

drew on her reserve energy from the lifeforces and cast the same spell again. She sank to her knees in pain, almost empty. She would have to rest now.

Snap!

Selma tried to turn around, hearing steps behind her. She fell, groaning. Mud splattered her clothes and face.

Jason stopped, shocked to find his employer here. *I didn't know it was her!*

Selma stared back, also recognizing him. Their one fast meeting to arrange the contract on her sister had happened as they neared the Borderlands. Marcella had been busy releasing her hounds while Selma made arrangements to prevent her sister from making it to the bunker. She didn't want the competition.

Jason realized she still had a little reserve energy, and she was much stronger than he was. He used the only option open to him now. "The job is done."

Selma pushed into a sitting position. She felt the tension and didn't relax. "Proof?"

Jason slowly took the phone from his pocket and brought up the image. There were many others on the phone.

Jason understood she wasn't going to relax enough for him to catch her off guard. Sadness filled his heart, along with determination. *Even if I die, she'll be out of energy and Alexa will be able to kill her.* "I'll take my payment."

Selma scowled. “I can’t get you into the bunker right now.”

Jason shook his head, storing the phone. “I don’t want that anymore.”

Selma sighed, weary body on the edge of giving out. “What, then?”

“Your life.” Jason fired at her.

Selma used the last of her energy to deflect the powerful death wave. It slammed into the tree next to them.

Crack!

Jason didn’t have time to run. The tree fell over and pinned him to the ground. His head smacked into the earth, sending stars through his vision and pain through his brain.

“Ahh!” He lay there, groaning, as footsteps approached.

Rachel gently put arms under Selma’s withered body and lifted her like a child. She ignored Jason’s weak struggles to stay alert and get free of the tree as she walked into the fog. “You’ll be safe with us.”

Selma had no strength to resist. Her head fell to the side as she passed out.

Rachel had stayed under cover to see who would win this unexpected battle, recognizing the moment. She didn’t offer a lifeforce or energy. Selma would be drugged before that happened, so their group could keep her under control. She would never be allowed to regain her full strength. “You’re ours now, to use as fate guides.”

Rachel vanished into the tree line with her prize as most of her group died at the hands of Alexa and her crew.

4

Alexa felt something bad coming their way. She didn't know what it was, but she'd felt something like it once before. *That was when Corbin thought he had us trapped. He took Daniel hostage.* Alexa groaned. "And we faced Nature's tremors!"

Her men moved closer, also feeling something bad coming.

Alexa swept the trees. "Up! Pick the thickest tree, Edward!"

Edward did it quickly and pointed. He knelt to give her a boost into the first branch that was well above her.

Alexa moved with her new vampire speed so the others would know to do the same. The vampires hit the tree one right after the other, except for Edward. He used his big arms and new strength to heft the normal men up into the branch that the others were clearing as soon as they landed.

Edward staggered as the ground shifted.

"Quit playing around! Get up here!"

"Working on it, Boss!" Edward gained his balance and leapt straight from the ground.

"Hang on!" Alexa hoped the tree went deep enough.

The earth rumbled, shattering into small cracks and rifts that tripped refugees and swallowed campsites. The rest of the town structures collapsed into the flood water. A second tremor swarmed the area right behind the first, rattling everything.

Alexa and her team held tight to the tree and waited for it to pass as dead leaves and branches snapped off all around them.

Refugees and Fanatics still tried to reach them, staggering through the tremors and cracks. The fighters ducked knives and sticks, and kicked at hands trying to climb up to them. They didn't return fire. They were out of ammunition for their guns, and their bows needed two hands. They held onto their knives for guaranteed targets when they got back on the ground.

The quake slowly settled down, leaving new tears in the ground and cries for help that rippled through the air. The furious feel of magic faded back into the desperate fight for survival.

Refugees zeroed in on them, running and shouting. In the distance, more cars appeared, trying to escape the flood that had now submerged most of Bridgeport. Some of them came closer to see if they could gain the reward. The rest headed east, wanting no part of this chaos. They got out of sight as fast as they could.

“Drop! No mercy!”

Thick clouds kept the sun from burning as the team dropped from the tree at Alexa's shout. They ducked and twisted, punched and kicked their way

through the remaining refugees. The quake had swallowed many of them. Alexa hoped the cloudy sky held for another half hour. This would all be over then, one way or another.

David tried to keep his shield up over the entire crew as they approached the next campsite. It quickly wore him out. He gasped for air and let go.

“Save it for when we need it.” Alexa led the way to the next fight, the next deaths. “There’s a reward to be earned here, my pets.” Alexa looked to Edward. “Kneel!”

Edward immediately went down on one knee.

Alexa ran toward him and used his shoulder to jump into the air. She twisted, firing.

Refugees and Fanatics fell as she glided to the ground. She knelt. “Next!”

Jacob ran forward. When it called for Alexa to support one of them, the lightest man went. He leapt off her shoulder, getting more height than she had. He fired his last magazine, making all of them count. Slugs slammed into legs, arms, chests.

“It only counts if they stay down!” Alexa set the rules as Jacob knelt to reload and Billy ran his way with furious, eager steps.

Edward and Mark went last as the heaviest. Edward tossed two knives and dropped.

Mark jumped and aimed carefully, letting his hand feel the moment.

Bang! Bang!

He aimed again.

Bang!

He landed as five bodies fell.

“Two twofers. Very nice!” Alexa tensed.

Mark threw his last knife at her.

Alexa dropped. It sailed over her head and stuck in the throat of a man sneaking up to grab her from behind.

“A reward has been claimed!” Alexa rolled and came up on her feet. She flew toward the crowd of Fanatics and refugees who had gathered near the enemy camp where Alexa hoped Jason had been successful. There hadn’t been another magic attack since the earthquakes. She took that as a sign of Jason’s victory.

The crowd tensed as she came toward them. Some ran, but most lifted their weapons and waited for her to reach them. They were still defending Selma’s camp.

Jacob decided to take a risk. He yanked his knives free and used Billy’s hip to make the jump as they ran behind Alexa.

Billy reacted with tensed legs to balance the move, proud he could do it even when caught off guard.

Jacob tossed his four knives while in the air, twisting to hit four targets.

Alexa chuckled.

Jacob grunted as he landed, scooping low to collect the two closest blades. He fell back in line as Alexa led them deep into the mob that was finally realizing they’d made a huge mistake. He moved

forward to help Billy clear their side, determined to earn the next reward.

5

Carolyn staggered across the broken hilltop, still tracking Jason's mud prints. She'd fought her way through, but it hadn't been as hard as she'd expected. When the quake hit, people had been distracted, allowing her to slice and run. She'd fallen a few times from the tremors, but she'd still made great time reaching this site.

She spotted a campsite with a filthy tent, but no one came out to challenge her. A crowd was on the opposite side, but they were fighting in a huge mass of bodies. No one paid attention to her.

She traced his prints to the fallen tree.

"Jason!" Carolyn pulled on the thick tree branch laying across his legs, but it didn't budge. She kept trying to roll it, hoping she didn't do more harm than good when it finally moved.

Jason didn't react. He was unconscious.

Carolyn ran out of energy quickly. She was forced to guard him as the fighting continued to get closer. People were fleeing through the woods around them now. It wasn't safe to leave Jason alone and if she was judging it right, Alexa would end up here anyway. Her team could move this tree and then she was leaving. *He doesn't deserve to be burdened with my death.*

His leg wasn't bleeding as far as she could see, but it was hard to tell with the branch pinning him in place. She felt on it gently, trying not to hurt him. She didn't think anything was broken. She wasn't sure why he was unconscious, but she assumed Selma's spell had done it. She didn't see the magic user anywhere, but that didn't mean much with Alexa coming in this direction. *Anyone with common sense would hide.*

Chapter Nineteen
A Family Matter

1

“**L**ast site!”

Alexa and her men were out of knives and bullets now. They fought with their hands, delivering hits that caused mortal harm. Once the opponent was down, they used ugly kicks to break jaws and snap necks. The refugees took off running, but the Fanatics only paused and then came on stronger, angrier. It was clear they blamed Alexa and her team for their defeat by Ulysses and his soldiers.

The feel of real danger swept the team. The sound of horses pounded through the air, bringing fresh adrenaline.

“Now it’s needed, David!” Alexa kicked, hard. The Fanatic’s neck popped. “Hold it as long as you can!” Alexa ducked a swing and rose up while delivering a powerful uppercut

The attacker’s jaw broke. She hit the ground, screaming as Alexa ran by.

The team stayed around Alexa, killing anyone who got close enough to grab her. The refugees were all gone now and the Fanatic numbers were

low. A few more of those darted into the fog as the thundering sound of horses grew louder.

David let go of a body and brought up his shield. He strengthened it as much as he knew how and then concentrated on holding it. He scanned the distance and found ten men and women on horseback racing toward them. “Bounty hunters, Boss!”

“Hold that shield!” Alexa drove her fangs into the next man’s neck and tore out his throat. Next to her, Edward did the same to the last woman who’d been trapped inside David’s shield with them.

Gunshots rang out.

David held the shield, bracing to feel the bullets and suffer the pain of the impacts.

Robed bodies fell into the mud instead. The bounty hunters shot the Fanatics as they came through, ensuring their prize. They didn’t need the competition.

“Stop! Stay!” Alexa quickly stepped through David’s shield, muttering a spell. She paused to watch the effect.

Cold wind ran through the damp, broken trees, whispering to the hiding inhabitants of these woods.

David watched for trouble, ready to move the two feet closer that would get her back inside his protection. He assumed she needed to be outside of it to use her magic.

Edward flipped around to watch their rear as the bounty hunters arrived and surrounded them.

“Alexa Mitchel! You are Wanted!” One of the hunters dropped a parchment at Alexa’s feet. He reloaded while staring at her. The others circled the stopped team, watching for tricks or escape attempts. Their hard faces said taking back bodies were fine if that was how it had to be.

Alexa wiped her blade across her hip to clean it. She sheathed it, assuming a calmer air. Her men did the same, sure that she was drawing the hunters into a trap but not how.

A loud shriek echoed through the trees. The hunter’s horses shivered uneasily.

“On what charges?” Alexa bent down to retrieve the parchment, pretending to verify the claim as she stalled for her spell to take effect.

“Murder, for starters.” The leader of the hunters-for-hire waved. “Get her weapons.”

Another shriek sounded. Alexa slipped backward, reentering David’s shield.

The bounty hunters all frowned at her. Two of them got down from their twitchy horses.

Alexa added her strength to David’s shield as bears appeared in the woods around them. Large and hungry, they moved toward the horses with quick gaits.

The bounty group spun around, shouting as they opened fire. Screams echoed through the fog once again. The bounty hunters were used to fighting people, not nature. Only a few of their bullets were effective against the ferocious bears.

Alexa looked at David. “How are you doing?”

David grimaced. “The longer I hold it, the harder it is.”

Alexa understood. “As long as you can.”

David settled in for a painful lesson. It actually made his head ache to hold the shield against the sniffing bears and the hunters who were now begging for help. They punched and kicked the shield, trying to get in. David felt every hit.

A low growl echoed from the east. Alexa placed a hand on David’s shoulder, giving their energy a clear connection. They were both very tired now. “Get ready.”

Her men realized the real threat was here. They watched four giant dogs run toward them in shock. Huge, with red eyes and tiny sparks coming from their labored breath, the dogs scattered the bears with terror.

The team knew exactly how the bears felt.

Two giant dogs hit the shield and bounced off. The impact knocked David backward into Edward, who had lined up against him for the fight.

The other hounds snapped at his shield, trying to lunge through it. They bounced and landed on the damp ground, but they didn’t stay down.

“Boss...” David pulled on his pride. His energy was gone.

Alexa pulled him forward so the shield gave them bodies to loot. Men immediately grabbed guns and nodded when they were loaded up.

“Bring it back up as soon as you can.” Alexa tapped David’s shoulder. “Let go!”

David did. The shield vanished in a fast, angry pop.

The hounds shied from it in surprised discomfort. Alexa and her men attacked.

The hounds overwhelmed the smaller members of the team. Billy and Jacob went down together under one huge dog, arms straining to keep the jaws from reaching their flesh.

Edward jumped with Alexa, both putting their gun to a big animal's head. They pulled the trigger until it fell.

Alexa spun around to help David and found him holding a shield around Mark, who was facing two of the angry hounds.

Daniel grabbed a knife from the ground and leapt.

"I'm out!" David let go of the shield and dropped to his knees. There was no pop this time to provide a distraction.

Mark punched the front hound to keep its attention as Daniel came down and impaled the dog through the back of its head.

Alexa used reserve energy to fire a weak anger spell. It rushed out toward the remaining animals.

The team regrouped as the two hounds took off toward the west, whining.

Alexa took stock and found only minor injuries that could wait to be treated. She walked into the fog toward the final campsite, fighting not to yawn. She paused by a wounded woman and took her lifeforce.

The energy merged with her own, making her stomach twist.

She gasped in air and went on, hoping it would be enough. She didn't want to take more lifeforces. She hated how it felt to recharge this way.

