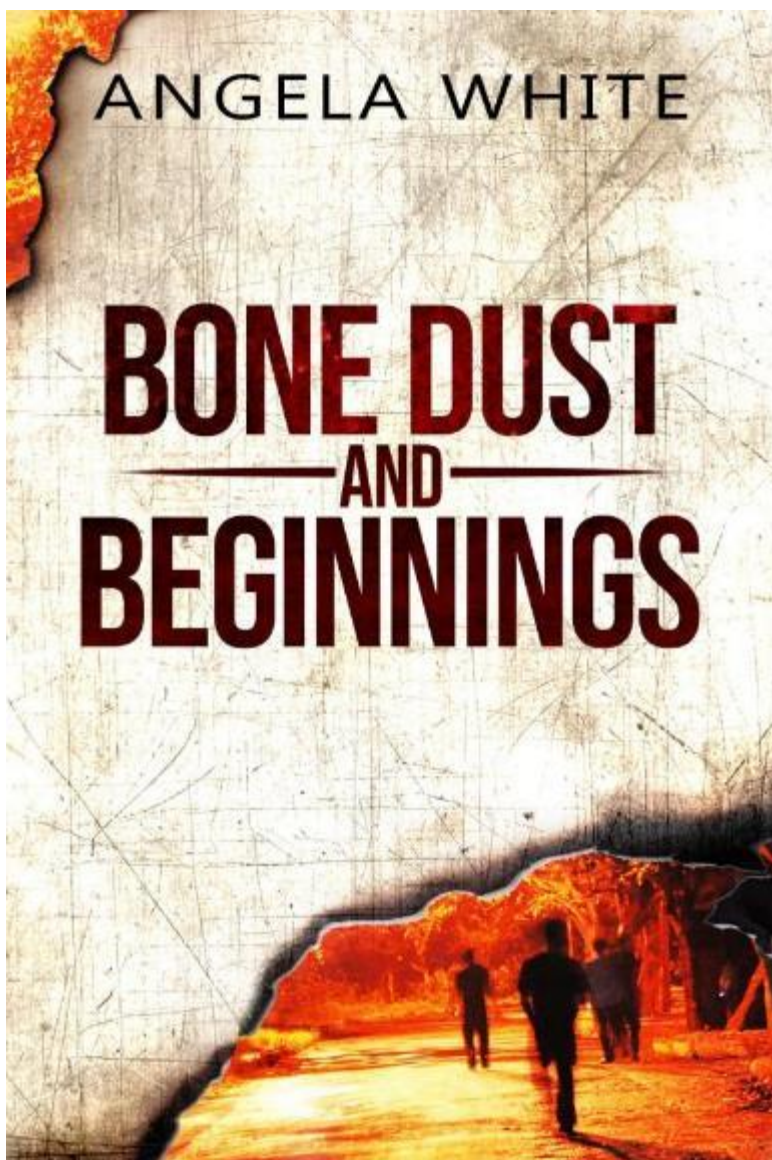


ANGELA WHITE

BONE DUST
AND
BEGINNINGS



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Thank you to Elizabeth, Drew, Crystal, Kristi, Jim, and Jackie! Your dedication to my work is awesome.

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The Quest

They came from the west,
Seven fighters to the end.
One fierce blonde warrior,
Leading six hardass men.

Through magic and death,
Demons and fire,
Clever ambushes,
And nature's ire.

Stand in their way,
Nothing will.
Bone dust or bullets,
To pay the bill.

Through now decayed cities,
Filled with nightmares,
Following a path,
Forgotten over the years.

Looking for a place of change,
Of safety and light,
Striving for honor,
And American might.

Wrapped in the horror,

Lucky to be alive,
Blessed and cursed,
How many will survive?

Chapter One
The First of Six
Lexington, Utah
April 2016

1

A lone woman limped into the border town on a sunless morning, long years after the nuclear world war that returned humanity to the dark ages. In front of her, the last outpost within a hundred miles beckoned like a flame. Behind her, the shimmering green sky overtop dusty wastelands rolled closer in a devious illusion.

Lexington consisted of two dozen rickety homes and half as many store tents lining the unforgiving road that gouged its way through the brutally arid terrain. It was large by the standards of Afterworld.

Only stunned merchants saw the woman limping steadily toward them. Coming from the west, where even the hardest of men vanished, the merchants expected only walking dead or worse. That was the reason for the chemical barrier around the border town, but the smoke

had no effect on the female as she stepped through it. She didn't scream in pain or burst into flames.

The lanky blonde was filthy, covered in glowing desert dust, and her hardened face said she'd been to hell during her lifetime—likely, more than once. A Colt .45 slung low on each slender hip supported that impression, as did her torn, tacky pant leg. The horrors that fate had delivered to her in the wastelands clearly hadn't been easy to survive.

Shaking off the shock to vie for the woman's business, the merchants moved toward her with greedy eagerness.

Stopping, Alexa's hands slid to those gritty Colts, and her frosted blue eyes blazed with heat.

The half dozen sly puppets immediately paused in fear and confusion. Guns made the law in Afterworld and she obviously knew how to use hers.

Seconds more of this set stance from the woman found the thieves banished back to their stoops and flaps. She had items for trade, and the anger to punish those who tried to take advantage, but these vultures weren't worth a lesson. Border towns were as rare as the Caravan stores and twice as soulless. If she fell, these men would not offer help, only an attack.

Alexa would never willingly haggle with their like. She spent her dust with those who were worthy, those who deserved the patronage. The rest were no better than animals.

Before the war, Alexa had stayed away from other people, but there was a feeling of something being in Lexington that she needed. Someone crucial to her quest was here and that feeling of importance said they couldn't be found in any other place.

Slap! Slap!

A tattered American symbol flying over one of the smallest stores drew the woman. She turned that way with a smoothness not impeded by her injury, ignoring the hawkers and their instant, impotent outrage. Her boots made no noise on the dirt hardpan as she headed for the fluttering flag. The decoration was the equivalent of suicide for a business owner, proclaiming them to honor the old ways that had destroyed so much. Alexa instantly respected the one who had put it there. Love of country was part of what she'd come for, as was courage.

Before she reached the battered green canvas under the flag, the tent flap opened. A cloaked man of tall stature and wide shoulders stepped into the bracing wind. The sense of being pulled here faded.

He's the one.

This merchant didn't rush to be useful; he kept his hooded head bowed in respect. When he only waited patiently, Alexa was instantly comforted. He wasn't a vulture like the others here and he was strong. She could feel it emanating from his form in thick, healthy waves.

She looked toward his store.

The merchant immediately held the flap open for her, moving with a casual grace that she admired.

Alexa stepped inside with a hand still resting on one of her Colts as a warning to those watching with heated glares. Having one old world supporter in town was an annoyance. Two was a threat. It impressed her that they had allowed this seller to stay. In the other places she'd been since the end of the world, flying the red, white, and blue caused an instant battle to be survived. It said a lot about the man now closing out the dust with a light hand on the zipper.

Alexa evaluated the layout of the small store in seconds, marking neat displays of handmade firearms and bins of ammunition. Since the war, life anywhere depended on guns and the men to use them. All of her crew would be gunslingers. This hard loner was the first.

Edward kept a clear distance, able to feel the woman evaluating him, determining his worth. Would he finally be rescued from the self-imposed prison he'd created? *Can my real life begin now?*

He slid the hood back, exposing black waves and a face roughened by the brutal sun. "May I offer you a drink?"

Alexa studied him. The man was clearly no stranger to survival. It was evident in the cold eyes that watched her, expecting trouble, but also in how his hand stayed near the 9mm on his hip. He had the fighter's steel that she needed, but would he kill for her? This would be no short, easy quest.

Edward looked back just as intently. Tall, with uncountable blonde braids falling into thick ponytails that hung to her hips, the wide forehead and that crooked nose fit with those remorseless blue eyes. However, the gentle curve of her jaw and delicate arch of brows hinted at a softer side he thought few were probably lucky enough to know. The merchant suddenly wanted to be counted as one of them.

"I have no thirst...only a hunger."

Her raspy voice rolled through the canvas like a match across sandpaper, snagging, bringing heat. Edward's tone deepened. "What would please you, mistress?"

That one word sent a short-lived smile across her weathered lips. “To be a man up when I leave this place.” Alexa took a step closer, not caring about the occasional scarlet drop still trailing from her leg. “Do you have a mind to fill that need?”

Edward nodded slowly, heart thumping with anxiety that didn’t bleed through his tones. “Aye. Only ghosts hold me here.”

“Bones are to be buried, not brought along for this quest! I need men, *fighters*.”

Edward felt her strength then, and the dark, endless well in his heart began to fill with hope. She sounded like a true leader. “Aye. I am that.”

The woman hardened herself against the silent pleading in his body language. “Where do your loyalties lie?”

His answer came instantly. “With America.”

“As do mine.” Alexa went on before he could make the mistake of questioning her words, of asking for proof. “I offer no pay, no promises. I will not swear to protect your life.”

“I don’t expect it.” Edward’s voice was surprisingly bitter, considering how much he wanted to leave this place behind. Many people now started dangerous trips, but few survived long enough to see them through. “The quest

above all else. I know the code.”

Satisfied the merchant really did (his tone said he had also made a trip through hell) Alexa asked the required questions quickly. “You’d go where I do? Obey me?”

Edward didn’t consider refusing, not with her vibrant sense of authority now filling his canvas. “I would, and you have my thanks for asking.”

“It’s my honor, Horseman. You are the one called that?”

“I was.”

Alexa extended a scarred hand, head swimming with exhaustion. The battle in the desert had drained the small bits of energy she’d managed to glean since escaping the government bunker. She needed this part over with so she could recharge.

Edward let his big hand move toward hers. His reputation had grown if she’d tracked him down from inside the wastelands by that name. He hadn’t been called such since before the war, when his nature had gone from protector to life taker.

Alexa pulled hard as they touched, drawing energy. Willing killer or not, she needed him in more ways than just the obvious.

She’s a magic user! Edward stiffened, but didn’t protest. Her drawing was the feel of icy

water on exposed skin, followed by the searing heat of flames. Sulphur and rose scents filled his nose.

He'd felt her calling out in need, even before seeing her. It had brought him from his tent when little else did. Edward shuddered as the heat increased.

Alexa let go and staggered to her knees as his energy began to merge with her own. She mentally directed it toward her wounds. Her ways were different, even for Afterworld, but she waited for his reaction without concern. He wanted to be free of this place, this life. His silence was screaming it. She doubted he would pass up the opportunity. Many creatures more dangerous than her roamed man's roads now. Magic was easy enough to accept in comparison to monsters.

Thankfully, the rest of this apocalyptic land was slowly coming to the same conclusion. Though still shunned, magic users were no longer being driven out of the scattered groups of refugees—unlike in the beginning, when the war had first allowed nightmares to become reality. In this new world, one such as her could be useful depending upon what battle for survival was being fought, and the price, of course. Nothing was free now, and certainly not the talents that she had to offer.

Head bowed, trembling, Alexa's breathless rasp was still one of power. "I give you one chance to back out...to *live*. After this, only bullets come to those who leave my side before the quest is finished."

Edward didn't doubt her words "That's clear enough."

Alexa heard his light steps moving away, but she still didn't look up. She wasn't sure that she could yet. She needed at least five minutes to recharge. That amount of time had almost cost her the quest more than once. One of those mistakes had come recently, leaving her with a slug in her thigh and rage in her heart. Regan would pay for his good aim. So would his one-eyed boss.

Despite the merchant's respectfulness, Alexa tensed as Edward returned. His boots stopped by her head. They were sturdy, made to endure this rugged land as much as their owner was.

A fur blanket dropped over her shoulders an instant later.

"Mmm..." Alexa closed her eyes in bliss at the warmth. *It was so cold in the desert!*

Her moan sent a flare of want into Edward's gut. He quickly moved back. He'd lost his submissive wife in the war, but this was no cheap slam to be ridden and escaped

afterward. This woman was lethal.

I'll die on her quest. Edward was suddenly sure of it. He should send her away... "I have a room empty."

Her raspy chuckle in response tugged on his gentle side. Many seasons had passed since Edward had heard amusement, and even longer since he'd been the one to cause it. His presence usually only brought scorn or bloodshed.

"A canvas room is always empty."

Edward snorted at the military joke. "So it is, lady, but mine lies under our feet."

Alexa grunted her consent, but she didn't move from the warmth of the fur. His energy was repairing, aiding, strengthening, and it hurt. Her lifeforce was very defensive.

Sensing her weakness, Edward knelt. "May I?"

She grunted again, head still bowed. "My permission and my gratitude. It was a long trip out."

"You came from the radiation zone?"

"More than one." Alexa flashed to the battle she had clearly lost control of. The tremor storm had saved her, but it hadn't left enough bodies. Even now, Corbin and Regan were likely on the way here. They wouldn't find her underground, though. She was thankful again

for this merchant's defiant sign. The tattered flag said more about him than the neatness of his store or the very low prices chalked on the board over a thin wooden counter.

Steeling himself to the feel of her, Edward lifted the woman carefully but without hesitation. It wasn't the first time he had shared his energy, though it hadn't felt nearly as intense before. He wasn't comfortable with magic users, but he didn't hate or fear them. Since the war, everything had changed—even reality. Adapting was the key to survival.

Using his feet to open the cover to his hideout, Edward was aware that she was judging his value even as he gave aid. He had expected to dislike whoever finally saw his worth. There were few happy endings to journeys like these, but instead, he found his heart eager to serve. Edward frowned. *When did death become so mundane to me?* Since the war and the aftermath that had turned him into a murderer, there was no mistaking the feel.

Alexa tensed upon seeing the open hole in the parched dirt. She'd escaped the government compound, but she wasn't free. Corbin would never give up the hunt and because of his connections, killing him wasn't an option. He knew where the kids were, where they would be in the future. Until she had another way to

locate them, that one-eyed bastard had a pass on her wrath. Regan, his henchman, did not.

The need to comfort the trembling woman made Edward hurry carefully into the darkness. “Half a minute and then we’ll have light.”

Edward immediately cursed himself for putting an exact time on it, then felt his lips curl in disdain. *Time means nothing now.*

The man didn’t fumble or feel weak as he moved down the ladder. Alexa allowed herself a rare moment of comfort. Eyes closing, she burrowed against his thick chest like a lover. His clean, musky smell was tempting, but she didn’t draw more energy. Where they were going, he would have need of it. Another of her fighters was begging to be saved, but before that, some of the government’s other captives would be set free. She would live with that guilt no longer.

The darkness was complete as he pulled the lid closed and drew a deadbolt that didn’t echo due to a light touch. Those outside would think they were still bartering, in one form or another. Unless they knew of this hole, then blood might spill. It was a risk to let this stranger take her below the ground, but that’s all life was anyway—a risk.

The steps went on for what seemed like much longer, but by her count, they were on

solid ground before the thirty-second mark.

“Lights.”

At his call, a dim blue glow brightened the dank cavern that was really a half-collapsed section of the huge bunker that edged this town. Filled with long dried mud that had leveled the walls in places, it was an enormous room with dark doorways and tunnels leading to all ends of the abandoned complex. One small side was nearly pristine. Edward headed that way.

The other side was like looking through a museum window at a display from the war. There were rusted guns and shell casings, and even mildewed red smears on artwork dotted by black mold crawling up seams and sills. There were also graying bones in the corner, but it wouldn't bother Alexa to sleep here. This was just another relic from the old world--one that she'd seen too many times to fear.

Stacks of cobwebbed machines lining the room winked in the soft glow as Alexa turned her attention to what lay above. The panels of lights and maps faded into sleep mode as she watched.

Alexa felt respect for his ingenuity. He had gotten some of the old technology to work. She grinned. “Clever. I am in great need of that skill.”

Edward opened his mouth, then closed it.

He already liked her praise.

Aware of his response, Alexa leaned a bit deeper into his warm embrace, testing his character. Her lips brushed his jaw. “Would you have your service repaid in such a manner?”

If he chose that trade, she would honor it—she found him pleasing enough—but she would leave him here come dawn.

Alexa was gently held back and then lowered to a half-filled air mattress near the steps. For an instant, there was the sense of his body about to follow hers down and then she was alone on the neatly made pallet.

“I’d talk about it another time...” Edward moved back another step. “But Afterworld demands debts are settled while both people still live, so here’s what I need. Do we fight for New America? I can give everything to that.”

Braced, Edward waited for the scorn and mockery those words usually brought. Someone who could control horses through the violent weather was much sought after, but being a patriot was not.

Alexa understood what wasn’t said. Would-be masters came asking for him, as she may have had to if not for the flag, but once inside, his loyalties became clear and he was refused. Especially by the women, who were more than

half of the leaders she had come across since the war, but also by the few men still trying to gather an army to protest that shift in power.

Her hand tensed automatically as she answered. "I seek those who came before us."

Edward's eyes widened. That legend was one he had soaked up eagerly. To think there was another life to be had, a second chance, no matter who you were before, or what you'd done, was all he'd dreamed of for years. He stared in shock. "I'll owe you."

Alexa leaned back onto the pallet. Almost clean, the smell of it wasn't one that she would mind on her skin. "Why is that?"

"Because I'd die in Safe Haven or trying to prove that it exists!"

The woman nodded, warming to him. "You shall get your chance. We both shall." Too weary to resist the exhaustion, her eyes closed. "I'm Alexa."

"Edward. May I see to your wound?"

"Yes." Satisfied, the leader gave her first fighter a stunning smile, sending him to his knees in dazed awe. Her pleasure was designed to draw, to unite. Normally used for ties with a mate, she was employing it to bind fighters to her for the quest. Where Adrian Mitchel led, Safe Haven followed. The same was true of his only daughter.

Shortly after he began to pry the bullet from her pale, perfectly scarred thigh, Alexa passed out. Edward was glad. She'd made little sound, other than to quiz him on the things she saw in the room, the technology that he'd brought back to life. She was strong, more so than any of those who'd come before.

Edward searched himself and found no revulsion at the thought of serving a female. He'd already sensed the end that was waiting, but in time, he might be willing to die for her.

"Tell me how you came to be here."