The team followed, all scanning for the other hounds and any surviving Fanatics. Trees moved in the wind, but nearly everyone was gone now.

Alexa moved into Selma's camp with light steps and ready hands even though she was out of ammunition. She scanned for the enemy and found only Carolyn sleeping next to a fallen tree. She narrowed in and saw Jason was pinned.

Alexa waved Mark and Edward to help remove the tree while the rest of their team cleared the tent and then formed a watch around the abandoned site.

Alexa felt eyes on her. She did a slow turn and found the woods alive with eyes, though none of them were human. The creatures had come back out despite the weather. Some of them were bloody, telling her they'd helped in the fight. Her call had summoned more than just bears.

Alexa saw Zaro's two granddaughters in the distance. She was able to hear their thoughts perfectly.

We want justice!

Give us permission!

Alexa nodded. *No mercy.*

Both of them hissed at her and vanished into the fog.

Alexa swallowed the guilt over what they would do next. She'd just given permission for those attacks, but in the end, it was best for the future of humanity, not the creatures. She was, as always, protecting the normals.

Carolyn jumped up as the men hefted the tree branch and tossed it aside, freeing Jason. "Thank you."

Jacob used smelling salts on the man.

Jason woke slowly, blinking. He looked around groggily, mind and body aching. "Thanks."

The men helped him to his feet.

Jason rubbed his aching head, trying not to go back to his knees. The earthquake had finished rattling his brain. He hadn't been able to stay alert.

Edward gestured at the empty tent. "What happened?"

"She got her shield up..." Jason struggled to clear his head. "It used up her energy. She couldn't fight when the Fanatics took her away."

Alexa didn't tell him he was wrong on that assumption.

Jason put weight on his leg carefully and was relieved when there was only a dull ache. "I was out for a while, but I remember them taking her."

Alexa stored that information to give to Safe Haven when they were united. Selma's powers were dangerous when she was full. "Our deal is done. Stop hiring out to murderers. Serve the greater good."

Jason grunted, not promising anything, but he was almost certain he would. “And when you come back?”

Alexa gave him a weary smile. “My crew will be light then. Your place will be set.”

Jason nodded. He turned to stare at Carolyn, who had stayed by him and protected him while he was unconscious. Her mind was loud with fear for his life and full of emotions that he hadn’t seen before. *She loves me.*

Carolyn moved into his arms and pressed her lips to his. Then she turned and walked away, slowly vanishing into the foggy day like everyone else had.

Jacob wiped blood from the claw marks on his arm. He scowled at Jason when the man didn’t move. “Why aren’t you going with her?”

“She doesn’t want to care for anyone so she can’t disappoint them or hurt them with her death. I can’t cure her.”

“No one can. So she’s going off to die, alone.” Alexa got her canteen out for a drink. “There is a group of kids northwest of here, traveling. They need protection. Tell your mate a life given in service to kids is a worthy way to die.”

Jason scowled. “That’s cruel.”

Alexa shrugged, also wiping away blood, though most of it wasn’t hers. “But it will work. And it will tear you apart when she dies.”

Jason walked away without speaking.

“Hey!” Mark caught up to Jason. He held out his hand. “Give this to Claudia for me, with a smile.”

“Okay.” Jason stared at the intricate flower that had been carved from a chunk of wood. He stored it in his pocket, heart pounding. It was hard to imagine Mark, a stoic killer, having the softness to carve something so beautiful. He was filled with sadness at being split from Alexa and her amazing crew so soon. He wanted to stay, but he didn’t need her to tell him that he wasn’t welcome yet. He was on the path to regaining his honor, but until he did, he wasn’t worthy to be with them.

Alexa’s team watched him go, silently wishing him well while celebrating that he wasn’t joining them now.

Alexa paused at a familiar sensation. “Hello, Uncle.” She turned around.

Brandon’s shimmering figure appeared. He stared at the devastation behind the team. “Wow. I know it’s always sex or death with us Mitchels, but don’t you think you’ve gone a little far this time?”

Alexa nodded, cleaning off her knife again. “I certainly hope so.”

Edward caught her tone and stored it with his other observations about this run.

Brandon looked back to Alexa. “Ciemus is evacuating while William is occupied. We’re headed south to stay with friends of the Ghost.”

Alexa assumed something big had happened to make an entire town flee. “Who died?”

Brandon's hazy face twisted. "My newborn sons if William finds us."

"Congratulations." Alexa was glad one of her family was at least content with their lives. Few had been in the past. "I wish you peace on your journey."

Brandon stared at her, picking up details and clues. He didn't speak them in case her crew didn't know. "And I wish the same on you, niece, but that won't be the case, I'm assuming."

Alexa shook her head, gravelly voice regretful. "When you visited last time, I made plans."

"And now you've carried them out."

"Yes. That future has changed, for all of us."

Brandon sighed, rubbing at his itchy beard. He hadn't had time to shave while helping his wife birth their twins. "Have you heard from your father?"

Alexa thought of her dream. "He's alive. They're on the island."

Brandon smiled in relief. "No one has heard anything in so long..."

"They survived the trip. My crew and I will try to do the same as soon as winter breaks."

Brandon began to fade, energy used up. "Good luck."

Alexa snorted. "I don't need luck. I have an amazing crew and a brain that even a byzan couldn't outguess. We're set."

Jacob waited until they were alone before asking his question. "What's a byzan?"

“The strongest of our kind. They’re nearly unbeatable because they have so many gifts and defenses.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Edward waited for the rookie to ask the next most logical question. *How do you become byzan?* But he didn’t. Edward assumed he was the only one who understood what Alexa had really done here.

Jacob and Billy finished bandaging their wounds while Edward looked to Alexa. “What do you want to do now, Boss?”

Alexa scanned the few remaining campfires across the hilltop. Most of those were abandoned. The fight here was over. Alexa turned toward the mountains and began walking.

Her team fell in behind her, sharing grins. They’d made it through this part of the quest and they were still together. It was all they needed.

2

“I hear something.”

The team paused at David’s comment. They’d only been walking for a few minutes, but the sun had set.

Alexa turned to face the rear, able to feel something catching up with them. “Trees, on my call.”

Her crew prepared to go high.

Everyone tensed as a battered brown wagon came into view, speeding toward them.

Alexa held up a hand to keep her fighters from attacking. They'd looted a little and now each of them had one full magazine of ammunition, but she didn't want to waste it. The feel coming from the wagon was desperate, not hostile.

The wagon screeched to a sliding halt as the driver saw them.

Donna leaned her head out the window. "Safe Haven!"

Alexa and her team didn't relax at the code. They followed the muddy tire tracks of some other vehicle as they approached her, still ready to jump into the low branches over the road.

In the distance, more engines sounded, along with the noise of rushing water. People were still fleeing ahead of the flood, but many of them weren't going to make it. The next towns were on lower terrain. The water was pooling there.

"The dam broke!" Donna waved a gloved hand. "Get in."

Alexa paused, staring at a pair of bright blue eyes looking at her from the backseat. The feel of magic and danger hit her. She was slapped by a flash of her father. "We'll talk, quickly."

Alexa slid into the long backseat next to the boy, shocking her crew. They quickly crammed in with her and the kids, using the front seat and the cargo space.

Edward grinned at the little girl who climbed into his filthy lap and wrapped her arms around his

bloody neck. He patted her back. “Hello to you, sweetheart.”

The other kids, except for Andrew, did the same. It shocked the bloody, weary team to suddenly find children in tired arms that had just dealt out so much death. It was a reminder of what they were all fighting for. The future belonged to these children if they survived to live it.

David dropped his head to the seat and let exhaustion have its way. He was too tired for anything else. He was grateful Alexa was giving them this break.

Alexa looked at the driver in the mirror. She tried to pull thoughts, but she was too tired. She settled for one of her hardest gazes.

Donna put the wagon in park and looked back for a brief second before scanning the muddy road again. “Are we safe here?”

Alexa shrugged, now trying to scan the child. “As much as you can be, considering who I am. What do you want?”

Donna nodded toward Andrew. “He insisted we come find you.”

The small blond boy placed a hand on Alexa’s wrist, eyes glowing.

Alexa brought up a mental shield with her reserve energy. Her skin started to crack as she held it.

Andrew smiled at Alexa, still trying to charm her. “Take me to the soldiers.”

Alexa pulled her arm away and dropped her shield. “No.”

“Why?” Mark didn’t understand.

Edward had picked up enough clues to understand. The menace was thick. “He won’t use his gifts for their protection. He plans to take control of the soldiers and their bunker fight.”

“So?” Even David had to protest. “The soldiers are a mess. They need a better leader.”

Alexa shook her head. “It’s not just one bunker. He’ll never stop.”

Donna was quick to defend the child. “It’s a normal hatred of authority. I’ll help him control it.”

Alexa snorted. “And who will help you control yours?”

Donna’s eyes flashed. “In time, I’ll learn to endure men again. The hatred will die and something tolerable will grow from the ashes.”

“Perhaps.” Alexa studied the boy.

“Will you lock him up?” Donna was desperate. “I can’t control him.”

Alexa gave a curt nod.

The boy glowered at Donna, drawing energy to cast a powerful spell. “You betrayer!”

Alexa slapped the child’s hand. “Stop.”

Everyone in the vehicle thought the boy was going to attack her. His teeth bared, his eyes narrowed, and his small fingers clenched into fists.

The other kids cowered against her team to avoid Andrew’s wrath.

Alexa finally pierced the darkness in his mind as the anger overwhelmed his control. The skin on her wrist shriveled up, wrapping around the bone in a wave of agony that she fought. *He's infected. What can I do? Is there any way to help this child? And which side of our family should take him?*

“Say my name!” Andrew’s face twisted, showing the ugliness inside. “Who am I?!”

“Mitchel.” Alexa grunted as she withdrew. “So much power at such a young age.” She looked at Donna. “Where did you buy him?”

Donna was stunned to know she had a Mitchel orphan. “A slave market. The caravan doesn’t make that run anymore.”

“Too dangerous?”

“Too dead. It’s gone. Has been for years.”

Alexa stared at her little brother, able to see their father in his expression and in his ability to keep a secret. “Where’s your mother?”

Andrew snarled at her. “Sold me!”

Alexa grabbed the boy and hugged him close, muttering.

Donna hit the brakes. “Don’t you hurt him!”

Alexa felt the boy go limp and gently placed him on the seat next to her. “He’ll sleep for a long time. He’s forgetting about all of it, including his sister. Tell him he was ill.” Alexa waved a hand.

All the children fell over, murmuring as they went under. “I’ve removed the hatred from their minds. Only you will know the truth.” Alexa leaned

against Mark as pain rippled up and down her ankle. The shriveled skin stung and burned.

Mark rubbed her arm, feeling her discomfort.

Donna nodded when Alexa's sharp eyes made it back around to her. "What do I owe you for this?"

"Nothing. It's a family matter."

Donna was grateful things had worked out this way. As soon as she'd discovered Andrew was a magic user, she had packed up her orphans and come south, hoping to remain off the grid of the few government installations still searching for people like him. She hadn't known about the sister. She'd never seen a female child with that clan, and she hadn't asked about his family after the purchase. She'd just told her group of orphans they had one more mouth to feed and that was it. She now mourned the loss of the girl she'd never met, wishing she'd asked. If she had known, she would have tried to find the girl. *A female magic user is always better than a male.*

"Go to the soldiers." Alexa removed a small pouch of dust from her cloak and handed it to the woman. "If the soldiers won't take you, find a small homestead and stay there." Alexa's gaze went over her little brother. "If his gifts unlock, kill him or he'll kill you."

Donna was shocked, but she was also unable to hide her true nature in her response. "The bunker would treat him better than that!"

Alexa sighed at the woman's obvious greed for power. "The soldiers have gathered in the smallest

swamp to the east. They will accept the boys. You and the girls may be safe in that bunker.”

Edward caught the fact that Alexa hadn't sent this group to Claudia like she had nearly everyone else. So did Mark. They were both relieved.

Donna drove off as soon as Alexa and her team were out, engine revving angrily.

Edward put a hand on Alexa's wrist. *Take what you need.*

Alexa inhaled of his energy and swallowed the pain, still watching Donna leave. She felt bad, but the children in that wagon were in danger no matter what choice she made. This one might allow for their survival until Safe Haven returned. After that, the final war would determine everyone's fate. *And this completes my plan, though I didn't know it until now.*

Alexa kept her thoughts to herself and led her team east.

None of the men asked about her decision. They followed their leader into the darkness.

3

Green stayed behind the tree trunk, watching them leave. He'd witnessed the end of the fight. He was forced to admit some hard truths. As much as he wanted to be on Alexa's crew, he wasn't ready. There was no way he could keep up with them as they were now, and those hard men were only going to get stronger. If he'd been with her from the start,

Green still wasn't sure that he would have been able to keep up.

But I need to serve her! The second condition of their agreement flashed in his mind. There were other Mitchels who needed what he had to offer. Her son was the first one who came to mind. *And he's in an old bunker, safe, with supplies.*

Green turned northwest. *I'll protect her son and be close to her that way. It'll be enough for now.*

The former captain saw a couple moving through the woods on the same trajectory. After a few minutes, he placed them as part of Alexa's group. He understood she'd sent them away so it was just her and her main crew again.