He hadn't known she had woken, but to his credit, Edward controlled a flinch of surprise. "As we eat."

They were in the soft, blue glow of the cobwebbed ceiling lights now. His store above them was closed for the evening. There were hours to kill before dawn brought a start to their journey together and even the distant drip of water in the darkness was slow. In Afterworld, when nighttime fell over this dead land, time became longer.

Alexa pushed up to sit against the wall as Edward drew their dinner from a sweetly steaming pot that had once been a large coffee

can. There were a variety of soothing noises down here, from the gentle crackle of the fire he had rigged to blow out of a vent miles from here, to the soft hum of the machinery running the lights. His things were few and neat, ready to be grabbed, and she counted no less than three other exits besides the stairs she'd been brought down. It was a nearly flawless hole up. Was he really the perfect hired hand that he appeared to be?

Making little noise, Edward handed her a plate-sized serving platter with three small bowls and a cup of what looked like milk. He moved back to collect his own meal as she sampled the food warily.

“Mmm...”

Her low groan of pleasure made Edward look toward her in need.

Alexa was impressed with his self-control when he stopped, then went back to collecting his own bowls. Descendants were hard to resist.

“I call it swill.”

Alexa snorted, scooping a larger bite of the slightly garlicky stew. “‘Tis pig, after all.”

Edward was glad she understood the main ingredient. Many people now refused to eat pork. Swine flu treatments were long gone, but the nasty beasts were abundant. Their ability to eat almost anything was both the source of their

survival and the revulsion of most survivors. For a long while, human carrion had been the only readily available food source for nature.

Alexa watched him settle a few feet away, noting the strength of his body, the ebony glow of his hair in the light. He would be a solid hand when trained. Even now, he was a good addition.

“The Draft brought me here from Colorado. This is part of the bunker we were held in.”

He didn't pray before eating. Alexa hadn't expected him to. She doubted he'd believed in a long time. That was another thing all of her crew would probably have in common. She speared one of the potato-like lumps in the second bowl.

After a quick chew and swallow, Edward continued with his story. “There were a lot of us, too many for them to keep feeding. Six months after the war, regulations changed. If we could prove we had kids that we would return to, we could go.”

Another bite and swallow, this one to smother his anger before his deep voice went on. “I was only married, so not eligible. I killed a guard, took his keys, and let the other four barracks of Draftees out.”

Alexa jabbed another creamy bite, stomach growling. “The bunker was breached?”

“By those I set loose. Afterward, they sacked the closest towns, killing, raping, burning. Lexington was the only one to rebuild.”

Alexa met his eye pointedly. “Why didn’t they end you for it when they found out? Why do they tolerate even the sight of you here?”

His lined face flushed at the brutal honesty, but he didn’t look away. “Because there are only a few of them still alive who know, and I’m very, very good with my guns.”

Alexa’s lips curled upward. “Is that so?”

Edward went back to his meal without repeating or even confirming.

Pleased, she forked a yellow tidbit in the last bowl. “Go on.”

Alexa delighted in the taste of vanilla and crushed pineapple with brown sugar. He either had a good stock or knew where supplies were. That might come in handy.

“I went home first, as many of us eventually did, but my old life had been murdered. I came back here and opened a store with the things I’d gathered.”

“Why return to the scene?”

Edward answered with an openness that hid nothing. “I had hoped there would be someone here who could kill me for my crime.”

“And after you realized they could not?”

Edward's tone deepened into the misery that had been pulling her to this place, to his tent. "In time, I thought maybe I would find the courage to do what they couldn't."

"I will give you new ways, new hopes." Alexa's words rang in the chilly air. "Will you swear yourself to me?"

Edward smiled slightly at the official offer. "I was yours the instant you chose my flag over everyone else."

3

Alexa jerked awake in the darkness, instinct telling her danger was close. She looked around to find Edward heading up the steps.

He cast a slightly curious look over his shoulder as he blended into the shadows, but he didn't presume to tell her what to do.

Alexa quickly gathered her things, pleased with her first fighter. She assumed it was government rats now stomping through Edward's store. She had left loose ends in the desert. When she'd escaped Corbin's control, she had been tracked, but she'd stayed underground to remain out of their reach. Being spotted out of her hole up had been an accident.

Voices echoed down the stairs as she moved on a leg that was nearly healed thanks to

the vibrant energy of her host. She judged the time to be just before the dawn's ugly break that would have woken her naturally.

Louder, angry words echoed now. Alexa stilled as rage flared. One of those voices was familiar, loathed. She'd thought to sneak away, but it wasn't a scouting party. Regan was up there. *I'm not leaving without spilling his blood!*

Alexa pulled herself onto the ladder and began to climb.

“Where is she?”

Standing behind the thin counter, Edward kept his tone even. “The woman left last night after buying ammo.” He waved a hand at the rack he had emptied into his bag while closing the store. “She went south.”

Four of the soldiers stomped around, poking boxes and bins, turning over crates.

Their leader, a redhead with a fresh scar on his neck and a mean twist to his lips, pointed toward the hole they'd seen him emerge from. “What's down there?”

“My cellar.”

Martial Law hadn't been revoked. It made dealing with soldiers awkward. It was almost impossible to know if they were real or impostors, but it didn't matter this time.

Edward hated these men on sight. He was already sure they were the ones who'd shot Alexa.

“Search it.”

“No.” Edward’s voice was like stone.

A bit intimidated, the four soldiers looked to their leader.

Regan felt the challenge and sauntered closer. They’d followed their prey by common sense. This was the only outpost within a hundred miles and Alexa needed to regain her energy. She had to be close.

Regan studied the merchant, looking for telltale signs. He saw deep bags under the man’s eyes and a pulse that pounded slightly faster than was normal due to a low energy bank being refreshed. Yes, she’d taken from him. So why wasn’t this man a pile of bones like the others they’d found? Regan stepped closer, jealousy flaring. “You’d deny a government search?”

Edward grunted “I’ll let you know when I see government. *They* bring papers.”

Which wasn’t always true, but the insult was clear enough. Edward watched the guard’s eyes narrow without worry. The redhead wore the weapons of a fighter, but the fit was awkward. It wasn’t something that could be said of himself. His own guns were an

extension of his hands and always ready for use.

“We’re going to search it.” Regan glared. “If you interfere, I’ll shoot you.”

Edward sensed Alexa listening from the open hatch. He felt her agreeing with how he wanted to handle the situation. Edward glared in warning, eager to show his new mistress a bit of his talents. “You can try. You can also die.”

“Deal.” Regan went for his gun. The soldiers with him did the same.

“Down!”

Edward hit the floor at her order, not needing to draw his own gun as Alexa’s Colts crashed.

Her first two shots were the best, hitting three of the men. One was Regan, though he was saved from death only by the smallest of flinches. The slug plunged through his arm and punched a hole in the tent. Her other bullet went through two necks within an instant of each other, killing the soldiers it hit.

Regan returned fire wildly in surprise, sending a bullet into the tent floor near the cellar entrance. “Get her!”

Beside him, the two remaining soldiers darted forward.

Alexa fired again, sending them into the

side of the tent with gaping holes in their foreheads. The tent teetered from the weight, ripping at the seam. Gusts of sand flew into the canvas.

Edward was amazed. Five seconds and five bodies...except one of them wasn't dead yet.

Alexa didn't come out. Edward followed her lead, staying behind the counter. He did draw his gun.

Regan crouched behind an overturned display, cursing his choice to come in before support arrived. Commander Corbin had said it was okay to grab her if Regan thought he could. That one-eyed man was on the way, but it would be too late. There was only one thing to try—the truth. “We have your brother.”

Silence...

“He was in Ocean City, waiting for someone.”

Alexa surprised both men by answering. “You know who he waits for.”

Regan grimaced, shifting his gun to his uninjured hand. All bunker guards were required to shoot well with both. “Yes, but you're not going to make it to Safe Haven, are you?”

“Perhaps I'll go further than your narrow mind can accept.”

“We'll never let you bring Adrian back! If

he comes here, Corbin will slaughter every child we hold!”

Edward felt the air thicken. Death was sweeping their way again.

“Why does it matter to you, killer of the innocent? He won’t keep you around so long as that.” Alexa laughed harshly. “You have no value.”

“I will when I bring you in!”

“You can try, and you can die.”

Enraged, Regan charged the hole.

Bang!

Alexa watched her enemy fall with satisfaction blazing across her cheeks. For his crimes, Regan deserved worse than a fast bullet to the throat, but it was still sweet. She’d hoped he was dead from the tremor trap she’d set, but the scar on his neck said he’d had a narrow escape.

She holstered as voices came from outside the tent. The gunfire was bringing the townspeople, the next danger.

Edward spun for a corner, grabbing the two large kits he’d made while she slept. He slung one over each shoulder while moving back toward the den. “Coming down.”

“Clear.”

He moved swiftly, landing a second after she did. “Front path!”

A row of blue lights came to life at his command, showing the exit he wanted.

Alexa memorized it, glad of the mental map he'd given her.

The lights went out; her eagle eyes saw him grab two more bags, then head for the exit.

"They're coming." Edward moved faster.

Alexa followed, listening to the angry, worried mutters of the merchants above them who were discovering the bodies. The surviving government was brutal. Hours from now, only tumbleweeds would remain in Lexington.

Edward noticed that she followed him silently, not even shifting gravel despite the darkness and unknown terrain. A wave of excitement rose in his heart. He was glad she couldn't see his face right now. She wanted only cool control. She didn't need to see how openly happy he was. His second chance, his *real* life, had begun!

Alexa smiled indulgently in the dark, estimating that they would travel half a day in these tunnels before he led them to light. He obviously knew them well. She turned her attention to the next part of the quest, content to let him lead. Come daybreak, that would change.

Chapter Two

Exploits

1

Edward and Alexa emerged from the reeking ground almost eleven hours after the map winked off. The dimly fading sunlight was a secret relief. Man wasn't meant to live under the ground. They'd both felt that clearly while listening to the angry earth rumble and mutter around them as they took a break for rest and food.

Eager to be back in the light, the sight of their company as they emerged was not welcome. Snakes, some the size of the decaying trees, were spread out over the rocks and boulders that lined the entrance. They were trapped.

Alexa pulled a plan from her bag of tricks, and slowly drew the crossbow from her belt. She motioned to Edward. They carefully eased back inside the shadows of the dank cave.

Alexa knelt, adding and then baiting a string with a shiny lure. She didn't hesitate to fire it after only a bare glance for aim.

The arrow sailed from her crossbow, shooting out into the dim sky with a whistle that drew attention.

Unlike the juveniles who made a mad dash while hissing and snapping at each other, the larger snakes watched it start to fall, estimating, before they slithered toward it.

Alexa made a quick gesture that Edward couldn't mistake as she headed for the entrance. She jumped up the side of the stone like a cat, and he followed, being as quiet as he could. He hated snakes even more than wolves.

Alexa took them toward the top, never pausing in her footing. They were fifty feet up before she stopped to look down. Seeing movement at the base of the cliff, she immediately resumed climbing.

Edward was careful to place his bigger feet where hers had been. Without being told, the man knew she was also picking the ledges with his weight in mind. The beginnings of real trust started to grow.

Alexa paused, scowling. "They're coming."

Looking down, Edward couldn't see anything.

Alexa dug one-handed through her kit while holding onto the ledge. "From the inside."

He could feel it as soon as she said it. The stone vibrated under his hands as the reptiles

slid through the gaps and crevices, shifting smaller rubble. They were right behind these walls.

“This is your first test. It’s a bit rougher than I had planned to start you with, so watch me closely and continue to live your new, *real* life.” Alexa tied a thick rope around her waist, one with a small, hard knot at the other end, which she tossed to him.

Edward caught it awkwardly in his surprise. Had she pulled that from his thoughts? How powerful was she?

Edward did better with the rope already around his own waist, only needing the hand knot and the throw back so they were connected by two ropes.

“Slack is the key.” Alexa got set. “Stand pat while I jump.”

Edward started to wrap the hand knot tighter and stopped, searching for better footing instead. At that point, she began jumping and his grip on the rope was unbreakable.

Alexa swung a leg out to stop and landed gracefully on a nearby ledge.

“Shit!”

She looked back to see the stone under Edward’s feet crumbling, hungry fangs lunged.

“That’s mine!” She snapped the rope backward, hard.

It pulled Edward off the edge and out of reach.

Alexa's arms bulged with straining muscles as she guided the falling man to the ledge below her.

Edward caught himself and remembered to breathe.

“Ready?”

He nodded, heart not quite steady. He braced as she jumped again.

It was exhausting, but effective. Fifteen minutes later, they were around the side of the granite cliff. It would take weeks for the hungry reptiles to get through the mountain and at least two days to go around.

Alexa began to move them downward, body draped in a fine sheen of sweat. Corbin and his henchmen wouldn't even be able to see smoke from a fire, thanks to the mountain blocking their view. They would be able to sleep.

Edward was glad to see flat ground gradually moving closer. His arms were on fire; his back and neck were screaming. Alexa had to be feeling the same or worse, but he didn't hesitate to jump and let her swing him. She was in the lead now.

As evening fell, Alexa and Edward sat in front of a small fire, freshly washed and fed. Mugs of chicory coffee in hand, they leaned against the stone cliff and watched the odd slowness of nighttime surround them.

They'd scouted this site and then hunted together, using their knives. Edward hoped he'd pleased her with his talent. The rabbit hadn't been a real test, but it had been a neat kill. Her perfect throw had been astoundingly fast. He was already planning on more practice with his blade to match her.

Edward studied the purple sky and the layer of thick grit that never seemed to dissipate. Somewhere up there was a space station with the bodies of those who'd been there when the war came. Had they run out of water or air first? It was a morbid thought. Edward struggled to ignore the old feeling of rage. Those who'd destroyed the world hadn't been punished. That still sat wrong with him.

Alexa listened to the sounds of the night. The wind was restless, upset. Showers of blackened leaves rained down on them steadily. Nature hadn't liked helping her escape.

Edward broke the silence reluctantly. "Was it the redhead who shot you?"

Alexa glanced over. It was only fair Edward knew who their hunters were and what they were capable of to attain their goals. She'd honestly expected him to ask before now. "Regan, yes."

"Why?" Edward couldn't find a reason to kill a magic user instead of selling them. It was unusual for Afterworld.

"I escaped from a lab." Alexa's voice faded into a low mutter as she took two pouches from her cloak pocket. "And was found."

Sure of the next question, she gave him a tolerant nod. "As we smoke."

Her fingers began to twist the tobacco. The night around them seemed to slow even further.

"After I escaped, I spent two months hiding underground, evading patrols. The first time I came up, Regan was waiting."

Edward listened intently as she told him of her battle for survival in the wastelands.

Then

*I've stayed below ground as long as I can.
It's time to go back up.*

It had been months, but it wasn't a surprise that there was someone waiting topside for her. Only who it was caused concern. Regan should have been punished for her escape, not sent out

to collect her. Maybe it was just an awful coincidence, but it didn't feel that way.

Alexa slowly pushed the dirt and grass cover aside, other hand ready and willing on her gun, but barely able. She hadn't regained any strength during her months of hiding. Her kind was not meant to be alone, for many reasons.

Regan tensed, sensing movement more than seeing it. He'd been here for a week, instinct guiding him. That had allowed him to pick up his victim's trail time after time. Here and now, it had led him to Alexa. Her escape had forced big changes at the compound, including the transfer of a large number of the descendants. His part in it hadn't been discovered, but it had lingered just the same. Regan would do anything to change that moment. *I didn't get to finish!*

The cover moved.

Regan's hand tightened on his rifle. In the trees on the other side of the hole, four soldiers waited for his call. They'd been relaxed a minute ago, but he'd chosen these men for their brains, not their brawn. He motioned them to get ready and they did.

Regan planned to dart her and take her back to Commander Corbin. He had volunteered for this duty to earn marks with the boss. If he

became one of the favored, he would be free to kill while guarding the captives who were being tested. He'd strangled normal survivors and found no thrill in it any longer. Someone with power, though...

The waves of menace coming her way were impossible to miss. Alexa closed the lid. In desperate need or not, she couldn't go up there yet. She had two other exits, but they were both a mile away in different directions and her weakened condition wouldn't allow it. She needed to go topside and use her remaining energy on a meal. *Unless I steal some of what I need.*

Alexa carefully found a corner and slid down against the wall with one of her Colts still in hand. The other claw-like talon dug into the earth, drawing on a third option that she had employed many times, but never from this source. Her father's lesson rang in her mind.

If the enemy is out of reach, convince or force someone else to strike in your place.

Regan scowled in frustration as the lid closed. She knew they were here. Would she run for a different hole or wait for the right moment to fight?

The evil guard thought of the glimpses he'd gotten. Emaciated and clumsy in weakness, he'd barely missed having enough time to aim before she'd dropped into a hole the first time. The shock of seeing her out in the open gathering water had cost him precious seconds that she'd used to vanish. He hadn't been sure if she'd spotted him or not, but that was a given now.

However, her kind needed energy and she clearly hadn't had time to search for any while the government trucks rolled in and out. After her escape, the big bunker had ordered most of the descendants transferred to other locations, and the traffic had been steady enough to keep Alexa in hiding. What had she been living off of while underground? Raw, whatever it was, because smoke drew quick attention and there hadn't been reports of any.

Regan grinned, feeling more confident. Alexa would wait for dark and come up with the intention of killing him, but he would have a surprise in place for her instead. The thought of going in to ferret her out never crossed his mind. Underworld was lethal by itself. Add in Alexa, even weakened, and the odds of coming back up shrank to zero.

Regan waved at his men to back off and meet up at their campsite half a mile to the

south. They would still be able to see her cubbyhole with binoculars, but she wouldn't be able to hear their plans or movements. Corbin said it was best to be as meticulous as possible when you dealt with a descendant, and while Regan knew he couldn't be perfect, he intended to win this battle. He was taking her, or her body, back to Corbin. Command had told him dead was acceptable.

Meeting up with the sixth man guarding their transportation, the recon team gathered around the dingy green hardback, working out a plan.

Under their feet, Alexa did the same.