Green left them alone, assuming they were feeling the same sadness that had just sank into his heart. Not being good enough was awful.

4

“Wait up!”

Carolyn kept walking.

Jason hurried to her side, holding his head. He winced at the ache in his bruised leg as he came down wrong on it. “I need to talk to you.”

Carolyn grunted. “Go away. We're over.”

“It's about my next job.”

Carolyn looked over at him with a scowl. “Who are you killing now?”

Jason didn't take offense. “I'm escorting a group of kids to the west where they'll be safe.”

Carolyn stopped. “Kids?”

Jason used Alexa’s suggestion. “If you died in service to them, that would be worth all you’ve done.” He let out a miserable sigh. “And all I’ve done.”

Carolyn knew he was using her emotions, but she still missed her son. Being around kids, helping kids, sounded like a good way to spend the last months of her life.

“I need you.” Jason’s eyes softened. “Let me love you in the time we have. I know the price.”

Carolyn resumed walking. “Go away.”

Jason didn’t make her stop. He kept pace through the pain. “She gave us a job.”

Carolyn snorted. “I didn’t accept a job from her—you did.” She winced at a fresh lance of pain in her stomach. All the running and bouncing hadn’t been good for her. “I can’t help you, Jason. I can’t even help myself. Go away now and let me die in peace.”

“No!” Jason moved in front of her, now making her stop but still not putting his hands on her. “You’re being selfish.”

Carolyn’s hand came up to her hip. “Me?!”

“Yes. Those kids need us. Your pain is nothing compared to them.”

“You don’t need to see me die!” Carolyn let her true feelings show as tears rolled over her cheeks. “Remember me up and fighting, not puking up blood.”

Jason pulled her into his arms and held her while she cried. “That’s my choice to make, and I’ve made it. You’ll come with me. We’ll help those kids, and you’ll stay alive until Safe Haven returns. They’ll reward you by healing you.”

Carolyn thought back to her brief time with that camp. She’d been told they were working on treatments back then. By now, they might really have a cure. “I don’t deserve it.”

Jason rubbed her cold back. “Maybe not right now, but if you save those kids...”

Carolyn caved. She didn’t want to die. Any hope was better than none. *And Jason wants to be with me.* She shuddered in defeat. “Okay.”

Jason led her off the road and into the woods, where they would be under cover. “Let’s camp in the trees for now so I can rest. We’ll head out in the morning.”

Carolyn didn’t argue. She felt bad, inside and out. A few hours in Jason’s arms sounded great.

Jason felt a bond enter his heart and take up residence there. *She gave me back my ability to love a female!* Jason kissed her head and helped her climb a thick tree. *Now I just have to find a way to save her so I’m not broken again.*

Chapter Twenty
In Service

1

“**S**ir! A transport truck is approaching, sir!
It’s Captain Green!”

Ulysses hurried to the gate, eager to see what Green had managed to find. He narrowed in on the erratic driving and then the red stains on the windshield. Survival instinct kicked in. He took off running.

Stephanie gunned the gas, slamming into soldiers as she chased down the leader. She knew him by the way the others had saluted him and looked to him for orders.

The other women held on. They were splashed in gore and covered in bruises, but they’d won the fight for control of the truck. Stephanie had organized them to attack as soon as the soldier’s camp came into view. The rear of the truck was gory. Blood was in puddles on the floor and on the seats.

Soldiers opened fire on the truck, hitting everyone inside. Bodies fell on top of Frank’s corpse. He hadn’t survived the beating when Stephanie’s rage had snapped her control.

Stephanie leaned on the gas, gasping for air around the bullet in her chest. She steered into the command tent, screaming as another hail of slugs flew her way.

Ulysses dove under the bed of a parked truck and huddled there, waiting for the impact.

Stephanie's arm jerked from the slugs, turning the truck toward the woods. It smacked into a thicket of moldy trees and sent up heavy smoke.

Soldiers ran over to check for survivors.

Ulysses picked himself up, mind snapping it into place. Green wasn't in the truck. He'd sent back a group of women hard enough to overpower the rookie men that he'd taken along. *He went AWOL on me. Again!*

Ulysses joined his men to clear the truck, aware of the mutters and ugly glares. His men wouldn't be willing to try this plan again, either. All the soldiers from this suicide run were dead.

When they didn't mention Green, Ulysses didn't either. *But if I ever see you again, I'll slit your throat!*

Jeanie stepped from the outhouse, shocked by the sight. She saw her tent had been crushed. Jeanie swallowed a smile. *Saved again!*

In the tree line behind the Snake nest, furious shadows gathered, waiting for the sun to finish setting and their targets to relax.

“There are lights ahead.” Edward paused to let Alexa take the lead, then he slid into her spot. She’d given him point an hour ago so she could think. Edward had figured out what she was doing in those moments when she slid to the center of their line. Edward suspected what she’d been covering this time. He would ask her about it later, though he usually didn’t delve so deep into her methods without an invitation. She would know he wasn’t asking because he’d lost faith. She loved training his mind, too. The conversation might just be hard, depending on her answer. Edward was hoping he was wrong, but it wouldn’t matter in the end. He supported all her decisions, even those that were dangerous to their team and the future.

Alexa circled her finger in the air.

The team moved into their fighting formation.

Alexa led them in the V, hands resting on her gun belts. She watched the growing shadows that lined the road, feeling eyes on them now.

The camp of survivors didn’t panic as Alexa and her team approached. They stood up, hands going to their weapons, and their faces hardened, preparing for a fight.

Billy stiffened.

Alexa shook her head. “Check the crew, my pet. These are gate hunters.”

Billy realized she was right because there were free men in the group, but that didn’t ease his need to kill the women wearing those red robes.

Alexa swept their campsite as she walked, not offended that they'd taken over a convent. It seemed oddly appropriate. Alexa kept scanning and found the striking sense of magic. She stopped.

Rachel, still in the same filthy red robe, stepped forward. She ignored the hard glares from Alexa's men. "There's no room for you here."

Alexa stared at her.

Rachel's hardened stance didn't change, but her tone did. "Please, keep going."

"Tell me why you're...protecting her." Alexa's eyes went to the center tent. "And why I shouldn't demand her life for my trouble."

Rachel didn't try to hide it. She let Alexa see her plans.

Alexa snorted. Then she walked away.

The gate hunters breathed sighs of relief.

Alexa knew her men were curious. She waited until they were out of hearing distance. "They think any descendant can close the gates and reset time. They're holding her captive until she does what they want."

Jacob frowned. "But we learned only Safe Haven can do that."

"Yes." Alexa caught Edward's thought, but didn't respond. The reset was indeed different than closing the gates. Both required specific steps and things the gate hunters didn't have.

"You left her there." David approved. "Payback or punishment?"

“Both, and more.” Alexa didn’t fill him in. She concentrated on not revealing her secret to the rest of the team. Edward was sharp. He would bring it to her at some point, but the others didn’t need to know yet. *Not until I’m ready to discuss it.* Right now, she was fighting for control of her own mind.

Alexa paused again to let Edward retake the lead, then she slid into his spot. “Pick a site. Full meal, open fire.”

Edward began searching for a place to camp where they could cook a hearty meal and have a roaring center fire. Alexa wanted anyone out here in the darkness to know they were there. That meant they would sleep in shifts and be ready to handle anything that crawled out of the shadows.

Despite his weariness and low ammunition, Edward was as eager as ever. *I love this life!*

3

“Sir! Our men are reporting threats in the shadows around this camp!” Sergeant Smith rushed into Ulysses’ new tent. “We’re about to be attacked!”

Ulysses paused in getting settled in his cot. “Under attack from whom?”

Smith shook his head, voice lowering. “By what!”

Ulysses scowled, lying down. “I don’t want to hear about that anymore, Smith! Fantasy creatures do not exist!”

The Sergeant spun out of the tent without replying or saluting. “He won’t help us! We’re on our own, men! Prepare to defend this camp!”

Ulysses sighed. He stood up and donned his jacket. “Shouldn’t have let them drink today.” He stepped out into a cold darkness filled with the tension of battle. He revised his estimation. The feel of a fight coming was unmistakable. “Damn Snakes!” He scanned their defenses and found hundreds of nervous soldiers standing around the perimeter of the camp.

A movement in the tree line caught his attention. Ulysses refused to accept what he saw. *Descendants, then. Their eyes glow that way.* He drew his gun.

That triggered the action. Shadowy forms with hungry teeth flew from the shadows in an open attack all around the camp. Gunfire lit up the night.

“No mercy!” Zaro’s granddaughters flew toward the defensive formation, dodging bullets.

“Get the big gun firing!” Smith pulled the trigger on his sidearm repeatedly, providing cover for three men trying to get the .50 ready. They hadn’t expected an attack yet. No one was prepared.

Smith fired again. A body dropped at his feet. Long clawed hands grabbing his ankle. Smith jumped back and spun, sensing danger.

The little girls lunged at him together, one taking a trim while the other took his life.

The .50 caliber gun began to fire. Panicked, the men swung it in a circle, hitting many of their own to get the enemy.

Vampires flew toward the pair. Bullets hit them and knocked them back into the trees and slushy mud.

“Behind you!” Jeanie stayed on the floor of the new tent she’d been given, rifle in hand. She aimed carefully and pulled the trigger. A vampire flew into the mud.

The men running the big gun didn’t notice. They were now shooting a thick line of monsters with red eyes and long fangs that they’d been told didn’t exist.

The gun jerked, clicking as it ran out of ammunition. The men kept trying to fire anyway, too panicked to realize it wasn’t working.

“Help us!” One of the soldiers reached the radio. “Please! We’ll be your slaves! Just help us!”

There was no answer.

The prisoners were slaughtered by Zaro’s granddaughters. The two girls ran through the screaming mass of females, slitting stomachs and throats in the blink of an eye.

“Retreat!” Ulysses used his voice and his radio to scream orders over the chaos. “Go west! Get out of here!”

Only a few men listened to him and fled. His refusal to admit the existence of such creatures had just cost him leadership. He watched his men be

grabbed, bitten, killed. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

A rifle fired near him. Ulysses turned to see their guest firing steady rounds instead of panicking. And she was good, splitting shadowy forms off before killing them so she didn't hit the soldiers. As he watched, her ammunition ran out. Three vampires converged on her.

Ulysses wanted to help, but he also wanted to live. Ashamed and furious, he took off running into the woods like he'd told his men to do.

“Kill the Snake!”

“I'm not a Snake!” Jeanie didn't struggle as she was jerked to her feet. She let her mouth do the walking. “None of these men are Snakes! Can't you tell the difference?!”

The vampires finally paused in their attack, looking around. It was obvious that she was right. Soldiers lay all over the battlefield, but there wasn't one glitter of a scale.

“We attacked the wrong people!” Yani retreated, face filling with dread. “These men were protected by the Mitchel. Our deal is doomed!”

“Shut up already!” Jeanie was still refusing to see them as anything but deadly humans. It allowed her to keep her cool courage. “Whining won't help you.”

“The Mitchel will never honor our deal now.” Yani left the tent. The vampires had come here to finish their revenge on the Snakes and instead, they'd slaughtered a group of freedom fighters.

Alexa would never forgive that. He stopped the few remaining fights, forcing them to let the soldiers go. Each vampire he reached realized what they'd done and tried to correct it by saving any soldier they could.

The soldiers wanted no part of it. As soon as a vampire let go, they attacked, killing several and dying in the process. It was too late to stop it now.

Jeanie stared at the last being still in her tent. She'd learned a lot during the short time she'd been with the soldiers. "They were supposed to destroy the eastern bunker."

The vampire understood her point, but he didn't discuss it with her. He went to Yani and spoke in urgent tones.

Yani nodded right away. "If we eliminate their enemy, the Mitchel may not order us removed. Gather us up. Collect our dead. I want us gone—now!"

Vampires moved swiftly through the carnage, taking their own while trying not to get killed by injured soldiers playing dead so they could get close enough to have revenge.

Zaro's granddaughters broke into tears as they realized what they'd done. They flew to Yani's side and silently begged forgiveness.

Yani put hands on each of their shoulders and walked them into the darkest shadows. "It wasn't only your choice, your eyes, your hatred. We all share in this tragedy. Come now. We have a small

chance to make it right. We'll go east until sunrise and then east again at sunset."

The girls went without protest, hearts hurting. They didn't like the soldiers, but men were the victims now. Killing them had been very, very wrong.

Jeanie watched them leave from her tent flap, mind racing ahead to Safe Haven's return. The bunker wasn't going to be a problem for them—at least not the current occupants. Jeanie doubted they would be alive two days from now.

She was glad. It was one less battle she would have to fight when Marc made her his queen. "We don't need rebel soldiers, shadow killers, Fanatics, or anyone else. When I take over, Safe Haven will rule uncontested and there will be peace. Or we'll coat this ground in fresh blood until there are none left to oppose me."

Jeanie smiled at the thought. She dropped the flap and went to her bedroll to sleep until the sun came up. She wasn't sure where she would go from here, but she knew she needed to be able to travel and she couldn't do that without rest. "Goodnight, boys. Sweet dreams."