4

North of them, the Spirit of Nature was dozing. When winter came, she would expend her stores of furious wrath, but in the harvest time, Nature got to rest. It was a reward for the hard work of her reproductive season, but also for the gathering she'd done. Her army was growing relentlessly. In less than two years, the last of humanity would be exterminated from shores around the world. The southern lands would be the final holdouts, but without the alpha, a beta, and a few others, humans had no chance of winning the war they'd begun.

Even if all those they needed were to find each other, something Nature would never allow, they would still have to travel to where she dwelled. It was the only place to close the gates, the only soil where she could be challenged and possibly even defeated. Should such a group make it to her shores, Nature would still be a formidable opponent, with legions of faithful followers that were eager for the fight.

“Warning!”

Drawn into alertness, Nature marked the feeling of a descendant and forced herself to start waking early. Someone was gathering energy from the dirt. *They’re taking what isn’t theirs!*

Nature’s fury rose quicker than her alertness; she retaliated without thought or pause.

As soon as the ground began to shake, Alexa was on her feet and lunging for the cover. Being buried wasn’t in her plans, only a much needed distraction and a small bit of energy to start her next bid for freedom. Gun still in hand, she shoved the lid over and hoisted herself into the daylight. All she had to do was get out of sight during the chaos.

The tremor raced through the ground like a bomb blast. The waiting soldiers were caught unaware. The earth under their boots split, cracking violently in protest.

“Stay still!”

Two of the men ran instead of obeying Regan, jumping gaps that opened as a loud roar rattled in their heads. *So much for them having brains!*

“There she is!”

Regan turned too late to stop his second in command from being shot in the head before he could lower the hand he had been pointing with. Regan fired toward the shadow fleeing through the shower of falling leaves. *Damn quake!*

Regan fired again and had a moment’s satisfaction when the shadow flinched, stumbled. *I hit her!*

To his frustration, she took off running again, telling him it wasn’t a serious injury.

The tremor’s strength increased noticeably, ground tearing open near where she’d emerged. Finding her gone, the roar grew almost intolerable. The tremor was also hunting Alexa. The grinding of earth shifted toward where she’d vanished.

“Come on!” Regan’s shout was distorted but understandable.

The remaining soldiers gave chase.

Taking advantage of the violent shaking, Alexa hefted herself into the first branch of a thick tree, gasping. She was almost out of energy, out of time. In half a minute, this tree would likely be uprooted.

A soldier darted under her without looking up, then another.

The ground behind them was ripping open in wide gouges that Alexa was sure were being guided by the tree she'd chosen. Its panicked pleas for mercy were vibrating through her head like a bell.

A third soldier ran under the tree as the tremor pounded closer.

Regan neared her location.

Alexa tensed.

As if in response, the ground stilled. Nature hunted her silently now, determined to recover the energy that had been stolen.

The trio of soldiers didn't go far. "Fall back!"

"Find a track!"

Regan felt Alexa's glare, turning, arm lifting.

Alexa dropped onto Regan's back, arms snaking around his throat. Her lips melded to his skin, drawing hard. Energy flooded her

throat at the exchange, sinking into her like water through dirt.

“Not again!” Regan slung her hot weight to the ground, finger tightening on the trigger. Dead was acceptable.

Alexa was helpless as his energy flew through her body, unable to move until it recharged her. All he had to do was fire and the quest was over. If Nature didn’t take the bait now, it was all for naught. “Please forgive me, Father...”

Regan leered, mouth opening.

The other soldiers saw the trap. “Look out!”

Behind the evil man, the tree was shoved out of the ground. Tilting backward as it fell, the earth separated. Thick roots rose under Regan’s feet, tripping him. The shifting tangles of dirt snared his ankles, seeming to jerk him off his feet.

Regan slapped the ground with his face.

Slimy roots slithered eagerly his way.

Alexa immediately darted for cover. Even in her vulnerable condition, she was behind the trees and out of sight seconds later.

Behind her, gunfire and screams filled the air. It was a common sound in Afterworld.

Now

Alexa didn't need to look at Edward to know he was finding her story a bit incredible. She didn't disabuse him of the notion that she was embellishing. He would see for himself in time. Without another word, she slid down into her bedroll and closed her eyes.

Edward watched her for a long moment, suspecting encounters like that might mark their quest. He could only hope he would be able to react through the shock.

6

“Should we bury them?”

The Commander's harsh, one-eyed glare made the lower ranked man take a step back. Garbed in dark clothes and deadly gear, Corbin's most outstanding feature was his missing eye. He kept a patch over it, but the sense of menace was still thick. “Burn it.”

They'd come too late to aid Regan in recapturing the woman and found his body instead. Regan's skills as an interrogator would be missed, but not his clumsiness. He liked to kill, but he wasn't good at it. It was better that he wasn't around anymore to expose what really took place on the bottom floors of their scientific compound.

Corbin studied the abandoned shacks and

tents around them as the order was carried out. This was the first sighting of their prey in months. Alexa had been careful to stay on the move after the tracking venom had cleared out of her system. Before that, she'd been traceable but unattainable due to her preference for being underground.

Regan's call had been unexpected, though the loss of him and his squad wasn't. When challenging someone like Alexa, four teams of men were required, and sometimes more. Corbin was glad Regan had chosen to try and lost. Corbin didn't want Alexa recaptured, though the big bunker would never know that.

The bodies flamed up brilliantly with a little chemical help; the soldiers moved back to avoid the flying debris and the smell. When their commander motioned toward the rest of the abandoned town, his men obeyed. They had no problem with setting fires. It was a benefit of being topside. No one cared if it burned.

"Where has she gone?" Corbin glared at the short, hunched over man at his side. If she had left with someone, and their slow packing informant had fearfully told them that was the case, then she'd begun the quest. In all the years they'd tracked Alexa, she'd never taken partners. With that proof, Corbin would be able to negotiate a different sort of future for her

with his superiors, one that didn't involve death. At least, not yet. "Can you get anything, Rabbit?"

Paul shook his shaggy head. The screen in his hand showed only static. "It wore off. The tracker juice only lasts a few weeks...and you know that." Paul didn't want to draw fire, but he was unable to pass up the opportunity to call Corbin on something. He was only alive at the Commander's whims, but it did little to curb his hatred. Paul had been raised in the complex, and been trained to work in the lab. He'd spent the last twenty years developing technology for the government that was holding him captive.

"Yes, I do." Corbin glared back. He was very aware of the scientist's talents, but he despised the gifted weakling for caving to servitude. Still, it had its uses to have a genius on the team. Paul had the blond hair and blue eyes of the descendant marker, but both were cloudy, not quite in line with the other subjects. Those few he had contact with were always sure to behave carefully in case he was Corbin's eyes and ears. "How about a guess?"

Paul hesitated. Corbin was tall and imposing, with a quick fist and an even quicker coverup when one of his favorite men got into trouble. Paul wasn't one of those, though he frequently wished he was. Due to the war,

Corbin's brutal research was mostly unhampered by authority. He ran his complex as he saw fit, and only the annual visit brought outsiders from the big government bunker. Four times a year he also had to send reports and specimens, but those went with a flunkey. Until the escape, Corbin and his closest men hadn't been topside in two years. If Paul made the man angry enough, Corbin would kill him or leave him out here in this ugly wilderness. "To gather the rest of her crew?"

"Then they'll bring Adrian back, and come for the others."

"Yes." Paul agreed reluctantly with Corbin's assessment. "She knows the kids are still being held, even if it's not in the same bunker. When she tells Adrian, he'll come home."

Corbin's new personal man stepped closer. Shane had never met those he was guarding. He had been surprised to get the order to come up here. "Why don't they use their gifts to escape?"

Paul knew that answer. "They can't because of the bond. They're connected. None of them are strong enough to walk away from the others. That's why they're so lightly guarded."

“What about this one?” Shane didn’t return the scientist’s curious look. “She left them all and didn’t look back.”

The woman had looked back, but Paul didn’t correct the well-built man. “She’s not like the others. She’s an Alpha.”

There was only one stronger than her that they’d ever discovered. It was really no surprise to Corbin that those in charge wanted her dead. She and her infamous father were threats. “She doesn’t follow them. They follow her.”

The Commander moved toward the jeeps. Even Alexa had been unable to completely resist the pull. She had come back once, right after her escape, and found an empty compound. She’d shown up alone, but Corbin had little doubt that she would have been successful in rescuing them had the children still been inside. “Let’s go.”

“Back to the compound to deliver your report?” Paul eagerly slid behind the wheel. They were in the mountains this time. He felt safe inside those granite walls.

“No. Send it in this time. Use Shane.” Corbin started taking maps from his folder. “We’re not going back.”

Paul didn’t like the note of steel in the Commander’s voice. “Until we find her, right?”

Corbin slowly turned his head, one eye glaring furiously.

Paul braced to be hurt. He never knew if the punishment would be mental or physical, but it was always painful.

“You are never going back there, *Rabbit*. Now that the quest has begun, your days of comfort in a complex are over. You’re my tracker.” Corbin smiled cruelly. “I’m almost sure you’ll die somewhere along the way. Your kind always does.”

Corbin enjoyed the injured look on Paul’s thick face, but only a brief moment of it. There were more important things to handle than a weakling who would never grow up to take his place. Paul’s days were numbered and Corbin liked making sure the boy knew it.

Paul didn’t say anything else, but he understood Corbin was scared of the quest he’d allowed to start. The legend of Safe Haven and Adrian’s return had been smothered and twisted, but the heart of it couldn’t be changed. Alexa would find Adrian and then Adrian would come back, but not just for Corbin. The legend insisted Adrian would exterminate those who’d caused the war. Surely that meant all of the surviving government? Those in charge were terrified of it, so much so that they’d put a bounty on Adrian’s head that rivaled any in

history. Assassins of all sorts would flood this land upon the slightest rumor of the Alpha's return.

That thought allowed Paul to ignore the stench of charring flesh as they drove by the flaming pile of bodies. When Adrian came home, he and all the others being held captive would be set free. Knowing Alexa's quest had truly begun sent hope deep into Paul's heart. *A second chance, no matter who you were or what you'd done... Who wouldn't want that?*

Chapter Three
Descendants

1

Long before a cold dawn, Alexa and Edward were enjoying the warmth left from breakfast embers. As they shared a rolled smoke, she told him of their coming adventure. After the snakes, she'd felt it wise to let him sleep before explaining the newest danger to be faced. "The government rats on my trail will never stop hunting me. They will be a constant battle."

Edward nodded, easily ignoring his sore places. They were minor twinges that wouldn't prevent him from functioning. "I assumed so."

"They'll hunt in every place we go."

He heard the tone. "But?"

"We must not let them keep us from the quest." She unfolded a battered map of the surrounding area. "We head here next."

Edward's eyes narrowed onto the spot she'd pointed out. It was granite mountain terrain. He shrugged. "I go where you go."

Satisfied, Alexa shook her head at the dregs, letting him enjoy it. “Are you set for two days of straight travel?”

“Four times as much.” He opened his mouth again, to question how it would work, but Alexa’s words stopped him.

“We have no need for division. Everything is shared.”

Edward went back to his coffee and smoke. They’d spent a calm night, and after seeing her in action, he wasn’t dreading the trek. She would lead and he would follow.

It was odd, however, to be topside as dawn arrived—for both of them. There was silence as they watched the dark green sky begin to lighten. This new world was full of things Edward barely understood. Safety, what little there was to be had, came from staying in the light, but it was something he was already sure Alexa wouldn’t do.

Edward looked toward his new companion as he had the thought, wondering if her strengths included such things. Did this hard woman know how to handle that darkness? They’d camped around a small fire at the base of the cliff and she hadn’t stood a watch or slept lightly. He’d been up before her, as well. Did those things matter? Edward sensed a toughness and ability to deal with whatever

came, but if she was careless, they would both die with the quest unfinished.

“Speak your mind.”

Drawing in a breath, Edward did. “We should have a guard when we camp, and use cover for our fire.”

“Do you think so?”

Her curt words made him look up to find an almost mocking expression. She already knew those things. He flushed at his own arrogance.

“I felt no need to guard what could only be had if the snakes were conquered first. The screams and gunfire would have warned us.”

His cheeks darkened further at the obvious answer.

“You are not wrong to question.” Alexa rose to her feet. “In your place, I would do the same.”

Edward hurried to kick sand over the coals and catch up. He wouldn’t again, though. One disdainful glance from those eyes had already been lesson enough. She was the leader on this quest, and the position was well-earned. Time would prove it.

2

They traveled on foot for the next two days, finally reaching her goal as late afternoon fell.

Set on two acres of almost flat, wooded ground, the bunker was much smaller than the Utah facility, but more fortified. A mere ten feet of it was unearthed, and the single door was time locked except in case of a fire. There was no way they were storming those walls. Those inside would have to come out.

Finding this alternate underground bunker hadn't been hard for Alexa after her escape, but leaving once she had was a torment that she still carried. Alone, she'd had little hope of keeping these kids free once she rescued them and they couldn't come along on her quest. Then there was also the question of what to do with the children once the soldiers picked up the trail. Until she'd had that settled, taking them away from here hadn't been an option. That opinion had changed now. She would free them before Corbin chose to use them against her again. Even a week's hunted freedom was a small light of hope that would spread to the other captives.

And it would rattle Corbin. He knew the quest had begun. His determination to find Safe Haven matched her own, but not his intelligence. If he'd been truly smart, he would have killed her long ago. It was a mistake that either she or her father would see that he paid for at some point.

Alexa glanced over at the tired, determined man at her side. She hadn't had an energy source to draw from then either. She wouldn't have been able to send for the birds after her escape. The woman wondered briefly what Edward's reaction would be to finding out that his energy was a part of why he was here. The Horseman hadn't been with her long enough to know it was a lot more than that. She honestly needed a crew for this journey, but he would think it was the only purpose he had. Would he still be at her side after that revelation? Alexa pushed the worry away, and continued studying the bunker.

Edward stared in concern at the concrete entrance set into the granite cliffs. They'd spent almost two days getting here, hard hours where he'd copied her movements and habits, and tried not to feel inferior. She hadn't stopped the entire time—not to eat or sleep—and even bathroom breaks were only quick trips into the brush.

They hadn't encountered any problems, other than the wind that was cold enough to make eyes water. Edward had been glad of the goggles and gloves she'd had in her kit for him. Her own skin didn't seem to get cold; he had envied her steady stride more than once. Now that they were here, Edward was grateful it was

over so he could sit down and try to feel his feet again.

Alexa was aware of his soreness. She had her own aches and pains, but if she let him rest, he would stiffen up and be useless for an entire day.

Grimacing at the pop of her knees as she stood, she waved him to the place directly behind her. “Watch the south.”

Edward started to argue that he was too exhausted to be part of a mission, but stopped himself. Had he thought a quest with her would be easy?

They moved toward the main door openly, hands hovering over holsters.

The guards inside noticed them in shock. Other than those inside, they hadn’t seen a survivor in years. Alarms began to blare all over the government compound.

“Stay behind me, no matter what.”

“Aye.” Thinking it was to guard her back, Edward did as he was told while wishing he’d asked what her plan was.

She stopped ten yards from the reinforced door, an easy range for anyone decent with a gun. Edward waited tensely to see her shot.

Alexa concentrated, eyes fluttering closed. In her mind, doors swung open. “*The time has come... I have come!*”

Inside the bunker, guards were distracted from their entertainments by captives surging for freedom. Alexa and her companion were quickly forgotten.

3

Edward watched the door, hoping he would be able to kill the first one out or maybe convince them to negotiate for whatever it was that she wanted from this place. The noises behind those doors were louder than a government complex should be. His hand tensed as the lock clicked.

“Stand your ground.” Her words were firm.

Edward let go of his holster. Before he could ask anything, the door swung open and kids began streaming out. Dressed in white pants and shirts, many of them were stained with bright red streaks and splatters, telling Edward how their freedom had been gained. They helped each other, carrying the younger ones. As they got closer, he was horrified at their bruised, abused conditions.

Some of the kids moved alertly to Alexa’s side, but most headed straight for the trees and disappeared.

“Should I try to get them?”

“No.”

The group around them slowly grew from a dozen, to two and then three. Edward swallowed a frown. *How many children are in there?*

Two tall girls of about thirteen ran to Alexa and threw themselves at her boots. Crying her name, the bald twins were frantic in their grief and joy.

“We did it!”

“We killed them all!”

“There’s no one left inside! We killed them all!”

Alexa’s hands settled onto each head. “You did what you had to.”

The girls visibly calmed, quieting.

Alexa swept the large group of kids, seeing the injured and weakest had been left with her. The kids who had run stood little hope of evading the soldiers with an injured party. She looked at the bunker and then back down at the twins. “You’re sure there’s no one left?”

“Yes.” The simultaneously spoken words were eerie. “They took many to other places when we moved. This complex held only two hundred.”

They had half of that number around them now and only minutes before a patrol would discover the escape. Alexa closed her eyes, sending out the power again. Without being

told, the children joined her, feeding off their joy at finally being free.

Edward listened to the waves of power with a slightly disbelieving ear. It was like a call for help and a challenge in one. He forced himself not to wince as it grew stronger. He wasn't anxious to see what they were calling to, but he was honored to be a part of something as noble as rescuing children. He stood proudly behind his boss.

The thought of traveling with these kids all the way to find Safe Haven didn't cross Edward's mind until he began really looking at them. Some of their injuries wouldn't allow a slow trip, let alone a fast flight. What would Alexa do?

Watch the south side.

Clearly, that's where she expected trouble to come from. He turned his attention that way in time to see a pack of large dogs running toward them.

"Look out!" Edward started firing before the snarling animals were close enough to hurt the kids. He heard Alexa spin to do the same.

Their guns barked loudly, drawing screams and running feet that they were forced to ignore as more dogs burst from the south perimeter and charged their way.

Edward let go of his control and proved his words of being very, very good with his gun.

The pack thinned quickly as he protected the kids. Alexa stopped firing to watch. There weren't so many dogs left that he couldn't handle it, so she studied his technique, his fast reload with only a seconds' pause. He was better than good. He was on her level. *Excellent.*

The perimeter soldiers followed the dogs from the trees. Edward switched targets, hitting them with beautiful headshots before they could draw and fire. He blew them off their feet, never hesitating. These men had held the kids, hurt them. *Time to pay for that!*

Alexa let him take care of the dozen guards, ready to hit any that he missed, but there was only a thick silence after he stopped firing that said he could have handled much more. The few bullets the soldiers had managed to get off hit nothing vital.

Instinct made her turn suddenly. "Get down! Down! Down!"

A second squad of soldiers came from the side of the bunker; the kids scrambled to get out of the line of fire as Alexa resumed pulling the trigger.

Edward finished the last two guards on his side, then turned to help Alexa.

More of the kids ran for the trees, unable to take the noise.

Alexa let them go. The mental ties that had kept them all captive were guilt-laden cords that no longer existed. Their kind wouldn't leave a man behind if they had another choice, but it didn't mean they wanted to be around each other. After the torments these kids had suffered, being left alone to fend for themselves was a relief.

The soldiers were all down, with only a few wounded for Edward to pick off from where he stood.

Alexa spotted the darkening sky. Their call had gone through. "Mind the south!"

Alexa's words snapped Edward from his shock at the sight of so many doves diving down from the apocalyptic sky. The white and gray birds were everywhere now. He couldn't help observing in amazement as they landed on the children. Giggles and laughter rose with the wind. The amusement was a powerful noise that seemed to improve their health as he watched.

More doves flew down, surrounding the group. The kids lifted happy arms covered with the old symbols of peace, twirling.

Alexa pointed toward the trees that held the freshly beaten path from those who'd fled. A

large part of the flock took flight. The doves surged toward the woods.

Edward assumed they were headed for the other children. He started to ask what the doves were for, but the sound of engines made his gun lift. “Company! From the South!”

Alexa looked at the twin girls huddling by her feet. She didn’t speak, but they both nodded shakily.

“Yes, we will.”

“We thank you for the honor.”

Alexa’s tone was gentle. “Do the best you can.”

The girls stood up.

Edward knew to move out of their way as a large group of jeeps and trucks came into view. They rolled up the winding drive with men checking their guns, getting set to open fire.

Alexa stood behind the twins, face impassive to the threat. “You are of age. Take your place among my father’s army.”

Both girls had tears running down their cheeks, but Edward wasn’t sure if it was joy or pain that had caused it. Their hands tightened on each other as small blue flickers of magic shot into the air, merging with the gritty sky. The twins screamed simultaneously. “Barrier!”

Edward flinched back as a vivid bolt of lightning forked across the roiling clouds above them.

The convoy of soldiers hurried closer, gaining speed. Half a mile before they reached the freed kids, the vehicles in the front of the convoy crashed violently into an invisible barrier. The explosions were immense. Flaming debris bounced off the force field and sprayed the other jeeps that swerved to miss the wreckage.

Alexa placed a hand on each of the twins' arms; the barrier lit up in a flash of white light that exploded over the soldiers. It grew blinding, forcing Edward's eyes down. When he looked back up, nothing moved on the other side of the now very visible barrier except for smoke and fire.

Edward saw Alexa stumble to her knees and found himself at her side without a thought. "Are you okay?"

The twins had scrambled back anxiously, but his concern for Alexa was obvious. They comforted him from a few feet away.

"She just needs to catch her breath."

The double timbre made him look up. "You're sure?"

To his surprise, they both giggled. The sound floated over the other huddling children, telling them the trouble was over.

“She is the Alpha’s daughter.”

As if that explained it, they turned from him and moved back toward the bunker. Many of the other children followed.

“Aren’t they going with us?”

Alexa slowly shook her head at his confusion. “The doves will carry their messages. Until someone comes for them, they will live off compound stock.”

“We can’t leave them here.”

Alexa waved at the fading barrier and the fiery wreckage. “Did you not see what they are capable of?”

“But without you—”

“They are safer.” Alexa pushed to her feet. “They were drugged, beaten, starved, and threatened with each other’s pain. I have freed them in the way that will allow them to survive. Any soldiers who come will be killed.”

“And when the big bunker sends more men?”

Alexa shrugged. “Their first patrols will be wiped out if any of these kids still remain here, but it will be months before anyone important knows what happened.”

Feeling better about their future, Edward had to ask one last question. “What about those who have no one to come for them?”

“They’ll find a family, if they think they need one, but these children are not human as you know the word. Only a few of them require a mother.” Alexa’s tone said she wanted that job, but it wasn’t supposed to be hers. “From a young age, they are left to fend for themselves. They sometimes find their parents after reaching legal age, but because of government trackers, it’s not safe for them to have families before then. They’ll stay low and wait.”

“Wait for what?”

Alexa turned toward the bunker without answering, but it sent her thoughts straight to the reason she now existed. These kids and hundreds more like them were waiting for a place where the light of peace would let them grow in protection and guidance. That place was Safe Haven and that leader was her father. Adrian had no idea so many of them existed. If he had, he never would have left. She had to find Safe Haven. *It’s time for him to come home.*

They spent the night in the bunker with the kids.

There were roughly three dozen who hadn't fled, ages ten to fifteen, and while they didn't avoid each other, it was clear that they weren't a close group. They didn't talk or joke like normal children, but they didn't fight either. The cleanup of the ground floor was done without anyone ordering it. The bodies were dragged outside, the blood scrubbed up, and food rations were distributed. Injured kids were placed on cots near the main door to be grabbed quickly if they needed to run.

All the while, Alexa spent time with them, but not normal time of comfort and care. It was more like a line of subjects waiting to see a King. They sat in a small circle around her as she answered each one of their requests in a tone that held Edward mesmerized. She didn't intend to stay and care for them or even get them settled somewhere, and yet these kids acted like she was their savior. *What am I missing?*

“She’s an Alpha.”

It came from the twins and was spoken in an arrogant doubled tone that said he knew nothing about the quest he'd joined.

Edward gave a soft snort. “Clearly. Is it okay to ask what that means?”

The twins turned eyes to Alexa, who looked up, and then nodded. She went back to the current child's request to learn fire making.

The twins gestured toward a quieter area in the corner.

Edward followed slowly.

“An Alpha is a direct descendant of the Creator.”

Edward blinked and then frowned. “Some joke.”

The twins were used to that response. “The war came because someone found out the governments have always known we exist. It had to be covered up.”

Edward was shaking his head. “The war was a terrorist—”

“*No!*”

The double shout shut his mouth and opened his ears. The pain their anger caused was like the nauseating jab of a headache that he vowed not to experience again.

“Descendants have been hunted throughout history. They've given birth to oil barons, presidents, and death with human hands.”

“To keep control and achieve their own ends, they destroyed the world.”

Edward felt the truth behind it. There was no denying it with those blazing voices in his

head, too, but his heart still protested such betrayal. “That can’t be.”

Other kids had come to their table, listening to both the spoken and mental words.

The twins looked uncomfortable. Edward got the sense that it was as painful for them to say as it was for him to hear.

“They could have stopped the fighting and death at any time. All they had to do was bring us together with an Alpha and the world would have had peace.”

“But there is no power in peace. They did not want that.”

Forgetting his protest in eagerness to know more about Alexa, Edward leaned forward. “Like what you did today?”

The taller twin shrugged. “That was a very small show of what we can do together. It’s why they don’t usually keep us in the same place.”

“Usually?”

“Sometimes they have one in the room with us...when we’re doing things.”

“So that it’s stronger?” He was drawn into the mystery of it.

The twins scowled, causing him to lean quickly back.

“So the Alphas don’t kill them all like we’ve done here! They remind us constantly

that they hold others like us across the world; a rebellion would cause their deaths.”

A low mutter came from one of the other kids at their table. “As it may now that we’ve risen up.”

The taller twin turned furious eyes toward the older boy. “An Alpha ordered it. You will not question!”

The teenager bowed his head immediately at the reprimand. “I’m sorry!”

Edward was in shock, but not so much that his brain had ceased to make connections. “You’re both Alphas, too.”

The twins didn’t seem as young anymore as they looked back at him with their fiery eyes. “We are Betas. Betas serve the Alpha when we come of age.”

“Gifts like ours come with age, but she chose to give them to us early for our wisdom.”

And your help, Edward thought, forgetting they could read his mind.

Both twins gave a scornful grunt.

“She did not need the help of untrained children.”

“She chose to give us justice.”

They turned toward Alexa and spoke simultaneously. “We are honored.”

Edward sat back, trying to soak it all in. After what he’d seen today, it was hard to deny.

His mind wanted to insist it wasn't possible, but that wasn't the way things were in this new world. Sudden, brutal changes had come to this land so fast that it was hard to adjust... *But I'll get to be with Alexa.* He stiffened. Alexa was an Alpha. Could she read his mind?

As soon as he had the thought, she looked over at him and raised a brow. *Will that be a problem?*

He flushed, shaking his head. *No. After all this, it will take more than mindreading to get rid of me.*

The twins giggled at the exchange. "That's also because she's an Alpha."

"Mindreading?"

"The attraction." They laughed again. "Alphas are meant to bring people together."

"Like the world would need after an apocalypse." His thoughts went back to Alexa. "Is that her job?"

The twins obviously knew, but a quick look from the warrior woman held them silent. Whatever the answer was, Alexa didn't want him to know. Edward switched his line of questioning. "Will you guys be all right here? Is there anything you need done before we go?"

"We will fend for ourselves."

The curt response drove in the impression that freedom meant a great deal to these abused

kids. Edward didn't want to believe the government had sacrificed the world to keep control of them. Why would they deny the world peace to keep the hate alive?

“As they've told you, peace comes with no power. They cannot use it to line their pockets or increase their importance.” Alexa moved their way. “To create a perfect weapon though, that is control in endless amounts.”

Edward nodded in acceptance. It fit together too well for it to be anything but the truth. He'd scorned the rumors before to stand in loyal defense of his country, but he'd been blind. *My faith in America was unfounded.*

Alexa denied that. “Not so. Your faith in those leaders was unfounded, but you haven't had that for a while now anyway. The ideal of freedom is worth our support. This country was built on blood and tears. We shall shed both in our quest to see it survive.”

5

Morning came with sounds that Edward hadn't heard since childhood. Shouts, laughs, bangs, and slams echoed through the top level of the compound where they'd chosen to sleep. *The kids are up.*

He smiled at the thought. He wasn't fond of children, but those twins were handy. When bedtime had come, all they'd done was send a calm look around and the room had been deserted in seconds. He assumed the others didn't mind following the girls, but he wasn't sure. Their bond was something he guessed a person had to feel to understand. He didn't yet, but after witnessing what these kids could do, he had accepted that they were dangerous.

Some of these bright-eyed youngsters had never once experienced the outside world. Edward assumed the bunkers were lined with something that kept their calls in, but he hadn't thought to ask about it last night.

Being here in a government complex again, should have been a nightmare for him. Instead, it had been enlightening. When they left, it would be hard to walk away. How had Alexa been able to do it?

He thought about the twins saying she hadn't really needed their help, that she'd been giving them justice. If that was true, then she hadn't needed his help either. Why hadn't she set them free before? And why had she come for him first if she didn't need the help?

Those were the questions he asked as soon as he slid onto the bench across from her. He

waited while a quick look from her cleared the table.

Alexa's tone was even. "Only once more."

He nodded, understanding his training was about to really begin. There would be no open questioning after this.

"When they keep us drugged, we get very weak. Calls have no strength to penetrate walls, fire only flickers. On medication, they can control our gifts. Between experiments, we are put back to sleep. When I escaped, my condition was the worst it has ever been. I needed time to regain my mental clarity and I had to have energy from a willing source."

His eyes went to hers, mind replaying their meeting and that vivid bolt of blue light. She'd recharged from him. Understanding fell into place. These were carriers of the light. They couldn't feed from an unclean source like those holding them captive and it kept them weak, under control. Now, these kids would be able to seek out new energy sources and regain their own health.

Alexa smiled patiently. "We are descendants of the Creator. He needed people, so we do, too. Without others to love us, to follow us, we are desolate. With those things, we have enough hope to save the world."

"That's the true quest, right?"

“Yes. We were born to this time and place to help rebuild and fix the errors of the past. The war was our fresh start. We need only take advantage of it.”

“And Safe Haven?”

Her eyes darkened with a powerful longing. “Holds the key to it all.”

“Adrian. Adrian. Adrian.”

The younger kids chanted it, drawing Alexa’s attention. She smiled generously, sending a wave of light through the room. “Yes. With Adrian, we will create a future to be lived in, not just survived. We will prosper and fill this dead world with our love. You are now a part of that, Edward. Do your duty with honor.”

“I will.”

6

Leaving was just as hard for Edward as he had thought it would be. His protective heart demanded that he stay until each of these fragile children had someone to care for their needs. He lingered in the doorway that Alexa had already gone through without pausing. Here, he could help. Out there with her, he was only a food source. Finally understanding it came with a sickening feeling of being raised

for the slaughter. *This is what livestock would feel like if they knew.*

The children looked back at him without expressions, letting him make his own choice. If he wanted to stay, he was welcome. He had come with Alexa and that gave him the right.

“Would you stay, Edward, or go with me? Make your choice now.” Her tone from just outside the door wasn’t unkind.

He looked at the kids again, searching harder. Did they want him to stay?

“No...and yes.” Alexa began moving away from the door. “You are a connection to me, but you are also a killer. They fear that rubbing off. You have little use to them except as someone to train or entertain.”

Flushing, Edward spun toward her. “And what am I to you beyond an energy source and a servant?!”

The warrior woman stopped. She slowly turned back to look at him with glowing blue eyes that promised he already held great value to her. “You are a dangerous tool that I will wield against the darkness that threatens to consume us all.”

Alexa didn’t use her gift on him, but she didn’t wait, either. She walked away. To sacrifice his life for these children’s safety was worthy. That he felt the same need to help them

won more of her respect. If he chose to stay, she wouldn't hold it against him.

Edward glanced back to find the crowded room behind him now empty. He hadn't heard them go, and it made his choice. Clearly, they were stronger than he was giving them credit for. They would be a fascination to be delighted in for sure, but would he look at the night sky and still long to be at Alexa's side?

Yes. They'd only been together for a few days, but he already knew more about the world. Life with her would always be hard, thrilling, exhilarating, *real*.

The fighter pulled up his hood and stepped through the bunker doorway with grim excitement filling his stomach. He'd just chosen to leave these children to follow Alexa to his death. The first heavy guilt-cord settled onto his shoulders.

He held his head up in response. Her goals were honorable. She wasn't settling for helping just one group of kids. She wanted to save them all. That could only happen when they found Safe Haven.

Edward caught up quickly, resuming the place she'd put him in for the march here.

Alexa didn't wave or even look at the kids as they stared from the windows and neither

did he. The quest had truly begun now. There was no turning back.

The next month was the best of Edward's life as Alexa trained him and trusted him with her secrets during their runs for food and gear. They moved steadily east, hunting for signs of Safe Haven. His only regret was that they couldn't remain alone. At some point, Alexa would add a new member to their crew. If not for the quest, Edward would have begged for it to never happen. He didn't want to share her.

If not for the quest, Alexa would have said the same.

Chapter Four
One Last Ride
May 2016

1

Before the war, I was afraid of roller coasters.

Daniel realized it with a start, allowing the quiet dirt bike to come to a slow stop on the twisting incline. Scarred and gouged from his reckless lifestyle, his sweaty legs braced the bike easily despite the angle. Set into the side of a mountain, Suicide Cliff was no easy ride and there was only one way down from this far up.

“And I hated amusement parks!”

It was a minor revelation compared to the others he’d made since the war and to what he was about to do, but for a boy whose family had run a carnival, it was a door to understanding the past that brought him to this point of no return. He didn’t care about the result. He only wanted to understand why he was doing it before it was done.

Daniel and his family, all nine of them, had been equal partners in the Ocean Walk

Carnival. It had been great most of the time. He'd learned to do the performances his parents and older siblings wanted at first, and eventually he'd developed his own skill to contribute to the family legacy—stunts.

There wasn't a bike on the planet that Daniel couldn't ride. He'd been on them all during his years in the public view. He'd grown reckless as the thrills faded. He'd been hurt more times than he could remember, but it had never stopped him. There was little in life that Daniel had feared before the war. He'd lost the only thing he wanted before his family had bought the carnival. From flaming hoops to long gaps over cars, he'd jumped anything they put in his path, but he had been terrified of roller coasters.

“Why?” He crankily scanned the cool darkness that hung over the scraggy trees and sharp boulders. “It wasn't the height.”

Daniel got the dirt bike rolling again, not being particularly careful on the two-foot wide trail that was blazed in the stone. Where he was headed, it didn't matter.

“Was it being out of my comfort zone?” he wondered suddenly, vaguely aware of a humming sound coming from the west. The wastelands made odd noises, often. It wasn't a reason for concern on a good day. On this

night, it mattered even less. If the final gates had fallen, his end would come quicker, that's all.

Unfazed by the thought, Daniel sped up as he returned to his mental dissection. Why had he hated roller coasters? His brothers and sisters had spent their work breaks in line for the biggest one that they maintained, filling the dinner table with tales of how they'd rode the front car of the Python with their arms held high.

Daniel had never done that. Every time he got in that front seat, or any of those behind it, his stomach knotted up and he worried over being sick before the short ride could end. His armpits dripped sweat and nervous gas had made the other kids laugh. When the car chugged up the hill, finally reaching the summit, the best he could manage was a weak yell with his eyes closed and his hands clenched tightly around the lap rail. It had been a large source of embarrassment during his childhood and then humiliation as he grew older.

“The Daredevil’s afraid of a little thing like riding a roller coaster! Ha-ha!”

Daniel pushed the bike faster around the last hairpin turn, letting gravity carry him through it. Gravity was something he could

count on to always be there, something he would experience intensely in just a minute more.

“It wasn’t the idea of falling, or the death waiting if the coaster flew off the rails...”

Daniel found the answer as he neared the summit, the small, clear area where he planned to end his life.

“It was control!”

If he had been driving the coaster, it wouldn’t have haunted him, but because he could only raise his arms to whatever the Python wanted to dish out, he was captive, unable to do that. He hadn’t been able to surrender control.