The surviving soldiers didn't hear Jeanie. They wouldn't have cared if they had. Severe injuries and shock disabled those who hadn't been able to flee. Dawn would see them all dead from lack of medical care and frostbite.

Those who had run from the slaughter didn't stop until they reached the next town. They ran

through the woods and streets in ragged, bloody, still panicking groups, shooting at each other in the darkness.

As soon as they realized they were in a town, they began reinforcing it against the next attack.

4

Gerald was the highest ranking officer to survive. He stumbled toward the gates that were being welded into place by exhausted, bloody soldiers who lifted empty guns at him.

Gerald went straight to the side without help and held the gate in place so it could be welded. He didn't speak to the men or try to order them around. *That part of my life is over!*

The soldiers didn't relax at having a chain of command member here. They glared at him while they worked, blaming him for their defeat and trauma. They didn't converse with each other. The attack had been so ugly that they didn't ever want to speak about it again.

Gerald scanned for Ulysses and didn't see him. He allowed that to sink in. Ulysses was gone, maybe even dead, which meant the troops weren't going to the bunker now. He looked around, letting go as the weld was finished. He saw the town was reasonably clean, small enough to defend, and had amenities they hadn't enjoyed in over a year—like a roof and beds. Gerald walked toward the main street, hoping

to spot a power station. *We can electrify that fence, build an overhead canopy, and just stay right here.*

Gerald heard men fall in behind him, but he still didn't try to give orders or even get them organized. *Let someone else do that shit. I just want power, water, food, and to be left the hell alone.*

Gerald knelt by the edge of a house and began pulling Rose Hips from a frozen Rose Flower bush. The berries were healthy and the bushes were all over this town. It would hold him a day or two while they built the fence and made other plans.

Gerald narrowed in on a pet store. He dropped the berries into his pocket, then went that way, mind blank except for covering the basics. He kicked the door open and disappeared inside.

The men who'd been watching him copied his choice of gathering some of the berries, but they didn't follow him into the store. The only man who could have gotten them to fall in line wasn't here. They weren't freedom fighters anymore. Those days were over. Now, they were just survivors in Afterworld.

Gerald stayed in the pet store. He gathered bottles and tubes, and listened for hell to come his way again. The medical supplies would treat his injuries; the berries would ease his guts. *Maybe I'll stay right here for the next month. The backroom is small and easily defendable. Who needs a house with ten exits to cover?*

“Someone's coming!”

Soldiers flew to the perimeter. They saw a tall man with reddish gold hair walking down the road. He was carrying a sleeping little girl, with a heavy looking backpack on his wide shoulders.

William stared at the injured, scared soldiers. He paused in front of the gate that was rapidly going up. “Good day.”

Some of the soldiers nodded to him, but most of them scowled or ignored his polite words.

William needed to feed the little girl and see to her comfort. He scanned the men for magic and found none. Satisfied, he stepped toward the gate.

“Stay back!”

Soldiers drew guns with rare bullets left, or knives, ready to rush out and kill him. If William hadn’t been male, they would have already attacked.

“Move on, stranger.” One of the biggest soldiers stepped in front of the gate. “You have a female. Her kind isn’t welcome here!”

William frowned. “She’s just a baby.”

“She’s female! Move on!”

William almost didn’t. He slowly shifted the girl higher onto his hip and turned away. *If I need a lifeforce, I’ll come back here.*

The soldiers watched him until he was out of sight, but the work on the fence didn’t stop.

“Reports are coming in about a dam breaking. It flooded Bridgeport and flushed out all our hunters. None of them have checked in yet.”

Marcella’s unease grew. She hadn’t been awake for very long. “And Selma?”

The guard frowned. “Your new lieutenant missed her check in.”

“Get out.”

The guard left and immediately began to spread the story.

Marcella knew her time here was up. All her support people were dead or missing, and she had little faith in the hell hounds she’d released. She hit the button on her chair. “This bunker will continue to run on the schedules I have set forth. Anyone who wants to make changes can come see me right now!”

Marcella regretted the outburst, but it was better than letting the whispers drive her crazy. *I’ve failed here. I hate how this feels.*

But there was no changing the outcome. *I’ll grab my crew and go right now, before the rest of it falls. I can try again somewhere else.*

Marcella left the command room. She went to the armory and began outfitting herself for the trip. While she worked, she called for her magic users and gave them orders to collect a few others.

“Help! Someone help us! We’re in the swamp!”

Radios around the bunker lit up with screams from the soldiers.

“Please! We’ll be your slaves! Just help us!”

Marcella shook her head at those who looked to her for guidance. She assumed it was a trap. Alexa might be with them even now, helping this moment along. *And if it's real, then we won't be facing them come spring.*

Marcella flashed comforting smiles to nervous residents as she passed them in the drafty halls. "The soldiers are dying! The future looks good!"

The bunker residents began to celebrate.

Marcella left the happy bunker of women and now crying slaves, taking the elevator to the bottom floor. She slipped into the escape tunnel and followed it to the exit she'd found in the blueprints. The feeling of things being good was an illusion. Marcella knew danger when she scented it.

Marcella patted the head of the female hell hound that came to her side. It was the last one. She would free it as soon as she didn't need it anymore. Allowed to propagate unchecked in the wild, there would soon be a new breed of dog in the east, too. In the west, her hounds were already enjoying their freedom.

Debbie Malin hurried down the tunnel, beaming at being invited to go with Marcella. She tugged on the rope. "Come on!"

Chris Malin clutched the newborn twins and tried to keep up so the rope didn't strangle him.

Marcella waited by the final door, preparing herself for the winter weather. She'd brought a long, heavy coat, gloves, and a hat, but she doubted she would need it all. This rage disease was great for

keeping warm. Women with the illness ran hotter than their normal counterparts. She enjoyed that part of her experiments.

Marcella heard her chosen crew coming. She hit the button to open the door. Cold air rushed through the tunnel.

The magic users surrounded Marcella and her hound as they left the bunker. All of them could feel things about to go wrong here. Marcella's mental offer had been accepted in relief. She was flashing images of another bunker just north of here. The women were eager to follow her new plan and leave these normals and slaves on their own.

Marcella led them to the escape vehicles that had been repaired and made ready over the last month. She slid into the passenger seat and waited to see who wanted to drive.

The magic users weren't offended. None of them wanted to be the leader. That job was too hard. It was much easier to drive a vehicle or hold a door than to conquer a country and enslave all males. Those shoes were huge. Only women who were crazy or had a messiah complex would even try to fill them. The magic users also respected Marcella for believing she could do this job. Her success in the west was well known, but this failure would be a blemish on her record. Taking over the next bunker would even that score and give them a place to wait out the winter. Come spring, the conquering would start all over again. Slavery was a marathon, not a sprint.

Lorey slid into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Marcella watched the snowy landscape roll by, thoughts going to Safe Haven. *I still need an army, and the bunker due north has one. All I have to do is aim them in the right direction when the time comes.*

In front of the bunker, a long line of refugees were waiting to be let in. Guards in the front booth were handling the people as fast as they could, eager to be done and get out of the cold.

In the distant trees, angry shadows with long claws approached the bunker. They missed Marcella's exit as they casually joined the line of people waiting to get inside.

When the screams and radio calls started, Marcella kept going.

6

"You have to go back!" The little girl squirmed in William's tight grip. "Go back! Hurry!"

William stopped, frowning. "What is it, little one?"

Abigail felt something snap in her mind. Grief flooded her. "My mother's gone."

William resumed walking, big coat blocking her from the cold weather. They'd missed the snow storm by a few hours, but not the wind.

Abigail's body stiffened. "You will go back!"

William resisted the spell easily, chuckling. “Save that anger for when you’re older.”

“You have to go back!” Abigail began to cry loudly. “I want my brother!”

William froze. *Brother?*

Abigail brought up her only clear memory. “Momma sold him. We’re the same.”

“You mean twins...” William turned around and headed west. “Tell me where.”

Abigail stopped crying and squirming. She held tight as William increased speed. “He’s with other kids. They say they’re a family, but he knows they aren’t.”

William increased speed. “Tell me where they are. I might recognize something around them.”

“Water ground...and Snake ghosts. They’re passing a yard with Snake bones.”

William detoured slightly south, almost sure where that was. “Are they coming toward us now or heading away?”

“Toward.” Abigail smiled up at him. “My brother counts time, too.”

William nodded, voice calm, soothing. “Keep tracking him and we’ll have you two back together before the sun rises.”

“I miss my momma.”

William patted her little back. “If we can find one more child like you and your brother, I might be able to change time enough to bring her back.”

Abigail smiled again. “I’d give anything for that.”

“Me, too, little one. Me, too.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Long Gone

December 12th

1

“Is there a way to blow it up or burn it down?” Yani walked next to the girls as the vampires explored the smoking, breached bunker in the coming dawn light.

Both girls shook their heads.

“It goes down five more floors and it’s made of concrete.”

“It would be a good lair for us.”

Yani considered it. The bunker would protect them from the sun and if they repaired the doors, it would shield them from humanity. But only until the next force of soldiers or Fanatics wanted it and then they would have to fight again. Yani was tired of killing, and still worried that Alexa might revoke their deal because of what they’d done. “No. Tell them we’re leaving in ten minutes. Then we’re going home to our caves. We will stay there until Safe Haven returns and then beg their forgiveness for our mistake.”

The girls ran off to spread the word.

Yani went back outside to make sure none of their enemies were close or closing in. After wiping

out the Snakes and the soldiers, there were probably justice seekers hunting them. Yani didn't want his people out here any longer than they had to be. The feel of powerful evil coming was clear to him. His own nature made it easy to recognize.

Belowground, the girls made it to the bottom level where their clansmen were releasing the bunker prisoners, including all of the enslaved males. Some of the adults were too damaged to be released into the wild. They were removed quickly, with as much mercy as possible. The rest were guided up the steps toward the open doors. These mindless animals lunged for freedom and vanished with shouts of delight and rage.

The girls returned to Yani's side.

"What about the children?"

Yani studied the kids now playing in the icy grass in front of the bunker. They acted as if they'd never seen or felt it before. Yani watched them interact, horrified by the immediate violence at every contact. "They are monsters, like us."

"We can't leave them." The eldest girl stared at her younger sister. "And we can't take them home with us. Everyone will be in danger."

Yani nodded. "We must give them mercy, maybe. Let me think on it."

The girls resumed spreading messages and gathering their people and the bodies of those who'd fallen. Five more vampires had been lost in this fight. Their clan had been cut by a third now.

This wasn't an accident. Yani felt the intent, the trap. If we take the rage children, even more of us will die. If we leave them or kill them, it will absolutely violate the deal we've made. Yani knew what had to happen. "Change them. Draining their blood may remove their disease. If not, at least they will be bound to our hive. The connection will force them to defend us."

Both girls looked back at him in shock.

"They'll be unstoppable if it doesn't work."

"No one else will be safe from them."

"We have pits for containment if needed." Yani liked the idea now that he'd heard it aloud. "If the Mitchel betrays us, or the vote goes against us, these children will help fight for our survival. Then, it will be Safe Haven who kills them, not us." Yani moved toward the wildest of the children, sending out a wave of obedience. "Come here, girl. Your new life is about to begin."

2

"Vampires did this." William didn't fear anything now, but if he did, vampires would top that list. "Too much like fighting myself."

Abigail yawned, eyes opening.

William turned so she couldn't see the slaughter. He didn't know how many soldiers had been here when the attack happened, but at least a hundred would remain here forever. The vampires

had taken a deep cut from this group. *You should have welcomed me in. I might have helped you.*

William moved down the road, hoping to get out of sight of the carnage before the child fully woke.

“He’s close. Bubby’s close!”

William scanned again, and saw a wagon chugging up the road toward them. The mud lines and wobbling tires said those inside had survived a recent danger.

William forced a smile onto his face as the car slowed.

Donna stared at the handsome man, surprised to find a male alone with a female child. “Are you one of the soldiers?”

William shook his head, smile fading. “They’re gone. They lost the fight.”

Donna’s shoulders drooped. She’d seen the buzzards circling and hoped she was wrong.

Abigail waved. “Hi, Andy!”

William scanned the occupants and found a blond boy waving back in confusion. “Where did you come from?”

Donna didn’t see a reason to lie. “Alexa Mitchel sent us here. She didn’t know the soldiers were gone.”

William wasn’t sure that was true. And if it wasn’t... “Alexa sent you to me.” William murmured a fast charm.

Donna looked up with a slight frown, eyes dazed. “Do I know you?”

William grinned at her. “You just gave me my son back! You bought him from slavers and brought him home! Bless you!” William quickly got the boy from the backseat, smiling at the other kids. He didn’t consider hurting any of them. Alexa had sent them here so he would have two of the three timekeepers he needed. He wouldn’t insult her gift with violence. “You should go to the bunker in the east. Woman and kids are safer there.”

Donna nodded, eyes glazed. “We’ll do that. Have a Safe Haven day!”