Daniel slowed the bike as he reached the almost level ground at the top of the cliff. He didn’t see the mysterious beauty of the glowing apocalypse sky, nor the shadowy forms of two people walking steadily toward him from the west. All he saw was freedom from his torment. “One last ride...”

“The Daredevil’s afraid of a little thing like riding a roller coaster! Ha-ha!”

His rage flared to life, as bright as any of the explosions that had destroyed the world. “Not anymore. That world, *that* Daniel, is dead.” The war had seen to it with a few

seconds and a single stray bullet during the chaos. He'd fired it. *I killed my mother.*

Pain rushed him in waves. Daniel hit the handle, sending fuel rushing into the bike.

It jumped forward eagerly in response.

As the bike neared the edge, Daniel's hands slowly crept into the air, surrendering control for the first time in his life. He managed to keep them there as the bike went over the cliff, but his eyes didn't open. Feeling it would be enough. He didn't want to see it.

2

Alexa darted toward the man's broken body and Edward tried to keep pace while scanning the barren landscape that surrounded them. Why they were wasting their time, he had no idea. Anyone who fell from that high up wasn't going to survive.

Alexa increased her speed.

Edward was unable to stay at her side. She streaked across the parched desert floor, leaving him behind.

Edward hurried. As he went, he suddenly thought maybe he understood her hurry. *Maybe she's hungry.*

Alexa was kneeling near the body before he got there. Edward turned his back to her,

watching their discouraging surroundings. They were in plain view against the wall of the mountain. Edward pushed the worry aside. If they were attacked, Alexa would handle it as she had the other times they'd faced danger since leaving Lexington.

They had been together for a month and the trip had been smooth. Not quiet, though. Twice, they'd been spotted by soldiers and been in gunfights to get away. There had also been a rough hour of crossing a river in a small skiff, using oars to push away the awful debris. Black, anxious snakes had paced them the entire time, not hissing, but gliding along the water next to the skiff menacingly.

Edward looked back to see Alexa's head lowering. He turned away without much concern. She needed energy, and if the man was dying anyway...

Alexa concentrated, drawing her strength. "Your name!"

Daniel opened his eyes, unable to do much more. He didn't feel pain exactly, but the sense of fading was clear enough. He'd had his one last ride.

"I offer a second chance..."

"Let me die."

Stung by his desolation, Alexa shoved herself into his thoughts. *"I seek Safe Haven."*

Daniel's eyes widened; they slowly began to fill with red tears. Even the angels wanted to be in Safe Haven.

Daniel understood that he was in the process of dying. He was grateful to see a woman's hard countenance rather than his childhood demons. He only hoped the pain didn't start before it was over. Being numb was preferable to reality. Isn't that why he'd done this in the first place?

Alexa leaned closer, deep in his mind, seeing what had caused him to do this to himself. "I need your strength for the quest, Daniel. You will not die in vain!"

Her tone allowed no argument.

Drawn back against his will, Daniel blinked, trying to really see her. Safe Haven...a quest. *Adrian!*

His body arched suddenly, eyes foggy, pupils starting to dilate.

"I will have an answer!"

Alexa's roar in his mind brought the world back into focus. Daniel gave the only response he could through broken, bloody lips. "*Master.*"

Alexa slanted her mouth over his, the blood ignored. Instead of the inhale Edward was expecting, she blew into the man's lungs—returning life instead.

Edward tried to stay focused on the watch, but the man's screams were terrible. Every breath she blew into him seemed to scrape away another layer of his paralysis, his injuries. It was slow work.

He'd thought she was ending the man's pain, but instead...

“Aaahhhhhh!”

Edward grunted, moving away. It would be a rough night for all of them and there was no telling what the noise would bring. “I'll be up high.”

Alexa didn't respond.

Edward's jealous heart was appeased a bit. She trusted him to stand the watch. It would be a while before the new man was allowed that honor.

3

“His name is Daniel.”

Edward looked at the pale man sitting against the cliff that should have taken his life. The Horseman was grateful the screaming had stopped as dawn arrived, but he was in no hurry to welcome the new man. He had enjoyed his time alone with Alexa.

“As did I, but now, the quest grows more dangerous and we have to, as well. Alone, we will not reach Safe Haven.”

Edward hung his head. Despite it being a month, he still wasn't guarding his thoughts from her. “Whatever you need.”

Alexa's response was quick. “*He* needs to be trained, as I have you thus far.”

Edward's head snapped up. “Me?”

Alexa met his surprised look with a raised brow. “Would *you* lead, while *I* teach?”

Edward flushed, hating it that he spent so much time in the wrong, but loving it that she always called him on it. A leader didn't explain, they taught, and he had already been learning. “When shall I start?”

There was silence for an answer.

Edward obediently rose to his feet.

Alexa watched him move toward Daniel, pleased and tired. She was near to being drained again, shriveled hands hidden deep inside her cloak to be out of view. In a day or so, when Daniel was able to defend himself for a few minutes at a time, she would reward Edward for his obedience and enjoy a much needed meal. Until then...

Alexa took up the watch, scanning the apocalyptic mountains around them. Right after the war, the western destruction zone had

encompassed the three farthest states. Then the gates had opened and the wastelands had begun spreading. Now, it was 300 miles beyond and steadily creeping east. Mother Nature wanted her land back. If the descendants didn't do something soon, she would succeed.

“How long have you been with her?” Daniel was extremely curious as to what the quest had been like so far. Almost succeeding in taking his own life had given him a new outlook, a new courage that he hadn't known he possessed until he was over the edge of that cliff.

Edward was feeling the need to jealously guard those memories, especially the one after he'd proven his loyalty by following Alexa from the bunker. She'd made him hers that night, in more ways than one. “Since Lexington.”

Edward watched the man's scarred fingers twitch like his body was being denied something that it craved. Edward noticed that the Biker didn't react to the healing twitches, even though the pain had to be bad still. Parts of bones and veins were prominent under his skin, clearly not where they should be. Except for his face, Daniel was covered in scars and ugly mementoes that said his life had been rough even before the war.

“But that’s almost the heart of the wastelands!” Daniel exclaimed, admiring the man’s courage. Of Alexa, he was in awe.

“Yes.” Edward didn’t want to accept the new man, but he did want to please Alexa. He held out a leather kit. “You’re never to be without this, even when there is nothing in it.”

He waited for Daniel to take the empty carry bag, and then continued. “Until she says otherwise, you’ll do what I do, down to where and how I step. Copy me at all times.”

Grrrrr...

The loud rumble from the west brought Edward to his feet. The rats were back. “Shit!”

He spun toward Alexa’s post, but turned back just as quickly. He leaned down into Daniel’s confused face, delivering his first real order of the quest. “You will get into the nearest tree and still be alive when she comes for you!”

Daniel gave a quick nod and watched Edward take off running. Trouble was coming, but he would be no help. Gritting his teeth, the battered Biker slowly began dragging himself toward the closest moldy trunk. Life mattered again. Daniel was grateful.

Grimacing at the feel of dragging his broken legs across the rough ground, the man was determined to do his share as soon as he

could. When his injuries had mended, he would make sure they both saw how useful he could be.

Alexa motioned Edward under cover as she waited tensely to see how many dogs had been put on their trail this time. The last two attempts had been small teams, but this sounded like a convoy of government trucks.

Not asking if Daniel was hidden, Alexa drew her gun, glad when Edward followed her lead. She was low on energy to be facing so many. His help was definitely needed.

Edward watched the trucks crest the rise, the dirt clouds trailing behind them for as far as he could see. Five team trucks... No, nine. Roughly thirty-five men. The trucks spread out as they neared the base of the cliff, like they were herding prey.

Edward looked to Alexa in concern.

Alexa's mind was racing. The soldiers would know their quarry was close. There wouldn't be any running, maybe not even hiding. Alone, she and Edward would win every time, but neither of them could stay ahead of the trucks while carrying Daniel. They would have to fight.

Alexa looked to her first of six with blue chips of icy steel. “Once the soldiers are out of their vehicles, no mercy will be allowed.”

Edward gave her a short nod that said he would be at her side for the fight and beyond.

Satisfied, Alexa took aim.

4

“I feel her.”

Paul’s words caused a round of cheers from the half a dozen soldiers in the hardback with them.

A harsh glare from Corbin silenced the men. “Where is she?” He looked through the binoculars again. The arid mountain terrain was all he could see with only one good eye.

Paul struggled to get a clear read on the woman. Her energy wasn’t as vibrant as he was used to. *She’s tired*, the scientist thought sadly. *We’ve hunted her so much that she hasn’t had time to recharge.* Aware of Corbin waiting for an answer, Paul grunted. “Keep going. It’s getting stronger.”

They’d spent the last weeks chasing, rounding up those she’d freed, listening to the tales of their travels from other survivors. Tracking them hadn’t been hard, only tiresome due to her preference for unforgiving terrain.

“Load your darts nice and tight.” The big bunker still wanted her dead or recaptured, but Corbin had set this in motion and he did not intend to back down now. He would get a tracker dart into her or her fighter, and it would be enough to buy a few more weeks to find something he could use to negotiate with the big bunker.

The cliff neared, showing them a small, neatly made camp with three bedrolls.

“There’s her site!”

Of Alexa, there was no sign, but if she’d left everything behind, then they’d surprised her again. It was the second time it had turned out this way.

Paul was sure her luck was used up. They would recapture her now, and the hope of Safe Haven would finally vanish entirely, just the way those in charge wanted it. Paul was suddenly glad that Shane hadn’t made it back from the base yet. The air here tasted like death.

Corbin studied the area, the cliff. There were no tunnels, no crags to allow an escape. She hadn’t gone up. He looked toward the trees that lined the cliff, to the thicket of dead branches that would make a perfect cover. “There she is!”

Crack!

The windshield shattered into a series of spiral fractures, surprising everyone inside into a harsh flinch. The thick glass was supposed to be able to stop a slug, but thanks to years of chemical rain, everything now had weak spots.

Crack!

The window next to Corbin's head imploded; glass flew through the truck.

The driver swerved, automatically turning south to keep from being trapped by the cliff wall. A barrage of gunfire rained on the truck as it turned.

Corbin was aware of her target as he tied a bandage from his kit around the stinging arm wound she'd just delivered. Blood dripped in thin sheets. *She'll pay for that!*

Alexa fired again, strategically hitting lead vehicles that were sent careening in different directions. The weakened glass had the soldiers looking for a place to use as cover and the opposite cliff wall was the only other place for that purpose. It sent the trucks right by her bullets.

She's herding them now. Edward fired again. His shot took out the rest of the windshield on the first truck and he grinned. This real life was perfect.

Alexa watched the remaining vehicles turn to follow their leader. She saved the rest of the

bullets she had in her gun. Waste in any form was destructive to her goals.

Edward's smile faded as the soldiers pulled behind the huge boulders that lined the opposite cliff. Men began pouring from the trucks like water. *There are so many!*

He watched Alexa drop from the tree like it was a single step; he tensed to follow her flight.

Bang! Bang!!

Alexa wasn't running now that the soldiers were out of the protection of their vehicles. Gunfire filled the canyon, echoing off the cliff faces and out into the barren wilderness.

5

“Get down, you idiot!”

Corbin snatched Paul back by his hair. He shoved the gifted man behind a boulder. “We're no match for her guns!”

“But there are more of us.”

“She's an Alpha!” Corbin watched his men get slaughtered. His three Lieutenants were trying to call everyone in, but these lower level men had no discipline.

Crack!

Corbin's eyes narrowed in on the shooters, using a mirror to keep from poking his head out for her to aim at. Only Alexa and one man, but

there had been three bedrolls. *Where's her newest fighter?*

His sharp eye went over their camp again. A fire pit had a small pot simmering over it. There was wood with gouges and bloody rags. Someone was hurt. And what did you do with an injured party during a fight?

“You stash them.” Corbin scanned the area, landed on the dead branches beside the neat camp and found a shadow among the dense limbs. The big bunker wanted her recaptured or hit with tracker juice, but one of her crew would be just as good. “Stay here!”

Paul watched Corbin hurry toward the vehicles with concern that had grown into alarm by the time the commander slipped around them and out of view. *Is he leaving me?*

6

Shielded by the trunk, Alexa fired again, taking down one of the closest soldiers. She and Edward were running through Corbin's men, but where was their leader?

Edward slapped the magazine in place in time to shoot the last two soldiers within an instant of each other. The chaos was complete. Bodies were spread all over the parched floor of the canyon.

Alexa waved a hand. “Make sure they’re all dead, gather supplies.”

Edward nodded. He took a step.

Crack! Crack!

“AAAhhhh!”

They’d heard that noise too much over the last hours to ever mistake it. They both turned toward their camp.

Alexa made a fast gesture. “Do as you’ve been told!”

Edward hated the idea of leaving her alone to rescue Daniel, but he obeyed. He moved toward the bodies with fast steps, hoping to be done and back at her side before the fight was over.

Alexa rounded the edge of the cliff and slowed to a steady pace. She saw Daniel in Corbin’s tight grip and then his newest wounds. Without hands, Daniel couldn’t fight back. Both of his palms were dripping blood.

“I’ll put the next one through his head!” Corbin dragged the dazed man further into the shadowy cover of the cliff face and its boulders. “Get out here where I can see you!”

Alexa stepped into view, Colts in hand.

Corbin’s harsh grin was full of triumph. “Toss them away!”

Alexa shook her head, hands hanging at her sides. She kept her eyes on Daniel’s. In his blue

gaze, she saw determination to survive and the belief that if he were mortally wounded, she would be able to save him again. *Good*. This way, he would be willing to take risks. He wouldn't ever be told that there was a limit to what she could do or that it was forbidden. She would eventually have to pay for playing the role of God.

“Closer!” Corbin was trying to be meticulous, but being close to her without the drugs was distracting, worrisome. She radiated a strength that made him tighten his grip on the mostly helpless man. It hadn't been hard to figure out that she'd saved him. That made him valuable property. Corbin waved the gun at his remaining two Lieutenants. “Cuff her, put her in my truck.”

“Now, Daniel!”

Daniel shoved against his captor at her call, ducking as Alexa did the same.

Her Colts fired; the two remaining soldiers hit the ground.

Corbin, now alone, struggled to keep Daniel in front of as much of his body as he could. He needed her alive. “Get in the truck or I'll kill him.”

Alexa's laugh was cold. “And give up your shield? I think not.”

Realizing his bluff was called, Corbin began dragging the man toward the nearest truck. "I'll take him with me then."

"No, you won't." Alexa started to raise her gun.

Corbin's arm tightened on Daniel's throat, cutting off his air. "If I die, so does he!"

"He has no value without hands." Alexa's voice was like the dead, it was so cold. "You ruined him. You keep him."

There was a shocked silence.

Corbin stared, not sure if she was now the one bluffing. Would she really leave a man behind?

Alexa grinned. "How about a deal?"

Not expecting it, the Commander sneered. "Deals are for the dead!"

"So they are. Would you make one to save your life this day? I will come for it in my own time."

Corbin slowly nodded. "Perhaps if I knew the terms."

Alexa didn't hesitate to bargain with the devil. It was something she expected to do many times before this quest was over. "I will back up, you will do the same. Let him go at the bumper."

Corbin caught sight of her other fighter stalking steadily toward them from the

battlefield. Corbin let out a defeated grunt. “Fine! Start backing up.”

Alexa immediately began moving away, face warning Daniel not to disrupt the plan she had just put into motion.

Corbin loathed her arrogance as she stared at him impassively. That would change after she led him to Safe Haven. When Adrian was wiped from the face of the earth, Corbin and Alexa might just disappear, along with a lot of drugs to keep her under control. He wanted Adrian dead, needed him dead, but the man’s daughter would suffer for years before he finally took her life. The Mitchel family may have forgotten the insult that took his eye, but Corbin hadn’t.

Alexa knew something wasn’t right, but with Daniel pouring blood and starting to sag in Corbin’s grip, there was little choice but to get him back as quickly as she could. She watched Corbin drag him around the side of the boulders, tripping in his haste. Both men went down.

Alexa shook her head at Edward. He wanted to rush in and take Corbin out, but that would sign Daniel’s second death warrant and she had no energy left to save him.

Edward guessed her reason by the restless tap of her fingers on her gun butt. Those fingers

were shriveled, ugly to look at. She was too weak for another confrontation that might end in Daniel being wounded further. Right now, his injuries wouldn't take his life. If the one-eyed man was pushed, Daniel might be lost.

Despite not wanting a new man on the crew, Edward felt better knowing that Alexa cared for her fighter's enough to delay Corbin's death. It didn't occur to him until later that she might have had different motives.

As they fell, Corbin slammed the needle into the man's neck and shoved the plunger home. The struggling man dropped like a stone as the medication hit. Corbin cut the man's pant leg. A few seconds saw a new scrape-like wound on his calf. Corbin shoved the heavy weight over to move quickly for the truck, not caring that he was the only survivor of this raid. Corbin yanked the door open to find Paul in the passenger seat.

"I saw what you did."

Corbin pulled himself up behind the wheel, face a mask of hatred. "Don't cross me, Rabbit, or we'll have a fox hunt."

Rab snapped his mouth shut, already sure the paperwork would state that Alexa was the one he'd implanted with the tracker. Corbin's reports to his superiors and the truth were never the same.

“Why didn’t you kill him before he could get to the truck?” Edward had seen her shoot. He knew she could have put a bullet in the man’s head, or at least in his back.

Alexa didn’t answer, instead going to Daniel’s still form.

Edward didn’t repeat the question. He hadn’t been with her long enough to be confident, but he believed she hadn’t done it out of kindness or mercy. Those weren’t the reasons she’d saved Daniel, either. Edward doubted she had much of either emotion. The things that Alexa did, good or harsh, were all for the quest. In some strange way, it must benefit her to leave the one-eyed man alive.

Edward helped her drag Daniel’s unconscious body back to the bedroll, hoping she would tell him to papoose the Biker so they could get on the road. It wasn’t safe to stay here.

Alexa bound Daniel’s hands, tying the bandages as tight as she could get them. “Papoose him. We need to get underground until his tracker wears off.” She hadn’t seen Corbin do it, but she’d be a fool not to expect it.

Satisfied, Edward did as he was told. It was a hard new life, but one he already wouldn't trade for anything.

Alexa looked over the battle scene, calculating how long it would be before the rats would return. Even considering Corbin's previous pattern of behavior, it was still hard to guess. The commander wasn't as lethal as her, but he was clever and those people often managed to come out on top in the end.

"I won't let that happen." Alexa's voice was like a wave of fire cutting through ice. "My father and I know what to do with the likes of you!"

Alexa helped Edward get their new man over his shoulder for his first day of travel. They had a long road ahead and a lot of adventures waiting. With any luck, she would have a full crew by the time they reached River City. *And then things will get crazy.*

3 Months Later

Chapter Five
River City
August

1

When they reached the bend of the Little River, the sight of the small town gave no comfort that what Alexa had come for was here.

River City hadn't existed before the War. Set near the back hatch of NORAD, the town had begun as a refugee camp that was wiped out by foreign invaders and then rebuilt. A few months later, it was destroyed again by the emerging government. River City had been rebuilt a second time after the volcanic eruption that had coated everything with ash, trapping refugees inside for weeks at a time. The population had taken another large hit, but the town had remained.

It now boasted seven businesses inside real wooden frames and nearly twice as many slanted, prone-to-collapse homes made from scavenged debris. The people had adjusted, but it was not a place of prosperity. Few groups of

people remained this far west.

Alexa and her small army moved toward the dusty town that had no chemical barrier. There was no pull this time, no sense of being drawn, but with the one she'd come for, there wouldn't be. Calculated guessing was all that had brought her to River City.

Alexa and her fighters had now been on the road together through several adventures; their movements were almost smooth, almost matched. The four men tried very hard to pace her long stride exactly.

Alexa was proud of the small crew she'd gathered. Today, if she were lucky, there would be a fifth fighter—the magician. The rats that had stayed on their trail had planted a number of trackers with well-aimed darts over the sixteen weeks since the start of the quest, but Alexa knew that was on purpose. Corbin didn't want her recaptured, only traceable all the way to Safe Haven.

A small movement in the distance caught the attention of Edward. He wore his rugged good looks proudly now, unlike when they'd first met. His full lips and hard jawline no longer hinted at how unstable he'd been before joining her. "Dust whirls. Too low for a storm."

"How many riders?" Her voice was tightly laced with approval.

Edward studied. “At least five, maybe with spare mounts.”

“Coming to River City?” Billy had massive hands and thick forearms that had killed upon her orders and were ready to do so again. Each of her fighters had been gathered in the same fashion. Only the settings, the reasons for their despair, were different.

“Aye. Mind your six, my pets, and remember your lessons.” Alexa increased her pace, wanting a cushion of time in town before the riders came. She wasn’t sure why, but there had been too many battles won on instinct alone to ever ignore it. “Watch form.”

The males moved into a rotating pattern around her billowing cloak as she scented the air. The town looked abandoned. Alexa used her gifts to evaluate, relentlessly searching for danger. Her first crew might survive if she were careful enough. Her father’s hadn’t.

The air was thick with watery rot. It tasted no better, harsh with the chemicals still lingering even now. At that thought, she drew up enough saliva to spit. The dust had settled, thanks to the late night rain, but the hardpan under their feet was still parched. She could hear the angry roar of the river, one of the few normal sounds in Afterworld, but it was no more upset than usual. Things were calm. If not

for that slightly closer dust whirl in the distance, she might have suspected there was no threat here at all.

The road into River City began to slope downward. The thick, sickly trees thinned into no cover at all by the time they hit the bottom of the dirt street. Half a mile away now, they were visible to those in the town. Nearby, parts of Ft. Collins stood as a reminder of the horrible struggle for survival that had started it all. The town that had protected NORAD had fallen with it. The fighters couldn't see the charred frames or tattered skeletons now, but they'd passed them on their way and stepped lightly until they were out of view. Ghosts lurked in such places. That was common knowledge.

“Cover switch.”

It was impressive to see five fighters in long cloaks remove and replace their hats with slightly larger versions at the same time, all without losing pace or form. Each one was done with a simplicity that wasted no energy, but allowed an artistic flair that made the woman leading them tighten her lips against the pride. So they could switch to bulletproof hats in one neat, eye-catching move. Could they walk for a week straight? Shoot the leaves off trees? Fight to the death?

This time, she allowed the tiny grin to liven her usually expressionless face. Yes. Her men could do all of that and more. Her training had been relentless.

Mark, her newest man, frowned. “The church has a dozen people inside.”

Alexa didn’t respond. The green letters tattooed across his ten knuckles said more about Mark than anything else. *I WILL-KILL U*. It was a warning and a description.

Mark had been in an underground slam with the other killers, but that hadn’t stood in her way. When she’d left the Boulder complex, he’d been at her side. His wardens had wisely negotiated his release.

Finding Mark once they snuck inside hadn’t been hard. His level of pain had drawn her harder than any of the others. Mark hadn’t been sorry for his crimes; he felt no remorse for the killings. He also had stamina. Of all her men, he was the most fit, the most physically imposing.

The landscape hardened around their boots, becoming more jagged. The group picked out signs of the world that had once been with angry hearts. It hurt to see the smaller skeletons; felt wrong to crunch them under heavy boots.

“There’s a bunker hole.” Daniel reminded

her he had a good eye for details. The Biker was lanky and limber, the smallest of their group. He was the one sent into places the rest of them couldn't fit. His tone said he wanted to use that skill on this old world relic.

“Maybe we'll do some digging before we go, if there's still an interest after our work here is done.”

That pleased them. Uncovering the secrets of the past was fodder for their adventurous souls.

Alexa swung into full alert as they reached the town. Determined to get what she'd come for, she let the fire demon inside take control as they crossed from the Colorado borderlands into Wyoming.

Alexa and her four fighters moved through the town with slow, sure steps, eyes shifting between doorways and shadowy alleys. With the wind whipping black cloaks as they circled, the men appeared to be royal servants bent on being useful to their queen.

Those watching muttered quietly with impressed disapproval and fear.

Alexa's hands stayed on her guns, cloak pushed back for access to the deadly Colts.

There was little doubt that she could use them. The surprise of seeing a woman with a male crew was the most obvious reaction from

the few dozen men and women peering out of dusty windows, but there was also a hint of curiosity. River City wasn't famous for gunfighters or even for guns. The glory came from still being a water town even four years after the war. Many things could be had here, good and bad, but of strong fighters and weapons, there were few.

Doonngg!

The church bell echoed loudly for a long minute, but the fighters didn't slow. Their leader had intentionally come while the religious refugees would be holding services and out of the way. Believing this new world to be the punishment of God, the converts were often the hardest to deal with.

Alexa moved toward the only open pub and the men flanking her sent hard glares that warned the townspeople to take care. At this time on Sunday, those not attending church were either doing chores or hanging around in the bar. Not that there was real whiskey anymore, but even grain alcohol would produce intoxication and dim this ugly world for a while. With enough of the homemade brew, the eyes might dim forever. Blindness was a common result of that thievery and ignorance.

Alexa paused with a hand on the swinging door, turning to look at the small, neat

blacksmith's shed next to the pub. She gave the man standing there a nod of recognition. His sense of strength was clear.

Pleasing her, he returned the gesture with a half bow and a smile of welcome.

Alexa stared a moment longer, making sure her fighters understood the man was now under consideration for their crew.

All four men took his measure with hard stares of their own while they took their assigned places for this situation. Alexa had been drilling them even during break times, making sure they could teach it as well as do it. Two of the fighters would stay on Alexa's flank, and the other two would guard the door. It had been harder to do when there had only been three fighters to watch her six. Mark joining them had been great. Now, there would be a fifth to share the chores and loneliness.

The door creaked as Alexa swung it open, sharp blue eyes picking out a dozen drinkers that were hard to distinguish from the decaying furnishings. Both wore the same colorlessness of neglect and danger. Alexa's lips thinned into a hard line. "I'm a man down."

Her fire-roughened voice cut through the stillness, where many of the haggard patrons opened their mouths only to snap them shut. It was easy to guess how she'd lost a man. The

Colts on her lean hips were the shiniest things in the pub.

A shuffling noise from the far, dark corner brought Alexa's attention to the three men playing Hob-Jong with fragile, ancient playing cards.

Two of them went on with the game, but the third man, lean and unkempt, turned vivid green eyes on her. "How much?"

His gruff voice told her he was a killer, but not the kind she needed.

"The success of the quest."

The card player grunted, dropping his eyes back to the rickety deck. The years since the war had been ugly for Rick. He'd once been the wolf in sheep's clothing, and after that, the pied piper, leading men to violent deaths. Now, he was a scavenger, one of the best, but his mind was always in the past. "What is it that you seek?"

There was dead silence in the smoky pub at Rick's question. There was a sense that her answer would be better than a rescue mission or a treasure hunt.

"Safe Haven." Her words echoed eerily.

There was a flurry of mutters and gasps, but the hard case only nodded as if he'd known all along. "The biggest myth of all." The steel in her gaze drew Rick in despite his attempts to

remain aloof. “You have proof?”

The scowl was in her frosty response. “I search for what I know exists.” Alexa’s voice became scornful. “What I suspect you know exists, as well, but you’ll not be at my side, grifter!”

She spun toward the door and saw the Blacksmith was just outside it and listening intently. “*Anyone* else can try.”

Alexa flashed a hand over the bar as she walked by, letting a large chunk of gold clatter to the grooved wooden counter. “That belongs to the winner.”

The woman stepped back out into the colder air. None of those inside would leave with her. They had no true courage, even the card player. But for the man standing nearby, this town was likely already dead and didn’t know it. There had been more life here the last time she’d come.

“You might try the Preacher.”

Her gaze went to the Blacksmith in curiosity. High cheekbones creased with laugh lines suggested he’d lived happily before the war, but the lack of amusement in his sapphire eyes said differently. Taller than her other men, he wore the same dark coloring and intelligent face.

“Before the war, Jacob was government.”

The man's tone was calm, bored even, as he ignored her protective men. Alexa felt her lips curl into a small line of interest that he responded to with his welcoming body language. It said he'd been waiting for her.

"My thanks." She waited, hoping he would know the code.

"My honor." David paused. "Is that right? I don't remember as much of it now. No one talks like that anymore."

"Like what, iron bender?"

He smiled at the term, showing neat, white teeth. "The descendant speech."

Alexa moved closer, openly evaluating. "And where did you hear it at all?"

"From my mother, and others." His eyes darkened with that admission, tone becoming abrupt. "The Preacher is called Jacob. You'll know him by his scarred face."

It was a dismissal.

Alexa left him with the scowls of her fighters at his sudden rudeness. "Set it up."

Billy and Mark lined up large targets that they pulled from those impossibly small carry bags. The other two men, Edward and Daniel, fell into a slowly revolving guard around the woman.

People stared at them from doors and windows, whispers floating on the dusty wind.

“Gonna try, I am.”

“Got no use for gold, not in trade for my soul.”

“You see her eyes? Kill ya, as soon as look at ya, that one!”

Alexa tuned them out, but kept her attention on the tall, lean man watching her intently from near the pub door as the battered townspeople began to spill out. The Blacksmith would have a turn, but there was more than excitement in his expression. There was relief, the kind that said he'd been waiting for her for a very long time.

Stooped over from constantly plowing an unforgiving earth, the people of River City were tired. It was in their arthritic hands and drooping faces. Each day's survival was hard-won. Most wore jeans and long jackets, but a few boasted the coats of gunfighters, despite not belonging to that dangerous classification of refugee. Alexa wasn't encouraged. She waved a hand at Edward, who moved the shooters into a clumsy line. Very little was said.

Alexa held out one of her guns to the first of them with an expressionless countenance. “One shot. Do the best you can.”

It was pitiful to view. None of the first half even hit close to a target. There were only four

shooters left when one of them finally clipped an edge.

Alexa waited calmly, aware that the noise had drawn the church people. The Preacher stood in front of his sweetly dressed flock of five to glare at her with dark, disapproving blue eyes framed by jagged scars that crisscrossed his cheek and forehead. The reverend hadn't always been peaceful. Narrow hips and an unruly mane of bushy black curls spun with the wind as he moved their way.

The last shooter also trimmed the target, but none of them expected to be invited along and none were. As the townspeople slowly headed back to the pub, Edward was there to press a small bit of gold dust into each of their dry palms.

Alexa motioned. "Take it down."

"Another shooter? Upon a condition."

Alexa raised an expectant brow at the lean Blacksmith. "And that would be?"

A few of the barflies had stopped to listen, but Alexa's Eagles gently moved them on, giving her privacy. Except for the Preacher. They were now aware that this might be a double stop.

"I'd know the job first. I'm not a hired killer."

Alexa's mouth opened, but the Preacher

answered for her.

“That’s all she’s come for. A fifth trained dog!”

The Blacksmith read a small amount of satisfaction in the beautiful blonde’s eyes, reminding him of the past in hurtful waves. There was no surprise for him when she simply held out the weapon.

The Preacher barked a laugh. “Well, at least she doesn’t deny it.” Jacob’s tone softened a bit. “Go on and have your turn, David. Perhaps you’ve had enough of this place.”

Alexa ignored the bitter man, not looking away from the Blacksmith. “I search for something long gone and nothing will stop me from finding it. *Nothing.*”

David only considered for a moment, then he reached for the gun.

“The only good man here and she’ll take him away!” Jacob’s voice grew louder. “And what is it he’ll die for? Nothing!”

Alexa also ignored this outburst, as did most of her men. The one who responded had been with her the longest, had the most right.

“You’ll have a turn as well. Anyone with that much anger to spew is no religious man.”

The Preacher spun to argue with Edward, but the sound of David’s shot stopped him.

“Near perfect. Very nice.”

Alexa's praise had the same effect on David that it did the rest of her men. She moved from his line of sight before he could fall at her feet, as they still did sometimes when she caught them off guard. Her gifts, her pleasure, gave them strong bursts of devotion. It was a descendant side effect that she'd learned to use. The witch inside was appealing to males. "Last shooter!" She shoved the gun into his hand.

The religious leader might have resisted if not for the way her scent blew over him. When he shuddered, Alexa's fighters understood. It was a smell like no other, one that called, tempted. And she knew what effect it had; she was standing in just the right place.

The scarred man shivered again when she smiled softly.

"It's time for you to make *your* choice, Jacob." Her tone became merciless. "I will leave you."

She turned from him with that and each of her men knew what his response would be.

Crack!

His shot was dead on the target, blowing out the entire center.

Alexa nodded without looking back. "Tear it down. I'll be at the church. Stay within a call."

A subtle sexuality filled the air as the minds

of her men turned to the few working women watching them hungrily. Not voicing her disapproval, Alexa moved toward the rickety church that was now empty.

Jacob followed with a furious glare toward David, who was disappearing into the pub to get the gold.

The church was spotless, clean enough to eat from the wooden floor and yet, it was unloved. The candles were lit, and even the offering plate held valued items, but it had not been done with care. There was no feeling of awe or reverence, only of disappointment. To Alexa, it was clear that the Preacher didn't want to be here. "Will you break bread with me, Jacob?"

He flinched at the name as it echoed inside the rickety shack, scarred face at a loss for words. He blew out an angry breath. "Yes."

Alexa chose the altar purposely, laying out a simple meal of smoked meat, wine, and hard bread. She moved to wash with no thought to his feelings, but there was only a low mutter when she dirtied the blessed water. *Good.* He would have to leave these things behind to come with her.

Jacob watched her move, her firm, healthy body twisting his mind into fiery pits and sweaty fantasies. She was beautifully made.

When she pushed her cloak back to begin the meal, he felt his body harden, ache. *I want her!*

“Enough to forsake your vows, to kill on command as my sixth trained dog?” She sent out more of the pheromones that drew men to her.

Flushing in horror at having his words used that way, Jacob dipped his head. Forced to choose between his nature and keeping up the lie, he struggled. “I... Yes.”

Alexa broke the bread. “I belong to no man.”

He cringed at the tone.

“So it’s understood. You’ll share to seal your promise?”

It wasn’t a hard choice. Really, there wasn’t a choice at all. “Yes.”

His husky whisper caused her to smile. This time, she let the effect land on him. “Mine?”

Jacob fell to his knees at the altar. “Yes! Thank you for wanting me!”

Satisfied, Alexa handed him half of the bread. “We are so bonded, Jacob. Nothing shall break it.”

2

“I was afraid.”

Jacob's shameful whisper drew no response as they lay together. He continued with a shaking voice. "Because of my face."

Alexa's bare chest rose and fell evenly in the silence.

His tone became urgent. "I'm sorry!"

She responded instantly this time. "If I told you to go right now, naked, to the whores who lay with my men and shoot them?"

Sated and wanted, Jacob didn't even think about refusing. "I don't have a gun. Can I use yours?"

Alexa chuckled tiredly. It was a dangerous thing, the way she'd always been able to bind men to her, and yet, it was useful. With these six, she would now be able to find Safe Haven. "When I leave, you'll be at my side and with a weapon of your own."

Filled with pain and joy, Jacob let her pull him close, this time to sleep.

3

Alexa stepped from the church to find four of her men lounging patiently around the steps. David also waited nearby with a kit and bedroll on his wide shoulders.

Alexa looked at Daniel and then back to David. "Your student."

Daniel nodded willingly, eager to please his mistress.

Alexa stepped aside to let their newest member be seen. “This one as well.”

Gone was the traditional black and white garb of a religious man, and no beard tempered the ugliness of his scars. In their place was the complete outfit that all of her men wore.

In his mid-twenties, Jacob’s dark eyes gazed back with no expression, but the healthy color in his cheeks told the others he’d enjoyed his time alone with their leader. If not for the scars, his baby soft skin would probably have been hard for women to resist. Without them, he could have easily been the best looking member of her crew. Instead, he appeared the cruelest.

Edward smothered his faint twinge of jealousy. “The riders came in.”

Noting the deep purple of the coming sunset, Alexa moved down the stairs.

Edward fell in on her right and the others followed, showing the two new men where to walk.

“Eleven horses and eight men wearing Nazi gear and markings. They went into the pub and straight upstairs, like they were meeting someone.”

“Did they know you were watching?”

“Yes.” Edward was uneasy. “Their leader is sharp...dangerous.”