William forced a cheerful smile, unable to wave with his arms full. The spell on the woman would fade, but she would be free of the child she couldn’t control. William doubted he would ever see her again.

Donna didn’t look back. Let William have Andrew. He was strong enough to control the child and to defend him.

Donna wasn’t sure why his charm hadn’t worked on her, but faking it had been natural instinct. *I’m different.* Donna eyed the kids in the mirror. *And I’m not good like those gullible adults believe.*

Donna turned the wagon east. The bunker would buy her male orphans and give shelter in return. *From there, maybe I’ll keep hunting stray kids. I like the feeling it gives me.*

As the wagon chugged away, William began to speak, filling in their wiped memories with the basics. “We are a family. You are *my* children and

we are being hunted, so we have to be mean at times to survive. Safe Haven is our enemy. They stole your mother and we're going to get her back."

"Do you think they'll believe that for long?"

William spun around to find a striking blonde standing in the center of the carnage. He scanned her deeply, not being gentle.

She waited, not thinking of anything but her end goals of claiming Safe Haven's leader and becoming the new world's first queen.

William thought of his plans to do much the same. He smiled at her.

"I'm Jeanie."

William held the two children and stared into her wide eyes. There was something about her... *I can't read her mind. How is that possible?*

Jeanie stared back, eyes inviting. She squeezed the bottle in her pocket as she stepped closer. The potion wafted up and hit William.

William felt his mental walls folding, but it was too late. A spark flew through the air and hit him in the heart.

Jeanie grinned at the sleepy children, waving at them.

The twins smiled back and resumed resting on William's big shoulders.

Jeanie gave the man a sultry smile, then turned around and headed toward the street. Once again, fate had sent her exactly what she needed—someone stronger to group with.

William followed. “Who are you? Where are you from?” He fell in at her side. “Why did you come here?”

“Jeanie Hornstader. Harrison, Ohio.” Jeanie didn’t fear magic users. She used them to survive. “Destiny.”

It frustrated William that he couldn’t read her mind. The intelligence in her face said that brain wasn’t just empty space. Wheels were turning in there and he wanted to see them! “Are you alone?”

She snickered. “Not anymore.”

William felt the spell of a succubus as he looked into her eyes. “Did you drug me?”

“Yes.”

He tried to get angry. “How? Why?!”

“With a potion I purchased in a very strange bar. Because I need your help.”

William assumed it was an obedience charm. Those lasted until the victim began to hate their controller and then things got ugly. He couldn’t fight the magic or her ruthless honesty. “You’ll have it. If you stay close.”

“I plan to.” Jeanie rubbed her arms. “Looks like more snow.”

William brought up his shield to keep her warm. Jeanie smiled again. “Perfect.”

3

Two dozen AWOL soldiers slowly surrounded Alexa’s campsite three hours before dawn. The men

had stolen ammunition before leaving the brigade, along with heavier gear and the last transport truck. They'd also taken slaves from among the prisoners. Those women huddled in the rear of the locked truck and hoped the men didn't come back.

The fleeing soldiers had been moving west when the glow of a large fire caught their attention. Upon finding Alexa and her men around a fire, casting perfect shadows to anyone driving by, they'd stopped. The soldiers rushed into that camp now, pulling triggers.

Cloaked forms fell over without fighting back.

The soldiers stared stupidly, not sure what was happening. One of them ripped a cloak away and found a bag filled with debris.

"Where is she?"

"Hello." Alexa smiled coldly as the soldiers looked up. "Rookies aim right, seniors to the left. Edward with me." She dropped down and grabbed the first shocked man. Alexa ripped out his throat, dropped the body and then lunged for the next terrified soldier.

Edward followed her as some of the soldiers opened fire. Using his new speed, he circled the men and came back to Alexa. Half of their guns were now in his hands.

The other soldiers realized too late that they'd been tricked. Half of them went down in the pause. The rest took off running, trying to find cover.

Alexa grabbed a weapon from Edward. She took aim on those who were unreachable by her men in the trees.

Edward tossed guns up to his teammates who were also now out of ammunition.

Alexa went after the rest with Edward at her side. She got three of the six, firing in rapid succession.

Edward increased speed and dove... He floated for a minute, gaining ground, then dropped heavily on top of a screaming man who felt death coming. Edward bit into the back of his neck and split it open to drink.

Alexa stayed between Edward and their team, head swiveling to watch them all while Edward fed. She was too full to hold more, but Edward was larger. His body needed more blood than hers did and these AWOL soldiers had just eaten their rations. She could taste it.

The last two survivors fled back toward their truck, hoping Alexa was too busy to give chase.

“Get the engine started!” One of the terrified men grabbed the handle of the truck door and yanked it open.

“Now!” Fanatic slaves who’d been taken by the soldiers attacked them with sharp branches. They stabbed their tormentors repeatedly.

“Help!” A bloody hulk lumbered from the woods behind the truck. “Who is that?! Can you help me?!”

Alexa’s head swiveled toward the scene.

She and Edward quickly rejoined their team. Edward went back up into the tree without being told.

Alexa waited by the fire, surrounded by dead soldiers. She didn't loot them. She watched the hulking man face the Fanatic slaves. They were trying to form a circle around him by poking him back into the center with their bloody sticks.

Ulysses knew he wasn't going to win this fight. He'd lost too much blood from his injuries. Something had caught up with him in the darkness. He didn't know what it was, only that its red eyes had been near the ground. It had slobbered like a dog as it bit off his finger. He'd scrambled up a tree and waited it out. Burning his injury shut with his lighter had taken all of his courage and strength. When he'd dropped from the tree, the hound had been gone and he'd staggered on, but the lost blood had quickly caused weaknesses to set in. *I'm not going down without a last try!*

He shoved his way through the furious women and took off running toward the only light in sight.

Alexa's lips tightened as the fray came directly into her campsite.

Ulysses drew up in shocked revulsion as he realized the bodies were soldiers and they were all dead. He stared at Alexa in confusion, dazed. "You're on our side!"

Alexa watched the man slide to his knees. She was aware of the Fanatic slaves coming toward them. "What did you do?"

“I gave us justice!”

Alexa understood Ulysses had gone corrupt. *That happened fast.* “I’m sorry for the loss of your honor.” She gestured at the dead soldiers. “And theirs.”

“Why?!” Ulysses struggled as the Fanatics shoved him to his knees, but he had no strength left.

Alexa swept the frantic females who were getting set to die at her hand so long as they could take him out, too. She looked back at Ulysses with no mercy. “You hurt me. There had to be payment for that.”

“I never touched you!” Ulysses didn’t glance away from Alexa as the Fanatics edged closer.

“By all means, delay your death.” Alexa saw understanding come into his eyes and was satisfied he knew why. To make sure Billy received another layer of healing, she spoke it aloud. “You helped them take something very dear to me. They damaged it, and though I have it back now, it will never be the same. Even your death will not be enough to make that right.” Her tone hardened into Mitchel stone. “And then you told me it was my fault. While you were right, saying that to my face without an ounce of remorse sealed this choice. Ripping out a chunk of my pride just because you could reminded me of why my family has survived so long. Our need for vengeance keeps us alive.”

“You gave us a vision! False witch!”

Alexa’s cold snort cut through his fearful anger like a blade. “You changed it by not having mercy.

I saw you letting innocent women and girls go free. You didn't do that, did you?"

Ulysses glared at her. "Women are evil!"

Alexa grunted. "Yes, at times. We're also givers of life and providers of compassion. You deserve none of that. Nearly a quarter of your prisoners were only guilty of being females brought to that meeting by their guardians. You showed them no mercy. I have none for you."

"I'll tell you about your father!" Ulysses seized onto the tiny hope. "Please!"

Alexa grunted. "What's done is done." She turned her back on him.

Two Fanatic women rushed forward with their sharpened sticks, aiming for his eyes.

Alexa led her men into the darkness as Ulysses' screams echoed. "We'll walk now."

"Our gear?"

"Leave it as a payment for their justice."

"Okay." Edward assumed she felt bad for not rescuing those females before they were hanged. He also felt bad. He hadn't considered mercy either.

Ulysses' screams continued to echo through the night. Alexa's men only listened for pursuit, hoping they didn't need to kill the abused women.

Alexa knew the slaves wouldn't follow, but she liked it that her crew was staying alert even though they were exhausted. She was very pleased with them. "Two of our crew earned their reward when we left the station. Does everyone agree with that?"

"Yes," came the unanimous answer.

She didn't tell them all of their crew had earned it. She wanted one of them caught off guard for that moment.

David grinned, face flushing in pride. Mark stood straighter as he walked.

"It will be delivered when we stop to sleep. Consider what it will mean for you until then. Once made, this decision can't be changed."

Mark didn't bother. He couldn't wait to be like her.

David knew his choice, but he did consider it. If he gave up his humanity, he wouldn't be welcome to stay with Safe Haven. He'd come on this quest at first just to earn that reward, but it was no longer as important to him. Alexa was. *And she always will be, I think. Where she goes, I will, too, so long as she wants me.*

Alexa delivered a soft smile over her shoulder. "I'll always want you."

Heat flared between them.

The other men groaned in good-natured teasing.

David enjoyed the feeling. After doubting her, he had been sure this was lost to him. It was a relief to know she could forgive such a horrible mistake. His mood dropped. "I'm sorry, Boss."

Alexa nodded and kept walking. "So am I. And yet, we go on."

David's good mood returned. He sent a wave of happiness and desire that wrapped around her like a cloak.

“Nice.” Alexa changed direction, moving them southeast now. They were only a hundred miles from Safe Haven mountain. Most people in Afterworld thought it was a myth. Very few of them wanted to climb a mountain to find nothing there. Alexa knew it existed, but the feel of a nasty blow coming from nature was settling onto her shoulders. They didn’t have time to get that far south before it hit. *I’ll make it to your last stand come spring, father. And then we’ll be on the way to you. I hope you’re ready for us. We’re not to be trifled with. We’re senior Eagles in your army.*

“Who do you think attacked the soldiers?” Jacob had been stewing on it. “Ulysses being out here alone, injured, means that camp is gone.”

“He could have lost a fight for leadership and been kicked out.”

Jacob shrugged at Edward’s comment. “Then why was there a small group of soldiers attacking us instead of the entire brigade?”

Edward didn’t have an answer for that.

Alexa shrugged. “The rebel males have made many enemies.”

“True.” Jacob tried to think of them all.

Edward shared a small smile with Alexa. They both suspected who it was and they didn’t want to talk about it, but Alexa also refused to lie to her team. She’d avoided that with clever misdirection.

The night creaked and scurried around them. Nature was alive here, though not doing well. The few glimpses they’d gotten had been of angry

animals who weren't going to submit to a hunt without a nasty fight. Alexa didn't challenge them. She wanted to get further from this zone before they stopped.

It felt good to be walking again even though the wind was cold and the ground was hard. They'd spotted several human threats since leaving the town, but none had gotten close or threatened them directly. They'd also spotted lines of traffic in the distance. People were headed to the bunker in big numbers.

Alexa was certain she'd spotted several vampires in those lines. The same group that had attacked the soldiers, she assumed. Her simple words had given the vampires permission to weaken the fighters on both sides, as well as claiming their vengeance for Zaro's death. Both power players would be unable to continue this war. When Safe Haven returned, neither would have an advantage over them. The vampires were also weakened, and the humans had taken a cut, as well. It was her first planned mass murder. Alexa refused to be happy about it or proud of herself. It was too awful.

Jacob figured it out all at once. He stopped, staring at Alexa in shocked surprise. "You did this."

She paused, frowning. "I did what?"

"You brought the bunker down. Without ever stepping foot in the place. That's why you wouldn't tell Jason your feelings on who would win that fight. You didn't want him to know you set this up."

Alexa's expression and tone remained the same. "Did I?"

Jacob nodded. "I think so."

She shrugged, resuming their walk. "You are, as always, free to believe whatever you wish."

"Why won't you just admit it?"

"I told my crew I wasn't getting further involved."

Jacob thought about that, grin slowly spreading. "And you didn't, did you?"

Alexa's lip quivered. "No. I planned it before I gave that promise."

Jacob laughed with her, not bothered. He liked it that she was good enough to outsmart them. *It's part of what makes her a great leader.*

"I'm a great leader because I'd rather fight men equally and maybe lose, than to see them as slaves?"

Jacob nodded again. "Yes, but they were crushed, too."

"I took the wind out of both sails at about the same time."

"For what?" Jacob couldn't help his curiosity. "They'll all be dead in the final battle."

"Maybe there won't have to be a final battle, Jacob." Alexa finally gave them all a nugget of her goals and hopes for the future. "If there are no superpowers when Safe Haven comes home, just Nature and her minions, they might stand a chance. The people we killed in Bridgeport were already dead or they would have been on the other side of that fight. I'm trying to lower their numbers and still

preserve the future. If we have that final battle, humanity may never recover. The normals are disappearing.”

Jacob’s brows drew up. “Do you honestly care?”

Alexa sighed. “I do. It’s my duty to save them, even from themselves.”

4

“It’s gone.” Donna stared at the smoking complex and the buzzards who’d ventured out in winter weather for the feast. Something snapped in her mind.