Alexa didn't doubt his observation. She was only eager to make her own. “Daniel, take the rookies and set up camp a mile east. Get them started.”

Daniel waved at the men, turned toward the west. A direction given in public meant the opposite to keep the rats on their trail guessing.

The two new men didn't want to go, but neither protested this first order. They moved away with reluctant steps.

Edward talked faster as Alexa's pace increased. “White, army clothes and boots with the swastikas. The leader carries a dual sword belt, but only one saber.”

Alexa stopped at the bottom of the pub steps; her three remaining men waited while she considered.

What would their kind come to River City for? The only thing here was the town itself. It was prone to flooding and there was little of real value. Except...this town rested on top of what had once been a vital government bunker.

Alexa looked at the only mounts in sight. The Nazis' horses, probably the last in this dusty state, were nearly dead. The blackie with the limp would be lame as soon as the swelling went down in his fetlock. What would make

them ride such valuable animals into the ground? In this new world, a good horse was precious. The only reason her group didn't have them was because it wasn't necessary and the lengthy, bonding journey was.

Her eyes narrowed. Only three things held any power now—food, water, and weapons. They must think the bunker still held one of those.

“And my fighters want to explore.” Alexa’s smile was hard as she turned away. “Maybe we’ll meet in the darkness.”

Alexa moved them into the brittle trees, not seeing the town lighting up behind her as dusk fell, but she was aware that it was coming to life. After such a hard ride, would those men wait for daylight or head out as soon as the town settled for the night? Her pace increased again. She and her three available hands had a stop to make that would answer that question.

4

Glittering green eyes watched their passage with longing and contempt in equal measures. She’d excluded him for a religious freak and an iron bender. Not that there weren’t reasons for Rick’s existence other than Safe Haven, such as the riders who’d come in four days late, but to

be left for the likes of those two! It was an insult the traitor took to heart.

Rick watched the woman pause on the steps with a familiarity that he instantly loathed. He'd seen her kind once before. He had tried to kill them all and failed. Had she sensed it on him?

The woman turned away.

Rick eased out the door and headed for the outside stairs to the loft. He had a goal here that would get done, but the blonde and her fighters were now in the front of his bitter, calculating mind. Cesar had been gone for half a decade. His charred gold convertible was overgrown with nature, but Rick was still looking for a way to avenge the evil slave trader he'd belonged to. The two months after the war had been the best of his life and someone would pay for ending that. Maybe this woman and her small army. He'd failed to kill Adrian, to extinguish Safe Haven's light, but fate had just given him a second chance to keep it from returning.

5

Jacob and David followed Daniel into the thin trees, glancing over their shoulders repeatedly looking for Alexa.

Knowing it was expected of him, Daniel drew in a breath and spun around. “Pay attention!” He barked it loud enough to make them both freeze in surprise. “She doesn’t need you that much! Earn your place.”

The teacher turned his back and moved on.

The two men hurried to catch up, sharing rueful looks, but neither of them considered changing their minds.

“Do what I do, all the time. Start now.” Daniel began to move in a rotating watch pattern that they tried hard to copy. As they went past the bunker hole, that glint of steel was noted again and ignored. There would be time later, if Alexa allowed it.

“We do everything one way—hers. You’ll be my students, but she’s the real teacher.” He led them through the trees at a fast clip, a bit disappointed that he would miss the fight with the riders, but he was eager to help make her choices fit in. Daniel had only earned one reward from Alexa in the time he’d been with her. He wasn’t quite as fast or sharp as the others, but with a gun, he was still lethal. He was hoping he would be a good teacher, too, and be noticed for it.

Hearing their steps, the rustle of their clothes, their breathing, he spun again. “You make too much noise! You’ll get her killed.”

With that awful warning, Daniel turned toward the path. They, too, would have an apprentice someday if the mistress approved it. Mark had been his first. He had been Edward's. They shared everything.

That sent his thoughts back to pleasing Alexa. Daniel frowned. It wouldn't please her that he wasn't focused on this task. He was the first to have two students at the same time. He wanted her to be proud. Daniel stepped aside, waving a scarred hand. "There's a trail here. We'll go on when one of you find it."

Chapter Six
The Mystery

1

Five once beautiful horses emerged from the knee-high fog with foaming mouths and unhappy noises of misery. They were ignored.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” The riders talked openly, not worried about attracting attention. In this new world, Nazis were once again a powerful group. Only those not afraid of death challenged them.

“Didn’t like the look of ‘em.”

“Me neither.”

“Stop it, shut up.” Their leader commanded obedience. “Set up a perimeter. We’re almost there.”

“Where?”

“The bunker, idiot. *You* go in first.”

“Aww, man.”

The authority was shoddy at best, but when the dirty grubber in the center glared, the man on his far right looked away.

“Fifty-foot northeast from where I’m sittin’.

Find it.”

Two of the men hurried ahead. Using small lighters to see by, their flames cast eerie shadows on the cactus and briar patches that surrounded them.

The hired hands were just that—extra fingers without brains. The leader watching them swallowed his uneasy feeling. He’d left his regular men in Lincoln to avoid splitting this reward evenly, but Donny wished he’d chosen differently now. These four were useless for anything more than sniffing duty.

“Found it.”

The metal hatch wasn’t sealed. It came open with only minimal effort, making the leader’s stomach churn. Someone else had been here, recently. “Guns out, use torches and canisters. You know the drill.”

They moved slowly, clearly reluctant to venture into the stinking darkness.

“Can’t this wait for daylight?”

“No. The dust storm slowed us up. We have to deliver the gas and vials to Roscoe in five days. He’s meeting us in Lincoln and we’ll have to hurry to make that.”

“But I thought we was...”

Tiring, Donny spun around and knocked the whining man off his horse with a single brutal blow to the temple. “Get in there!”

The bleeding man crawled the few feet and disappeared into the ground.

Donny turned to the others. “You two get the perimeter set. Ben, you’re with me.”

Donny let Ben go in first, pausing to take a map from his belt. With a last glare of warning toward the two nervous guards, he also vanished into the ground.

2

“Get the rabbit. A single shot each.” Knowing one of them to be unarmed, Daniel left his holster clear and immediately felt a rookie slide his Colt free and fire to the right.

The fat hare dropped with two bullet wounds. Jacob had his own gun, given to him by Alexa.

David slid Daniel’s gun back into the holster and then went to get the rabbit without being told.

Daniel hid a grin. She’d chosen well again.

3

Donny froze on the long ladder of the bunker as the two shots echoed. The sound of a scuffle from the darkness below was little comfort. “Give us some light, Ben.”

There was no response, though Donny could feel the ladder vibrating and knew he wasn't alone on it. His eyes widened, realizing what that meant.

Donny fumbled awkwardly for his gun, but it was too late to stop the relentless hands that jerked him off the rope and sent him into the darkness below. "Aaahhh..."

Thud!

Alexa was satisfied. "Give us some light."

A single emergency stick flared a second later, implying her men had been ready and waiting for the order, but also willing to function in the dark despite most of them fearing it. Aware of her own terrors, Alexa grunted her approval. She scanned the new bodies that had fallen on top of dozens of dusty skeletons, wanting to be sure that there were no survivors down here. There wasn't.

The signs of past radiation sickness were evident in broken bottles of iodine tablets and dust covered stacks of empty bandage boxes, but there would be more horror in here soon. Edward had made short work of the Nazi guards topside. Their bodies would be dropped into this hole. Then it would all be burnt.

Full of cobwebs and dust, the wide space they'd found was a panic room. The number of bodies directly below the hatch suggested there

hadn't been time to get the new President to safety. Moldering furniture couldn't hide the story of the awful ending that had occurred here. Cartridge casings and bloodstains still glared at them from beneath grinning skulls.

“Five-minute scan, in sight.”

A web of other rooms sprawled out from this one, but they only needed to look in the first open door to know searching the abandoned complex was useless. The skeleton on the revolting couch was mutated. Staying here might still be dangerous.

Alexa concentrated, suddenly sure they'd stumbled onto something she needed. There was a sense of peace here despite the nightmares filling these dark halls, a feeling of safety.

The witch inside scented the stale, stinking air and caught a ghostly whiff of Polo that was instantly gone. *Adrian!*

Alexa lit her torch with a mutter, brightening the enormous room around them to find the message sprayed across the monitors in front of her.

All of the fighters stared in stunned surprise.

Safe Haven
All Survivors Welcome

NE to WY
Channels 7 & 17

And along the bottom:

God Bless the United States and those we
leave behind!

4

“Have a constant loyalty to New America, and you’ll fit with us. Slack off, forget your place, endanger her intentionally or accidentally, and I’ll remove you.”

Not quite sure if that was a bluff or not, neither man was willing to challenge that. Daniel’s next words eased some of their tension.

“There will not be jealousy or attempts to control any part of her. She is not yours or ours. We are *hers* and we share everything.”

Wondering, but not daring to ask if that included intimacy, both rookies continued to listen and copy Daniel as they walked.

“If you have questions, ask them carefully, respectfully. You can come to me or any of the others when you don’t know what to do. We’ve all gone through the same training you’re starting today.” Daniel said it with little

emotion. “The quest matters to you for your own reasons, as it does to each of us, but don’t ever let your needs or desires come before hers. The rest of us will run you out before she has to.” Daniel glared at them now. “Do you understand these rules? There won’t be second chances.”

Jacob and David both nodded, aware that it now felt like a fool’s quest without the woman here.

“Good.” Daniel flipped a hand at the ugly Preacher. “You’re on my right; David on my left. No matter what else is going on, unless she says different, do what I do.”

5

Two bottles crashed to the bunker floor in rapid succession, followed by a small torch. Firelight began to glare balefully up at them from the hole.

“Cover it. The wind down there says it’ll have enough fuel. No need to advertise where it started.” That sent her thoughts back to the other Nazis waiting in town. Would those come looking for these?

After a moment of consideration, she turned away. It didn’t matter. The best had come with their leader and those hadn’t been very good.

The remaining flunkies would likely run, but somewhere, there was a bigger man pulling all these strings. It bothered Alexa to leave him unpunished. It was unlikely that her father would have.

These men had said they were meeting their buyer, Roscoe, in Lincoln. Perhaps she and her fighters would get lucky enough to pass through Nebraska. To want deadly gases and chemicals meant there was someone in mind to use them on. Alexa's heart burned with fury. Hadn't all the hell of the war been enough to make people see the error in the old ways?

Slightly off tune to her mood swing, the three fighters followed her through the darkness toward their camp, wondering if she would give a reward. Granted, it had been only a small battle, but they had done well.

When they stepped into the firelight of camp, the three males shared smiles of resignation. What they'd done tonight was nothing compared to what Daniel had accomplished in their short absence. If there was a reward given tonight, he would be the lucky man to receive it.

Jacob and David were now dressed identical to the rest, and their tools and gear were exactly as they should be. It was easy to see the rookies approved of the new setup from

the way they were working. Their hands didn't fumble, but drew needed items without looking as they built side-by-side smokeless fire pits in front of a one-man canvas that appeared to have been set up and broken down multiple times. Near these was a larger fire with a pot charring in the softly flickering flames. Fresh stacks of wood sat nearby, as did seven freshly filled canteens.

Alexa moved into their camp with a lighter heart, her mood improving. They'd found the first message on the day they had become seven strong. Fate had led her here. If it also took them away from Nebraska and Roscoe, so be it.

Daniel hand signaled an instruction to the new men, then watched Alexa as they hurriedly began serving the meal to the others now sitting in a loose circle nearby. She'd saved him, given him a new reason for living. Did she know how grateful he was?

The rookies were as careful as their teacher had cautioned them to be, also eager to show the woman they were serious. The meal passed slowly, enjoyably. While they all ate, the others filled Daniel in on the bunker and the clue they'd found. The talk quickly moved to planning.

“We'll hit Cheyenne and try to stock up,

unless anyone knows of a better place?” There was silence, each of them enjoying the beans and biscuits. Alexa waited patiently, looking over her men. With a quick smile and a thick goatee, Billy was the quiet rebel of her group. He still favored colorful t-shirts under his fighting clothes—the kind with slogans best kept covered around strangers—and if there was a joke to be told, he was the first to do it.

Sitting next to the Driver, Mark preferred a cleanshaven scalp and spent time achieving it daily. The sexy muscles of his head and arms glistened in the firelight. Each of her men had their own addition to the uniform she’d given them. For Billy, it was the t-shirts beneath his clothes. For Mark, it was the cutoff sleeves of the black shirt that had already given his skin a deep, beautiful bronze glow.

At his side was the Preacher. Jacob’s concession to the uniform was the cross he wore next to his heart. He was a contradiction, her religious killer.

After Jacob’s scarred face, Daniel was ugliest among them with all his battle marks. He’d lived for thrills before the war and his body had paid the price in stitches, gashes, slashes, and gouges that littered his hands, arms, and legs. Only his face was unblemished, showing a handsome profile that had been

protected out of vanity.

David, her future magic user, was taller than the rest of her men, both in size and nature, and carried an aloofness that matched her own.

At her side was Edward. Easily the most dangerous, the Horseman was cool and calm when it was needed. Dependable and ever loyal, he was also vain and a bit spoiled by his place as her first. He didn't hold it over the heads of his teammates. He knew neither she nor they would allow that, but he flaunted it around strangers with no remorse. Still, there was little she could ask of Edward that he couldn't achieve. When she'd wondered if he was the perfect student, nothing had been truer. He soaked up her lessons and repeated them in exact detail. For all his small faults, there was no one better suited to her right.

Around them, the night moved, but no more so than usual. Shadows gathered, fought, and retreated with information. It was happening everywhere, but as long as they weren't attacked, Alexa permitted it. Mother Nature wanted all humans gone, but that couldn't be allowed to happen. Part of repairing the world included letting Nature see how much respect they had. Adrian would retrain humanity to honor the planet. If that didn't work, Alexa

planned to do what she always had—fight.

“If we could cross the Little River, there’s a rail yard within a few hours of Laramie.”

“That’s right. That zone was so flooded, it’s probably untouched.” Mark slapped Billy on the shoulder, not caring that the area was rumored to be a hunting ground for some type of mythical creature. “Great idea.”

“And the river?” Alexa began taking things from her kit. No one knew the area as well as Billy. He’d lived near there before the war.

“The same way we handled the snakes, if we can find the right setup. Skiffs, if not.” Edward had a hint of fondness in his usually expressionless tone. He still cherished the memories of their first month alone together.

“Supplies will be replenished shortly and our first sign has been found.” She looked at them as her scarred fingers neatly twisted the small paper. “Our true quest for Safe Haven begins. Cry off now if there are doubts.”

There was silence. Alexa grinned. “I would have been surprised and that rarely happens.”

She lit the rolled smoke, inhaling deeply. She passed it to Daniel first with a nod of approval at the two silently watching rookies. “We’ll do much together, see much. Our hearts will beat with life.”

She lit a second smoke, took another deep

draw. Her eyes went to the darkness that was creeping closer to smother their light. Her tone became grave. “We will also face unimaginable danger. Our enemy has begun to gather soldiers as well, and soon, we will be the target of nearly everything that breathes. Many ugly battles wait for us.”

Her gaze went to the new men, already considering Jacob to be her last. David had been hers before the first shot was fired. “Nature is furious with all mankind. She wants us gone from her shores and forests, our bones rotting under her contaminated waters. Her loathing is so strong that she goes against the limits of her power. Do not trust anything living from this moment on. We have each other for that.”

Alexa stood, eyes telling Daniel that what he’d been seeking had been earned. “Billy will take over the students. Mark and Edward on guard.”

She moved toward the shadows.

Daniel followed, heart thumping.

Alexa’s cloak covered them almost completely, caught on the tree Daniel was against. Only the barest of their shadows could be seen by the two men on watch, but there was no mistaking the sounds.

“As you would.”

Daniel’s hands slid behind her jaw, gently drawing her closer. He groaned as their lips met. He made the sound again when she slid his hand to the snap of her pants.

The men on duty moved their perimeter back a bit to give privacy, but they both knew it wouldn’t matter. Their leader expected complete control over themselves at all times, but when she took them, she wanted *all* of them. Noise was the last thing on a man’s mind.

“Ooh...” Alexa slid over Daniel with a groan, pressing close. His hips bucked in response.

“Uhh!” Daniel growled in stunned pleasure as she took him, lost in her embrace. “Ooh...never felt...mmm!”

The two guards shared a look of tolerant amusement, moving back a bit more as vivid blue light streamed from the forest around the couple. In the distance, another fire glowed as brightly; the burning bunker provided their cover.

The rookies were on guard with Billy, the others in their bedrolls, as Alexa and Daniel returned to camp. Hardened male hearts clenched with emotion as she gently pressed a

soft kiss to the Biker's pale cheek.

"My thanks."

Daniel flushed with pleasure, voice full of devotion. "My honor!"

6

"It doesn't exist."

"I tell you it does!" Rick sneered harshly, still feeling the sting from the woman's scornful blue eyes. She'd known him for what he was at first glance, and for her to see it so fast was more proof. Chase a myth? Not the likes of her. "Safe Haven exists." The outcast watched the flames leap from the bunker hole.

Aware that the other three were looking at him stupidly, Rick jerked a thumb at the bunker. "Why else would they have burned it?"

"To cover the murders."

The scavenger snorted at the old world answer. "Why? You see a police car around here that we should be hiding from?"

The others snickered.

The treacherous man now leading them ignored the instinct saying he couldn't beat the blonde alone or with these idiots. It was a feeling Rick knew all too well.

"It would be nice to find the supplies they left."

Rick didn't bother to tell them that part of the myth was crap. He'd traveled with Safe Haven long enough to know the refugee camp hadn't had any extra supplies to leave behind for survivors. It was one of those extras that always got tacked onto a legend or a rumor. If not for that lie, Safe Haven might have already been forgotten.

"I saw light to the east as we rode up. If not for being on horseback, I wouldn't have noticed. We'll follow, and hang back until they make a mistake."

The slowest of them frowned. "And the woman?"

Rick leered. "After we retrain her, we'll take her to Roscoe in payment for our failure to acquire the gas. That way, he'll only kill one of you."