Donna felt the cool rush of power fill her body. The sense of being complete sent delight through her. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted. Thank you!”

It is my honor.

Donna grinned at the new voice in her mind. *I’m not Invisible anymore! I didn’t know for sure, but I’ve always known I’m different.*

How can I serve you?

Donna thought of her needs and made a clever choice. Too many people were coming here. “I’ve got this one.” She needed time to scavenge. Donna turned on the radio and lifted the mike from the holder.

“The bunker has fallen.” Donna held in the mike, voice properly stunned. “I don’t see any survivors.” She hung it up and shut off the CB, sure

it was about to light up. The kids in the backseat didn't need to be woken. The views were awful.

Donna put the wagon in park, scanning for threats, survivors, and possible gear or supplies. She didn't want to go in there and see the bodies or breathe in the rancid smoke, but they needed things. If she didn't scavenge, they would all die.

Donna got out of the wagon and locked the door. She shut it quietly, then activated her alarm. If someone tried to open the door, they would get a nasty shock. It would wake the kids, and they would start shooting. How to handle a firearm had been the first lesson she'd given each of them upon joining her, no matter their age. Donna didn't take in adults. She didn't trust them, but she adored kids. Running a daycare before the war had given her experience to raise the kids. Keeping them alive was a lot harder.

Donna approached the front doors without flinching from the view or smells. The body parts strewn about the ground didn't shock her or make her stomach turn. Neither did the holes in their necks. She wasn't terrified of the things that roamed the darkness. Most of them didn't hunt women and kids, and those that did, she'd learned to fight or bargain with to save their lives. If not for Andrew forcing her to bring him out here, they would all still be hiding in the Smokey Mountains resort.

The once popular tourist area still held treasures, though they'd been running low. The wealthy and elite had gone there for vacations and

time away from their fans. When the war came, they'd left behind more valuables than one family could use up quickly. She could have pulled another year of supplies from that town to get them through.

Donna stepped inside the bunker. Strange noises filled her ears. Dings, thuds, air whooshing, alarms blaring underground—it was hard to concentrate on just one. They blended together to make an ugly symphony. She flipped on her flashlight, pulled her mask up, and disappeared into the fallen bunker.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Close

1

“**C**ompany!”

The call brought weary, traumatized soldiers from tents and bedrolls. They ran to the new fencing that now lined the perimeter, haunted eyes searching the dusk shadows.

Alexa and her crew were still in the V formation. As the town and fence line came into view, Alexa didn't pause. She moved her men down the center of the street next to the town, head swiveling continuously.

The soldiers stared in fury.

“Keep going!”

“We don't want you here!”

“No women!”

“No creatures!”

“No magic!”

The man on the main gate tensed as Alexa drew even with it. “Please keep going.”

Alexa stopped. She turned only her head in his direction. “Ulysses is dead.”

More shouts came, but they were in support.

The gate man nodded. “Thank you for letting us know.”

“You’ll stay here and keep trying to train yourselves?”

Gerald shook his head, eyes and tone hard. “We want no part of your wars. We’ll fish and hunt, raise crops and livestock, and kill anyone who enters this fence without permission.”

Alexa swept the four hundred or so soldiers, seeing all of them agreed. “Where are the rest?” They’d passed the slaughter an hour ago, and while it was ugly, there hadn’t been enough bodies to account for everyone.

Gerald snorted in contempt. “They fled south, talking about the mountains.” He was still pissed those men hadn’t stayed to help secure their town. “They’re no longer part of our brotherhood.”

“Good.” Alexa resumed her walk down the middle of the street.

The soldiers breathed sighs of relief, but they didn’t stop watching until she was out of sight.

2

Alexa walked them for the next hour, trying to beat the rising sun. “How many of you have spent time in a luxury suite?”

The men frowned, not sure what she meant. A couple of them lifted a finger.

Alexa led them around the last curve and stopped, letting them view the city ahead.

“That used to be Gainesville!” Jacob couldn’t help the excitement. “I always wanted to go there!”

“And now you shall.” Alexa got them moving again. “This city was evacuated during the war. We’ll see if they left anything behind that we can use. Then we’ll pick the best hotel and enjoy the penthouse suit for the duration of our stay.”

“Black paint, Boss?”

Alexa nodded at Edward. “We’ll use the shoe polish to black out all the windows on the top level to stop our light from traveling at night. During the daytime, it will look like damage and be ignored, though we may run into scavengers during our stay.”

None of them were concerned with it. The mood lifted.

“If we can find a way to pipe in river water and clean it, we could use the hot tubs in those rooms.” Edward was thinking of his sore muscles. He’d never considered that vampires felt pains like this. In fact, almost nothing he’d gleaned about their myth over his lifetime was true. *I’m not dead. I eat. I breathe.* He frowned up at the rising sun that was already starting to sting his cheeks and fingers. *But that one is. Our blood no longer tolerates the light. Is it a wonder that vampires became monsters in the dark? It’s the only time we can be active.*

“What about power?” Daniel was also thinking ahead to the fun times they could have in a hotel.

“I think they all had generators, but if we connect power to the entire hotel, it could be a problem.” Mark didn’t want anyone else to be able to use that against them by opening doors that

should have deadlocked when the power went off. “If we stick to just a few floors or rooms, we should be good, though.”

“And we’ll set traps that are quiet.” David assumed they would spend the first few days getting their den in order before enjoying any of the amenities. It paid to have those plans ready so the work went faster. “Plus, we can use their kitchens and decorative tanks.”

“Fish?”

David nodded at Billy. “We’ll stock it so when the snow comes, we don’t have to go out.”

The men shared grins at the thought of fishing—not because it was fun or reminded them of their old lives, but because it would be another challenge to keep them from getting bored. Dangerous things came out of the water.

Alexa let them go with the plans, approving most of it. She scanned for trouble as they took the main street to get to the city. Gainesville had once been home to thirty-five thousand people. After the Draft and evacuation, it had emptied, but she was sure that wouldn’t have remained so for four years. They might have a fight coming up if someone else had already claimed it.

“Don’t hotels have their own cell towers and computer systems?”

Edward shrugged at Jacob. “Some. I don’t know if Gainesville had that technology yet.”

“We’ll check it out.” Billy grinned. “We can play video games, eat grilled fish, and let the boss beat our asses anytime she wants to. Should be fun!”

The other men laughed.

Alexa paid attention because she was in the lead again. She didn’t scold the men for not doing the same. They’d worked hard on this run. They deserved downtime and now they were about to get months of it. She much preferred them going into that dormancy in good spirits as to them dreading it like they had been back at the springs. It felt like they were honestly going to get a real break from fighting this time. Her only concern was finding meals for her changed men. She would have seven vampires to feed and fish wasn’t going to cut it. *If things get tight, we’ll visit the soldiers in their town. Maybe we can trade. I don’t like this side of being changed. I’d rather get them to donate what we need.*

Edward stared at her in shock. *Why didn’t I think of that?!* He’d also been feeling guilty over taking lives for food.

Alexa motioned.

Her crew straightened, putting their thoughts aside for the moment. They were about to enter another broken relic of a day gone by. If they didn’t pay attention, they might become part of this site forever.

“Something moved over by the bridge.” Edward narrowed in with his new sight. “Five males. They saw us. They’re taking off.”

Alexa scanned the males and found thoughts of escaping a bunker slaughter. She kept that news to herself for now as she increased speed to match the rising sun. She pulled up her hood and tightened it down, pleased when the crew followed suit without being told. “Let’s roll.”

3

“We’ll camp now. Work will start tomorrow.”

The team had no problem with her order. They had just secured the bottom level of the hotel and blocked all stairs and elevators to the upper floors. So far, they hadn’t seen a single soul here. The walk in had revealed only the same damage from neglect that they’d been finding all along. Surprisingly, the stores hadn’t been cleared out in the center of the city. They were all fully armed again, bringing relief to their minds.

Alexa fed another log into the fire they’d made in the empty fireplace. The hotel lounge had couches and chairs, but they were all settled on the floor in front of the fire. The bright sun outside was great cover for the light.

“There are rewards to be had.” Alexa looked at Jacob first.

Jacob frowned. “I didn’t earn it.”

“Bring up your shield—now!”

Jacob brought it up immediately, hand dropping to his gun.

Alexa smiled. “You earned it in that cellar. Your knife skills reinforced the choice.”

Jacob let go of the shield, grinning. “Really?”

Alexa rose, nodding proudly. “We will do one each night until we are all the same. You will go first.”

Daniel slapped the floor. “Yes!”

Billy and Edward groaned as they realized Daniel had won the bet on which man would become like them next.

Billy got the rifle out and handed it over, not really minding. This world was littered with amazing weapons just waiting to be picked up.

Edward did mind, but he nodded to Daniel anyway, hiding it. Losing a night at Alexa’s side hurt.

She rose, gesturing to the others. “Come show your brother love for his successes.”

Jacob went to them, grinning from ear to ear. “So, this stings a little, right?”

Edward, Daniel, and Billy lunged forward, sinking teeth into Jacob’s neck and both shoulders. Alexa followed, taking his wrist.

Jacob’s screams echoed through the hotel.

4

Donna emerged from the bunker an hour after she’d gone in. Her eyes picked out shadows beside the wagon. She drew her rifle and took aim.

“Don’t do that.”

Donna spun around to find William standing on top of the bunker roof. She had no idea how he'd gotten up there.

“Jeanie is entertaining the kids with a story about unicorns or something. Shooting her in the back would be rude.”

“You again?” Donna lowered the rifle. “You got the kid. What the hell do you want now?”

William's face darkened as he realized she'd faked her way by him. *Why didn't my charm work on her?* That hadn't happened to him before. *She must be special.*

Donna's frown grew. “We were just leaving.”

William shrugged. “The children are happy. Drop that load and go back for more if you like.”

Donna was tempted. There were still a lot of supplies in there and she was pissed about Alexa's lack of help. Going to a homestead wouldn't protect them and Alexa knew that, but she'd still refused to even escort them to a safe place. “People will show up soon.”

William looked down at her with glowing red eyes.

Donna understood he was offering her protection. For a brief moment, she thought about shooting him. Then she nodded and stored the rifle. Survival had to come first. “If you can get her to change the diaper on the little one, I'll cook you a nice dinner later.”

William chuckled. “I think I can manage that. Please tell the kids to put the guns away. She doesn’t like it.”

Donna marched to the wagon, ignoring Jeanie for the moment. She made a motion through the window.

The oldest child unlocked the driver door, which disabled the alarm.

Donna put the bags she’d gathered into the trunk. She smiled at little Abigail, who was sitting on the grass next to Jeanie. “Hi, princess!”

Abigail’s eyes lit up. *You said to take over the bunker and become a queen, Momma. I’m already a princess. The bunker will be my kingdom.*

Jeanie watched Donna, eyes narrowing when the stranger continued to ignore her. *When Safe Haven returns, you’ll bow to me, bitch.*

Donna snorted. “Not even if you were the last normal on the planet.”

William stared in shock. *Donna’s one of us!*

Jeanie’s nose went into the air. “I’m not just any normal.”

Donna stared at her, using her new gift to read the woman’s mind. “You were the Secretary of Transportation.”

Surprised at both revelations, William joined the women to stop the fight he felt coming.

Jeanie smiled. “Camp David was prepared for a nuclear war. I’ve been there for years, reading files on the Ghost and learning secrets about Safe Haven.

When Marcella's calls went out, most of Camp David emptied. We were running out of food."

Jeanie's smile faded. "My father died there. I traded his lifeforce to one of the prisoners who looked into the future. I saw the leader of Safe Haven kneeling before me."

Donna blew out an ugly breath. "You're insane. Great."

Jeanie's grin returned. "I'm protected."

William thought of the Free Will Curse, but he didn't mention it. Because the magic user who'd given Jeanie the premonition was not doing it willingly, the curse of free will would hit Jeanie at some point. Whatever she'd gotten from it would be doubled and then taken. William's heart hardened. *I'll find a way to save her.*

Donna scowled "You're both crazy."

Jeanie pointed at shadows in the distance. "Watch this."

Donna saw two giant, strange, bloody hounds running toward them. She scrambled backward, reaching for her rifle.

William put a hand on her wrist, but he stayed ready to bring up a shield around them all if Jeanie was wrong.

Jeanie stepped forward to meet the hounds. "Thank you for sending me a very strong group."

The hounds ran to her and rubbed their huge bodies all over her legs and feet. They licked her cheeks and hands when she laughed.

“How did she do that?” Donna shuddered under William’s light grip. “Those hounds hate everyone. I lost orphans to them near the Borderlands.”

William tried to scan Jeanie’s mind and was once again repelled. “I don’t know.”

Donna pulled her arm loose. “Well, you’d better find out soon or we’ll be blindsided in the final fight.”

William looked down at Donna, making plans. She was ruthless when crossed. *I can use that.* “If we find one more child like Andrew and Abigail, we can reset the war. All the kids you’ve lost will live again.”

Donna didn’t read any deception in his thoughts, but it probably wouldn’t have mattered anyway. *Alexa needs to be brought down.*

William nodded. “When they come back, it will be my goal.”

“No.” Donna faced him, tone dropping into stone that wasn’t going to change. “I want her hit before her family comes home. Let Safe Haven arrive to find out they already have a bleeding wound.”

“Yes!” Jeanie rose and turned to them as the dogs kept nudging her hand for more affection. “Adrian is their shotgun. When they blast him, the spray goes far and wide. He doesn’t even have to aim. Kill his daughter and that gun will fire until it runs out of ammunition.”

William saw her point. “He’ll concentrate only on revenge for her death. We can split him off as soon as they land.”

Jeanie’s excitement faded. “I’m told that the leader of Safe Haven is still Angela. Reports were unreliable. She’s dangerous.”

William’s locks rattled.

Jeanie frowned. “What are you hiding?”

William leaned forward as the charm on him snapped. He grabbed her by the throat and lifted her off her feet.

Donna got out of the way, not sure who she should help.

The hounds lunged, but William brought up his shield before they could reach him.

William didn’t squeeze. Jeanie didn’t struggle. She sent him her thought. *I’m the legal ruler of the country. Safe Haven has no claim anymore.*

William slowly lowered her to the ground, mind racing. She was right. *Safe Haven left. Jeanie is a representative of the old government. We’ll rally the people around her. Safe Haven’s honor will prevent them from challenging us.*

William took a step back and lowered his shield. The hounds ran forward and squeezed between them, but they didn’t attack William.

Jeanie put a hand on each of their heads. “Watch the kids while we set up a few rooms to use.” Jeanie moved toward the bunker doors. The dogs began pacing around the wagon and the twins who were now sleeping near the bumper.

William looked at Donna.

Donna stared back, making a fast choice. After a few seconds of thought, she jogged after Jeanie. “Wait, Madam President. You have to be protected until we clear it.”

William followed. “Don’t call her that yet. We have to hide her until we’re ready for people to know.”

Donna shrugged. “If there’s a problem, you can handle it, right?”

“Not if we move too fast.” William brought up a shield around the two females as they entered the damaged, looted bunker. “People will still come here for a while. We’ll convince them to stay and let word spread on its own that we have a President again.”

Jeanie stopped, turning. “What about the usurper making those radio addresses?”

William didn’t need a charm this time to make sure she was happy. “I’ll take a trip once the snows come in.”

Jeanie smiled at him and resumed her walk. “I want to use the Presidential quarters. I have to start living it or those who come here will never believe it.”

“I’m not sure many people will come anyway.” Donna flipped her light back on so they could see better through the shadows and smoke. The power wasn’t working now. “We shouldn’t say it’s a bunker.”

William thought of the nightly radio addresses. “We’ll call it Evening Town and encourage a farmer’s market every night where people can come for trades.”

Donna nodded.

Jeanie smiled. “I really like the sound of that. Evening Town sounds like a fun, safe place where you never have to apologize for being what you are.”

5

“Good evening, New America! This is your President. I apologize for missing the last address. As I’m sure you know, that earthquake was powerful. It did serious damage to the bunker and we were forced to relocate. As we get organized, we will release the new site locale and uphold all of our previous laws and agreements.”

Alexa snorted as she turned the radio down so it wouldn’t echo as much. “The earthquake did it.” She looked at Edward. “Do you believe that?”

Edward shook his head. “I’d say they suffered the same fate as the soldiers.”

Alexa was impressed. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

Edward shrugged. “Other than us, who else could have managed that? It’s not like bunkers are easy targets.”

“Agreed. Very nice.”

Edward was warmed by her praise. He lifted a brow at her.

Alexa nodded quickly, need flaming.

The other men snickered as they both rose and headed into the private lounge for alone time, even Jacob, who was in his bedroll, shivering and shuddering at the pain of the conversion. They'd just had a series of battles. Alexa wanted a service. The others weren't jealous. Edward had gotten the courage to ask her instead of waiting for the invite. He deserved the honor just for that.

The rest of the team finished listening to the radio address and enjoyed being on downtime together.

6

"I love you."

Edward stilled under her. Alexa was still straddling him, head resting on his chest. "You've changed again."

Alexa nodded, not moving off him. "I've done a very bad thing. It can't be reversed."

"And you're worried about what it will do to the team, the quest, and the future?"

Alexa chuckled, making him twitch. "That mind is amazing."

"And yet, I didn't know for sure if you'd done it until now."

"Mitchels are masters at hiding."

Edward shut his eyes, hand resuming rubbing her back. “Was it because of William?”

“Yes, and you.”

Edward frowned. “Me?”

“My feelings for you are dangerous. If you die, the quest is over.”

It both relieved and hurt Edward to hear that. “I’m not going anywhere, Boss. And now that you’re byzan, you’ll be able to protect me.”

Alexa sighed. She reluctantly sat up so she could see his face. “The reset, done correctly, might give us a small chance at the future we’re denied now.”

Edward shook his head. “We could never build a life from that type of beginning. It would be cursed.”

Alexa was surprised that he knew what was involved. “Who gave you those details?”

“Your uncle.” Edward smiled at her. “He was distracted. He didn’t feel me scanning his thoughts either time.”

Alexa laughed, sending chills through both of them.

Edward didn’t get distracted. “You told Jason you would support the reset if it didn’t go against your code, but you already knew it would require the deaths of three innocent kids to do the spell.”

“Yes, I lied. I will never support it.”

“Jason thinks you will.”

“Jason is grieving. Carolyn will help him adjust.”

“And when she dies?”

“He will take Billy’s place, and we’ll help him adjust. It’s the price we pay for loving someone other than ourselves.” Her sadness grew as she stared at him.

Edward forced a smile. “We’re together now, and for the quest. Maybe after won’t be as bad as we’re both expecting.”

“Perhaps.” Alexa knew better, but pretending was a way to hope, to have faith that they weren’t doomed to die in that final battle. Her determination to teach them better, faster, filled her heart again. “Be careful.”

Edward frowned. “What did I do?”

“It’s what you didn’t do.” She lifted a scornful brow. “Only two knives thrown during a challenge?”

Edward flushed.

“Do not get lazy.”

Edward nodded, sorry he hadn’t put in more effort at that moment. “It won’t happen again.”

“To that effect, have you thought it through enough for my questions?”

Edward slowly nodded, thrilled that she wasn’t waiting for him to bring it to her this time. “I think so.”

“Begin with telling me why I sent Donna to her possible doom.”

Edward didn’t hesitate. “She’s power hungry, but she loves little girls. When she finds out what William plans to do, she’ll try to stop it.”

“And why does that matter?”

“It could buy us time during the final battle.”

“Good. Why did I let the Fanatics keep my enemy?”

“You know how dangerous she is. She’ll either kill them all or enslave them. You’re still giving Billy justice, and extracting that Mitchel vengeance.”

“And?”

Edward looked away. “You’re afraid to kill her.”

Alexa sighed, not surprised that he knew. “When did you figure that out?”

“When you didn’t kill her in that first fight.”

“Do you understand why?”

Edward ran through the possible options and came up with the only one that made sense to him. “All the spells were nature based. You can’t beat her if you attack her now because Nature will show up to help her.”

“I can’t at all. Safe Haven’s other fighters will have to do that job.”

Edward frowned. “Even a byzan can’t?”

“No. Firewalkers are a part of nature. Nature can put out our flames and even control our spells in ways. In that final fight, all fire walkers have to be locked.”

“I’ll cover you, Boss.”

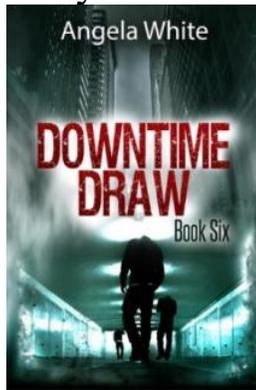
Alexa smiled at his immediate defense and his confidence that they would still be together then.

She delivered the reward for his brilliant mind.
“Love me?”

Edward immediately snaked an arm around her bare waist and rolled them so he was on top.
“Eternally, Boss. Eternally.”

The End

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scene

“Damn.” Alexa began checking her gear. “Our break is over, I think.”

The others agreed with her assessment. The unknown radio caller had used bait that few people could resist. Starvation was the biggest cause of death in Afterworld, even over lead.

“You two should go now while you can sneak out.”

Jason and Carolyn both shook heads at her words.

“I’m not leaving yet.”

“You’ll need me.”

Alexa didn’t insist. She might need them, and even if she didn’t, they had the right to make their own choices. “Finish prepping those water pots and fill our canteens. How are we on rations?”

Edward had already counted it. “A week to ten days, depending on company.”

“Good. Ammunition?”

Everyone groaned.

Alexa finished her personal check in. “We’ll loot as we roll, like usual.”

The radio was a garbled mess of people talking now. Billy shut it off and held it up for Alexa to store back in her cloak. “This feels a little old.”

Alexa chuckled. “That took longer than I expected.”

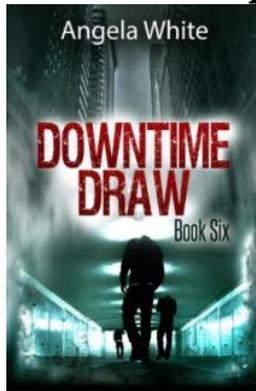
The men laughed with her. They were finally ready for a break, right when a new mob was on the way to kill them.

“Ironic.”

“Fate.”

Alexa nodded, tightening her gun belts. “Let’s not disappoint.”

Book 6 Sample



Downtime Draw

1

“It’s snowing.” Edward moved away from the window so the others could come over and view the beautiful scene.

Alexa didn’t move from her spot by their smoldering fire. She didn’t find snow beautiful the way they did, but she didn’t discourage them from enjoying it. She continued to mend the small rip in her cloak.

The men took turns looking through the window. Each of them scanned their surroundings, then examined the fat flakes falling over the dead city.

Edward joined Alexa by the fire. He sank down and pulled out his sewing kit to copy her actions. His cloak also needed mending and they had a lot of time to kill right now.

Alexa felt Edward's restlessness, but she didn't try to comfort him or the others who were feeling that way. Action always seemed to find them. She doubted they would be bored for long, but even if they were, her crew was well trained. They would suffer it gracefully.

Jacob stayed at the window after the others had gotten their fill of the view. They didn't have anyone officially on guard duty right now and it bothered him. He kept scanning with his sharper gaze, watching for trouble. Being changed was all that he'd hoped, but he hadn't understood how thirsty he would be all the time. He'd taken blood from his team, but he hadn't had an official meal yet. Neither had Mark or David.

Jacob stared harder, feeling something coming their way.

"You're calling it to us." Daniel frowned at their rookie. "Settle in and let it roll off."

Jacob's lips tightened, but he didn't argue. He also didn't leave the window.

Billy tossed his gun cleaning kit to David before the man could ask for it. He'd felt the request coming. All of them kept their weapons in pristine condition. This quest had kept them hopping until now, but that was no reason to slack off.

Mark picked up his stool and moved it to right in front of their main door. They were on the 10th floor of the Hampton Inn. They'd set traps below to let them know if someone arrived, but this city had been silent around them so far, other than creaks and thuds of rusting structures. Mark sat down and leaned against the door, nerves firing up.

The tension spread through their den at a fast pace.

Alexa approved of their caution even as she shook her head. "We will not interfere."

Jacob tensed as he spotted movement. "Survivors, boss."

Alexa kept sewing her cloak. "Not for long."

Jacob forced himself to move away from the window so he wasn't spotted. The small group below was being followed by hungry dogs or wolves. He didn't see any uniforms, robes, scales, or anything else that would identify them as a known enemy. They looked like normal Americans trying to find safety. It was unlikely that they would make it through the encounter. Jacob wanted to go help them, but Alexa's tone implied it was a bad idea. Jacob assumed they weren't good people and therefore weren't worthy of their help.

Alexa didn't explain her choice, though she felt his curiosity and slight disapproval. She'd felt the small group enter the city. She'd also felt the sense of wrongness that accompanied them. She didn't know what was wrong with them; she did know it would cause problems for her crew.

They'd been here for nine days now. They had things set up to fit their needs, from training to sleeping, but they hadn't spent much time on pleasure. Alexa tied off the thread and snapped it with her roughened hands. "We'll make a trip out at dawn for gear."

Every man there perked up. They also wondered what she meant by gear. They'd fully outfitted their needs in the first week. They were all heavy on beans, bags, and bullets.

"We'll go to the library first. Then we'll stop at the sporting store." She glanced at Mark. "Then the dojo?"

Mark grinned, nodding. "Sounds great." Mark loved karate. At the local dojo, he might be able to find training books so he could advance another level.

"After that?" Alexa lifted a brow at Daniel.

"A toy store." Daniel flushed at the snickers. "They'll have model kits." Daniel loved building things.

Billy shrugged when Alexa's gaze fell on him. "Modeling kits sound good. As long as it has wheels, I'm hard for it."

Companionable laughter filled their warm room.

Satisfied that she'd given them something to look forward to, Alexa added a stop for herself. "We'll end with a trip through the history museum."

They assumed she wanted to enjoy the exhibits that were left.

Alexa didn't tell them she wanted to collect a few of those exhibits before they were completely lost to the apocalypse. Some of those items were irreplaceable. She would hide them somewhere and hope the future would allow someone to retrieve them and put them back on display for the survivors. Leaving them here in this dead city would ensure that they were lost for good.

A faint scream echoed up to them, making half the men tense.

Alexa waited to see if one of them would ask her to change her mind. That was the only way she would get involved.

Jacob refused to open his mouth. He was tired of being the rookie. The only way he would get rid of the title was to stop acting like one. If Alexa said they weren't going to help the people, then they weren't.

Alexa was proud of him. She delivered a brief smile that sent warmth through Jacob's scarred body. He sank down under the window and pulled out his Bible to continue reading about the ark. It was his favorite part. The end of the world was a fascinating topic for him in any form. Reading about it wasn't as good as living it, though. Jacob couldn't imagine being this strong at any other time.

Edward threaded his needle and tied it off while subtly scanning Alexa's face. In the faint firelight, she looked tired.

"I'm fine." Alexa didn't like it when they saw her as weak in any way. "Watch your six."

Edward slapped a hand over the large spider about to crawl onto his leg from the floor. He wiped it onto a coal, chuckling. She hadn't even looked at him, but she'd known something was approaching him. "You're amazing."

Alexa snorted. "I saw the shadow on the floor."

Edward was even more impressed. The entire floor was alive with shadows from their movements and the dying fire. She'd been able to tell which one didn't belong. "How did you get so sharp?"

All the men stilled to hear her answer. They wanted that, too.

"Awareness was something my father drilled into me until I could pinpoint a spiderweb blowing a quarter mile away." She examined the hole she'd sewn up. "Would you like a short lesson?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely."

"Of course."

"We've drilled in the dark. I'm sure you remember."

The men chuckled, nodding. Their time in the basement in Point Pleasant was the only fond memory of that zone.

"Now we'll drill in silence. Put in your earplugs."

The men did, curious as to how she would instruct them when they couldn't hear her. Mental gifts were off-limits for this.

Alexa didn't do anything. She put up her sewing kit and listened to the screams outside while the men watched her and each other, waiting for her lesson.

Edward began to realize this was the lesson. Without his hearing, his eyes picked out the smallest movement to make up for it. He narrowed in on Billy's chest as he belched lightly. He saw Mark shift to let out gas. He spotted tiny ashes coming from their fire. *This is remarkable.*

The other men kept waiting, watching Alexa for the lesson to start. They also noticed more movement, but they didn't register it until Alexa signaled for them to remove the earplugs.

“Satisfied?”

Edward nodded. “We'll practice that.”

The others caught on, rolling eyes at themselves and each other. They also admired Edward for figuring it out. His position as her right hand was well earned.

“My father made me start every day that way for weeks. Then he took away my eyes and made my ears just as sharp. Then he took away both and made my mind adjust. It was the toughest part of my training. There were times that I doubted I would ever understand what he was trying to teach me.” Alexa yawned. “Now I can do it while I sleep if I have to.”

Daniel and Mark put their earplugs back in for another round.

Jacob went back to reading, but he was distracted now.

David and Edward listened to the fading screams outside. They were also unhappy that she wasn't sending them out to help the people, though they understood she had a reason.

Edward took his bandana out and tied it around his eyes.

David followed his lead.

Both men tensed as the screams seemed to become louder, closer.

Billy tossed another log onto the fire, then headed for their sleeping area.

Alexa rose and followed him, suddenly exhausted. She'd rested and relaxed here as much as she could stand, but she was still lagging.

Billy groaned in pleasure as she climbed on top of him and snuggled close.

Alexa chuckled. "We can do more if you like."

Billy was tempted, but he could feel her weariness. "Sleep, Boss. You can attack me when we get up if you like."

Alexa shut her eyes and dropped out almost immediately.

Billy held her close and slowly followed.

Edward and the others listened for the sounds of sex. When it didn't come, he and the other fighters removed their blindfolds and ear plugs.

"She isn't doing well." Jacob shut the Bible and stored it. "She needs blood."

Edward could still hear people screaming below them. It sounded like that fight for survival was

moving closer. “Who wants to break a rule with me?”

David stood up and began checking his gun.

“She’ll be pissed.” Jacob frowned at them. “We can hunt while we make our trip out at dawn.”

Mark nodded. “Listen to the rookie. Follow orders.”

Edward wanted to tell them he had the right to make his own choices. He glanced toward the sleeping area, then sighed. He leaned back and dug out his sewing kit again.

David grunted, hating it that they were going to let her suffer and that they were leaving the people below to die. But he didn’t go anyway. His place on this team meant more to him than a group of strangers, and Jacob was right—they could hunt on the way to the stores.

Daniel scanned them all. “We really are hers, you know? Even when it’s over. We’ll all end up with her.”

“Most of us, anyway.” Edward refused to say more when brows lifted toward him. Billy’s destiny was different. Edward assumed Alexa would try to save him, but he doubted it would work. Some things were just meant to happen and not even a byzan could stop them.

“Let’s listen to the nightly address. I’m eager to hear the new lies.”

Men snorted and chuckled at Edward’s words. The bunker woman was still claiming to run the

country even though she'd lost her den and been forced to relocate.

Mark tuned in his radio, thrilled that each of them had their own now. Gainesville was full of treasures.

Static came through the radio.

Mark left it on, but turned it down in case the bunker woman was just running late.

After checking his watch, Edward shook his head. "She's gotten into more trouble. We may have heard the last of her."

Mark hoped that was correct, but he still left it on to be sure. Time and schedules didn't mean as much in Afterworld.

"Why do you think she brought us here?"

Silence fell through the plush, warm room.

Edward looked at David, always eager to see which of their crew was on the same level as him and Alexa when it came to figuring things out. "Why do you think?"

David lowered his voice even though he was sure Alexa could hear them if she was still awake. "I have several ideas, but I'm sure I'm missing something."

"Let's hear it." Edward stored his sewing kit.

"We're close to food sources." David frowned a little despite loving the gift she'd given him. "We need blood and the soldiers are an easy source. There are survivors from all the groups we fought, too."

"Go on."

David did. "I wondered if she might want to go back and finish wiping some of them out."

"Perhaps. What else?"

David sighed. "We're bait."

Daniel immediately nodded.

Edward was pleased. Daniel had clearly already figured it out. "Why do you think that one matters? We're always a target."

David shrugged. "She could have hidden us somewhere, but she picked a city where people will come to scavenge, and where we might even get trapped and have to fight."

"We're not trapped anywhere." Mark shut off the radio and leaned back. "But I agree with the bait. She's dangling us here in hopes of catching something."

Daniel shook his head. "Not something. Someone."

Edward lifted a brow. "Who?"

Daniel gestured toward the way they come. "There's one of her kind out there slaughtering normals. I think she's drawing him in."

"Very good."

David frowned. "Why is that good? She's scared of him."

Edward put another notch in David's intelligence column. "And yet, we're here. What does that tell you?"

"It says she's not going to let fear stop us from doing the right thing."

Edward nodded. “Exactly. We’re the line between good and evil, and even if it costs our lives, we will stand and deliver safety to the future normals he might hurt.”

“I thought this was supposed to be downtime.”

“Alexa rarely does anything singular.” Jacob shrugged at David’s frown. “Think about it. You’ll see what I mean.”

David grunted as he stood, stretching a spine that could now take rough positions for a lot longer. It was a habit that he hadn’t shed yet. “So it’s downtime, but it’s also to draw in a threat she wants to eliminate to save the normals he might kill.”

Edward decided it was time to reveal the rest of her true motives. “It’s for her father. When Adrian returns, this threat won’t be waiting, just like the other choices she made. Alexa loves the normals and protects them because it’s our duty, but everything she does has one main underlying root; her father.”

The men fell silent for a moment. The fire crackled comfortingly.

Mark voiced something that had been weighing on him. “They won’t let us join like this. What if they see us as a threat?”

“Then Alexa will be forced to pick between her father and us.” Edward waved off the protests. “She’ll find a way to make it work. She’d never forsake us, not even for him.”

“Are you sure?”

Edward nodded at Daniel, voice grave. “I’ve bet my life on it and so have all of you.”

Jacob decided it was time for a topic change. “How do you think Brian’s doing on his quest?”

Edward thought of the rumors they’d been told, then shrugged. “He sounds busy handling a new partnership of his own. I think he needs more time.”

“Should we have heard from him yet?”

“No. He won’t contact her until he has a confirmed success or failure.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s what his mother would do.”

Silence fell again. Alexa’s soft snore echoed to them.

“Maybe we should make it easier on her.” David had thought long and hard about this one before bringing it up. “If we leave her, she doesn’t have to pick between us.”

All of them wanted to argue that option, but it was a solution that would spare the leader they’d all come to love and respect.

Edward sighed unhappily. “It might be the right choice, but I can’t do it. I’m with her until one of us dies, no matter by whose hand.”

“Same.”

“Me, too.”

“You know it.”

Each of the men confirmed that feeling, including David. He went to peer into the sleeping room.

Billy met his eye. His thought was clear. *I'm not going to be with the team at that point. I don't have to make that choice.*

David hated the way that felt. *Can't you give her up? Surely a teenage romance interest can't compare to your slot on this team?*

Billy shut his eyes and didn't answer.

David went back to his spot and sank down against the drafty wall. He enjoyed the cool breeze now, where it would have been an annoyance before.

Edward had felt the moment with Billy, as had the others. None of them brought it up. Just knowing that they would have to put Billy down was too much. They didn't want to talk about it, too.

Billy tried to sleep. With Alexa's comfort against him, he felt calmer about his future, but there was no changing it as far as he was concerned. *Maybe she charmed me.*

Alexa shifted restlessly as a nightmare tried to trap her.

Billy rubbed her shoulder. "Easy, Boss."

Alexa settled down, comforted by his presence.

Billy sighed as sleep finally started to claim him. It didn't matter if Leeann had charmed him or if he was just a problem man with a problem mind. When they got to Safe Haven, he expected Leeann to have a boyfriend, if not a husband. *And I'm going to shoot him in the head right in front of her. Edward will remove me then, and Leeann will be safe.*

Billy didn't want that future for any of them, but he agreed with Edward. Some things were destined to happen and nothing could change them.

Alexa sank deeper into the dream, determined to find the answer she was searching for. "Show me!"

Billy jerked, startled. Her rubbed her again, hoping it would help.

Alexa pushed harder, watching the future fly by. If the girl had waited for Billy, then Edward didn't have to take his life. "Where is she?!"

Billy stilled, sensing what Alexa was doing. He waited, heart pounding.

Alexa spotted the cute teenager. Her stomach twisted. "No. Don't do it."

Billy knew from that. He carefully shifted so Alexa was on her side. He rose and went to the window to watch the snow fall.

"What if you don't go with us?"

Billy turned to find Edward in the doorway, watching him. "I've thought about it. Marshal or Jason could take my slot."

"And?"

Billy fingered the card that stayed close to him at all times. "One of the things that got me through the Fanatics and Snakes was the thought of seeing her again. If I give that up, I might as well have died in captivity."

Edward understood that. He still mourned the choice Billy had clearly already made. "I don't want to do it."

Billy glared at him. "But you will."

Edward nodded curtly. "The instant she gives the order."

Billy shook his head. "Don't wait for her call. She might hesitate because we're bonded. As soon as you see or feel me snap, double tap my brain and toss me into the ocean."

Edward scowled. "We'll bury you! You're an honored member of this team."

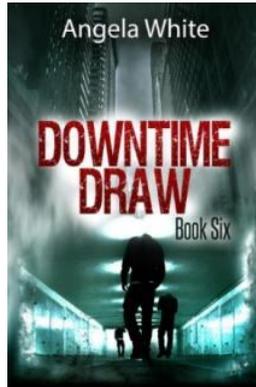
Billy turned back to the window. "Toss me into the ocean. If you bury me, neither of those females will ever let me go and move on. It's my final request."

Alexa kept her breathing even to prevent the two men from knowing she was awake. She didn't want them to know about the sudden hope she now held in case she wasn't able to pull it off. The teenager Billy had been charmed by had hesitated before saying yes and she'd walked too slowly up the aisle.

Whoever she was marrying wasn't the one she really wanted and that meant there was a chance to stop it. I need to get Billy there before she gets married. I saw Easter decorations. That's how long I have to get us to that island. *If I can't, I'll lose Billy to death and never recover. I adore all my men. If I can't give them happy futures, it will crush me.*

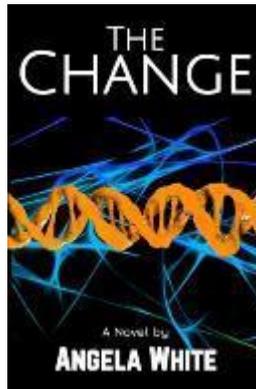
Alexa began rearranging her plans. *I hope you're ready to go when we get there, father, because we can't stay. There are no evil souls to be*

taken on that island...except yours, and I refuse to do that. If you need to be put down, you'll have to do it yourself.



Book Six
[Downtime Draw](#)

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