7

Alexa's chuckle woke the men on either side of her. Unpleasant, the sound was a perfect start to their day.

"There are new rats on our trail." She closed her eyes, enjoying the comfort of their big bodies a bit longer. "We'll handle that along the way, I think."

Daniel nodded to the guards, sent his eyes

over the two quietly working students, and then found Edward on the other side of them.

The sated man raised a brow, receiving shakes of the head in response that said there wasn't a problem. Daniel also closed his eyes. Alexa was warm and calm between him and Mark. The two men wouldn't budge until she did. One curled around her, the other securely in her embrace, she was surrounded by their dreams instead of her own.

"She'll never ask." Billy's words to the rookies were low, explaining the situation. "She used to wake us up with screams. This works better."

The students understood what hadn't been said. It was an offer to be made in the darkness of the night and then accepted or refused, but never mentioned to her. Whatever nightmares chased her, she didn't want to talk about them.

The new men had woken slowly, eyes repeatedly going to the sleeping trio as they quickly set up a morning camp. Billy's instructions were almost silent, teaching them the basic hand gestures while letting the others sleep.

The porridge was bubbling nicely the next time the blonde opened her eyes.

When Alexa stood to greet the day, male attention lingered on her dawn swept hair. Her

braids were almost never unraveled, but instead of a dreadlock effect, it seemed to protect her hair and her head, providing a thin cushion that served her well in a fight. A simple rinse with her canteen water washed the dust from those long braids and even longer body.

The men all turned their backs to give her a moment of privacy. Unless she called to one of them, it was always this way. She'd more than earned their respect. The slight silvering of her hair was something her senior men had noticed, though. It had come over the last weeks, with each of their adventures sending more of the shiny threads through her blonde locks. It was worrisome, but none of them were sure how to ask about it. As she joined them at the fire for breakfast, they still weren't.

Half an hour after eating, they were on the road again, with Alexa proudly leading them. She now had her army. The hardest part of this quest had been finished. Upon starting, fresh from her escape, she'd doubted there were any fighters left to be found, let alone to have come upon ones so strong, so gifted. They were already a force to be reckoned with and she set her feet firmly. They would go around no more.

Chapter Seven

Myths and Legends

1

The seven fighters moved at a steady pace. In the distance, the landscape was deceptive. One crested hill of muddy brush would reveal miles of pristine land unharmed by the effects of man. An hour later, the trees would begin to turn black and the earth under their boots shifted dangerously to lead them toward whole towns nearly covered in webs of nature.

The four senior men kept the form straight automatically, and the rookies tried to do the same as they filled out the ends of the line. Making very little noise against the stillness, quiet words floated to the new men, who listened intently.

“Eight by ten, with a short wing.”

“And the rooms?”

“Three.”

Edward and Mark worked on her wants while she and Billy guarded.

Daniel looked after the new men. “Still

hearing noise.”

The faint crunch disappeared. That was Jacob. He had an old injury that made his right foot turn. It was likely painful to keep it straight, but Daniel knew the rookie would make sure it was on each step now. Corrections in front of Alexa were rarely given and not usually repeated. Pain was nothing to the frost in those chips of ice that she turned on a man and used to cut him in half.

“Carry bags?”

“They already have them.”

Mark nodded. He should have known she’d be prepared for two instead of one. Their leader was the contingency analyst the old world had needed. The government had only planned to be underground for a year. Alexa would have been ready to dig in for five.

Mark grimaced, thoughts bitter. Not that the government hadn’t tried hard in some things. It had taken well over a year for his fellow inmates to begin starving.

“Rotating form. Rookies follow in place.”

The two men stayed where they were while the other four began a steady walk around Alexa as she moved forward. It had little grace. The buried debris was impossible to avoid, but it was still neat. When her call came, the rookies were ready. “Full crew, rotating

watch.”

Daniel waved them to places ahead of and behind himself, noting Jacob’s careful footing as they spent the next minutes patrolling around their leader.

“Direction change.”

The four senior men spun smoothly, catching the rookies off guard. Firm shoves to the shoulders put them back in place.

“Again.”

This time, Jacob tripped over his carefulness and turned it into a roll that put him quickly back on his feet and in line, face red.

“Again.” Alexa kept working them, showing the two new men how to fit with their team.

“Standard form.”

This one was the easier, simple V they’d begun the day with, and the two River City males were secretly very glad for the break. The constant rotation was a workout.

Two minutes later, when their breathing had evened out, Alexa spun a finger. “Rotating watch.”

2

They continued late into the morning, with Alexa calling periodic breaks to keep her men

from wearing down, but she didn't take it easy on them. She watched, evaluating. Soon, she would need to ease their worries of not being able to keep up. Her other men were the same as they'd started. Every other day of this journey had been spent this way, but Jacob and David were sweaty, disheveled, scraped, bruised. *They look weak in comparison.* She heard Jacob fall and roll again. *But appearances are often deceiving in this world.*

Needing to wait until the rookie wouldn't think he was the reason for the stop, Alexa subtly slowed their pace to find a spot for their lunch campsite. The ugly ground was becoming more like a swamp as they traveled. It had rained today. The dew on decaying trees dripped steadily, but the earth was arid. So much that it had cracked in huge, jagged patterns resembling glass shatters after a harsh impact. For being so damp, the trees were also brittle and dust bound. The weak branches hung over the two lanes of weed-hidden pavement like a canopy of desperation. In the distance, it looked the same, but appearances were not to be believed.

Alexa held up a hand in that soon-to-be familiar sign of warning.

Edward and Mark fell into protection detail around the group, one moving to the front, one

to the rear. The other two fighters placed Alexa and the rookies between themselves, creating a barrier from each direction.

Ahead of them, something moved, but when the other fighters remained motionless, so did the rookies. They understood where they'd been placed. If someone got through the other four, the two River City men would be Alexa's last defense.

The movement was slow, plodding. It reminded the men of the very recognizable clip-clop of a shod horse. Behind that came the soft noise of a harness jingle rigged with the tones of goods for sale.

Alexa pointed a calloused finger down and spun it in a fast circle that sent her senior men into action. They formed a crisscross line on both sides of her, with the rest lined up neatly behind. The rows were perfectly straight as the rookies stayed where they'd been put. Alexa's switch had cleared half of the road.

Seven sets of hard eyes watched the horse drawn cart roll closer.

“Potions, charms, spirits...” Not uttered, the words were spoken with a rhyming lilt that suggested a carefree innocence. The creature who called them? Not so much.

Alexa felt her army tense as the troll came into view. Only for the new men, she spoke.

“Do what we do. Consume nothing we don’t carry now.”

“Trolls will steal your memories.” Daniel instructed them from legends, not actual knowledge. “They were swamp dwellers before. Their existence was denied, but myth, they are not.”

The red and black, star-carved wagon came within ten yards before Alexa reacted. “Information for dust.”

“Aye.” The creature driving the solid gray horse slowed. “And maybe more, slayer?”

Alexa shrugged, voice carrying none of the greed in his gravelly pitch. “Perhaps.”

The traveler studied them avidly; vivid yellow eyes rapidly changed from bright blue to dark brown and then back, as if he couldn’t keep himself together in his excitement. Dressed in a black robe and boots of the same shade, the tufts of long, bright yellow fur coming from his ears suddenly curled around his thick neck.

The troll bellowed childishly. “Share camp?”

With his greenish, pockmarked skin, he was a foreign nightmare with hands three times the size of a human male. His bushy brows were a deep, blood red, giving his skin the glow of a monster. His pointed nails and fang-like teeth

added to the impression.

“Why not?” Alexa’s agreement surprised only David and Jacob. “Here?”

The troll grinned cruelly. “’Tis not *mans’* road anymore.” He extended a massive paw. “Jendon.”

All six of the fighters tensed.

Alexa shook her head, not smiling. “Will you begin our trading with trickery? I have no need so bad as to tolerate such as that!”

The creature cringed back from her as if slapped. “Nay, lady. There are so few left as you. I’m sorry!”

Alexa arched a brow. “Have you seen such as me?”

“Aye.” Jendon bobbed furiously, sly gleam coming back into his flickering gaze. “Gone now, though. Culled the herd and split.”

Alexa showed him a scarred hand and slowly took a pouch from her belt. She tossed it gently, but with an intentional curve.

Alexa was proud of her men when none of them reacted to the creature’s incredibly fast movement. Jendon jumped, caught the pouch, and stored it in a blur. Back neatly in place seconds later, they continued the transaction, which was mostly overlooked by the six shocked males. Even for all they’d come through, this was a lot to accept.

“Perhaps those who follow us will not know the words.”

The troll’s eyes shifted in quick flashes. A businessman had been hired. “Aye, lady. Without those, they’d go no further.”

“Or perhaps *you* won’t. One is harder than the rest.”

Jendon grinned again at her toneless warning, huge yellow fangs gleaming. “*That* would be something to see.”

Alexa shrugged. “I know where to place my dust.”

Satisfied with her fast response, Jendon’s ugly smile faded.

Alexa motioned for her twitchy men to set up a full camp even though they had half a day’s light left.

Edward and Mark stayed at her side as the others took care of it. She was rarely without a personal guard. If she fell, so would the quest, but with this...monster in their firelight, she would have two defenders.

Their camp was made within minutes now that they had more bodies to help with the chores, but Jendon still beat them. His speed as he unloaded things was eerie.

Alexa could feel the tension, but she didn’t offer any comfort. Nerves had to be conquered by them all and paranoia, as well. Some things

carried a clear sense of menace. The troll was one of those. “Will you join us for the meal?”

Jendon shook his large head at her offer, body piled under him in a barrel shape that hid how tall he really was. “I have no need.”

“Our circle, then, tradesman?”

Jendon smiled, more naturally this time. “With honor. Let your men stand while we barter.” The note of greed was unmistakable.

Alexa narrowed her eyes in warning. “Do not violate my hospitality. Save the switch for those who come after us.”

Chastened, Jendon nodded. “Aye, mistress. Truly none such as you have I seen, but for the times right after the death horse seal was broken. Only one other group.”

“Safe Haven.” Alexa’s voice was the barest breath.

The creature’s eyes widened. “You seek those who came before!” He paused in shock, mouth open to claim that it was a fool’s quest, perhaps, and then snapped it shut instead.

Her fighters, even the new ones, understood. Her eyes were beautiful, absorbing, hypnotic. They said she couldn’t be beaten. It was hard to mock that confidence.

“Tell me, outcast. I’d know it all and every pouch of dust I’m carrying will be split between us.”

Ignoring the insult, Jendon's bumpy profile lit up with harsh greed in the flickering light of the fire. "Deal."

He put a hand out.

This time, Alexa allowed a brief seconds' contact that made the creature grimace in distaste.

"No need for that!" He whined at the heat, making her men exchange grins.

She shrugged indifferently. "I thought so."

The woman looked at Daniel, who motioned the rookies forward with cautioning words to begin serving the meal.

"Talk now, Jendon."

The troll did as she instructed. "When the seal was broken, we such beings went further into the bogs and forests, yet many of us perished beside the humans we had felt a kindness for."

Alexa swallowed a bite of the bitter stew that Jacob had prepared; she now knew who had made last night's evening meal. It hadn't been the Preacher. She'd been able to eat that plate of food.

Jendon paused at her grimace.

Alexa gestured for him to continue as she reached for her canteen.

Jacob flushed, aware of the problem. He'd used too much salt, like he'd been doing for

decades. Most of his meals since the war had come from cans and pubs.

“We were content to hide, as we have always done. We survived.” The troll’s eyes widened a bit, the unsettling flicker slowing. “And then the winds arrived, much too early. They said we—the undead’s exiled defenders—had been recalled into service.”

The creature cocked his chin in wonder and confusion. “The chains that bound us before became our weapons. We carry out our new mission even now.”

This was said regretfully. Understanding came to the men at Alexa’s response.

“Humans.”

“The enemy.” Jendon hung his head in shame at the admission, though the males had a sense that it wasn’t genuine.

“There were attacks.” His rough voice filled with horror. “None were spared, not even the little ones!”

“Why were you banished, Jendon?” Her question demanded honesty.

“I gave safe passage to a human child.” His voice broke on the next awful words. “They brought her back and made me kill her!”

Alexa had no sympathy for his sobs. “Better that you had died instead. There is no forgiveness for such a sin.”

Instead of the rage that brutal truth could have brought, there was only profound loss. “Aye.”

The silence was thick.

Alexa looked toward the cart, to his sleeping horse that was still in its traces. “May we?”

The troll nodded, unconcerned.

Alexa met Edward’s eye for a brief moment of communication.

Edward called David over. As the firelight bartering continued, the two males fed, watered, and rubbed down the strong Appaloosa with quietly admiring hands and tones.

“You became a nomad?”

Jendon’s flickering eyes swung back to hers at the question. “Aye. My tribe served the rain goddess, making her potions and comforts. I do the same for those I meet.”

Alexa was sure those potions would be powerful. She leaned forward. “Of those you’ve met, I would hear now.”

Unable to resist the pull of a descendant, the troll began to speak of things that Alexa’s men had dreamed of before and during their time with her.

“Twas three full seasons ago when they came through our homeland. The bogs were

especially wet and none of us wanted to leave, not even to carry out the new missions the Wind kept delivering. The swamps were perfect, more flooded than we'd ever seen them. We didn't bother to keep a watch." The troll's unsettling face filled with a longing that Alexa understood well.

"Their noises drew us out. The screams and pain had become common, but this was a light in the darkness."

"Safe Haven Refugee Camp."

"Aye, lady. Full of the hardest I'd seen until today."

"They were defended against Nature?"

"She had no power over them!" Jendon whispered in awe. "Anything inside their light was protected."

"How long were they there?"

"Near a week. They spent time in a city, the one that collapsed, and then they loaded up and went east."

"You watched them the whole time?"

Jendon watched as she began to pull pouches from her cloak. "No one cared until the Wind found out that we'd let them pass and told on us." His voice trembled. "Nature tore the bogs apart with a mighty shake that drove us out. Then came my shame." Tears welled again.

Alexa tossed two of the four pouches she had dug out.

The troll's attitude changed from sorrow to suspicious disbelief. "I cannot accept this much."

Alexa's smile was harsh in the firelight. "In return, you'll stay close in case I have a need of you."

Jendon's eyes flickered rapidly between green and red now, between greed and anger at the trap. "For how long?"

"Until I've gotten my dust's worth."

The troll loathed her in that moment. His greedy nature was being used against him, but there was no trace of it in his response, only the proper servitude. "Master."

Magic swirled through the chilling darkness. Brutal and ancient, the streaming green tails coiled around Jendon's huge wrists, as the other end settled snugly into Alexa's grip. Such a bond was unbreakable.

"Bright! Too bright!"

Alexa closed her eyes for a brief second.

Her shocked men watched the creature's evil face relax.

"Better!"

"This binding stands. You will come when called."

Jendon dropped his chin miserably.

He stared in confusion when Alexa added a third bag of the heavy dust to the stack at his feet.

“Timeless potion.”

Jendon made the pouches disappear.
“Now?”

“Nay. I would hear more of those who came before.”

He paused, considering. “Have you heard the legend?”

Even though she had, Alexa was sure some of her army had not. “No.”

In a flash, the troll went to his cart and returned with a small harp. On the end was a disheveled fairy with golden wings and long, sharp teeth that she bared as she began to pluck the strings.

The troll paid her no notice, but started singing in a surprisingly pleasant voice:

*A light in the darkness,
Safe Haven once stood.
Sheltering survivors,
And serving the good.*

*A place of safety,
In a harsh new life.
Honor and duty,
Among the despair and the strife.*

*Blazing a path of hope,
Safe Haven Refugee camp came this way,
Arriving for many,
In time to be the saving ray.*

*And then they were gone, vanished,
Leaving only traces.
The new world slowly moved on,
And the survivors forgot their faces.*

*Years passed in hell.
Nuclear horror created more doubt.
It erased from the hurting land,
All the signs of their route.*

*Over the years, Safe Haven became myth,
A dream and rumor,
Scorned or ignored,
Treated with humor.*

*Forgotten by most,
The signs remain buried,
And the people in this hell,
Remain haggard and harried.*

*But for a few,
Ignorance remains,
Of the hope that once was,*

Just after the Final Days.

*Under the rubble,
Carved in the stone,
Are the notes of Safe Haven,
To lead people home.*

*Unable to stay,
They tried to make amends,
Guiding survivors,
To a life free of past sins.*

*On a tropical isle,
Civilization still exists,
Ruled with kindness,
Not iron fists.*

*Those left behind mock and scoff,
Throwing their hands up in denial,
While endless paradise waits,
Only for them to reconcile.*

There was a silence, thick with unspoken importance.

Alexa found David already watching for her instructions. “Bring a bottle, the red. Put out a standard watch.”

The rookie moved to Daniel for what she wanted, glad the senior man didn’t seem upset

at the attention. Her invitation to join them had been clear.

“Another song, lady?”

“Perhaps later.”

The troll sat the harp on the dirt next to him.

The snoozing fairy promptly buried her head under her shimmery wings and went back to sleep.

“What waits for us?!”

Her demanding shout was sudden and jarring, making the small fairy hiss in anger.

Jendon was only mournful. “Nothing. Nothing but trouble for your kind.”

Satisfied, Alexa took the bottle from David without looking at him. She motioned with her free hand.

David sat on her right, keeping his attention on their surroundings as much as on the creature across the dim flames.

Jendon studied the man, shifty eyes seeing what he had no doubt the woman already knew. “You’d use this one? You know what it will cause?”

“Stop.” Alexa cut Jendon off before he could confirm his suspicions. “Those are not your answers to give, nor your questions to ask.”

Jendon flinched from her reproach. “As you say.”

Alexa handed her knife to David. “A lock of your hair.”

The rookie did it quickly.

He hid a frown at her next request.

“A piece of your flesh.”

He removed it from the back of his leg, not wincing as red drops hissed into the fire during the exchange.

The troll took the items with obvious approval, stowing them beneath his robes. “Two hours.”

Alexa passed a small bandage to David without looking at him. “My thanks.”

His glance was curious; she permitted it. “As you would.”

David thought carefully. “What signs have you seen near here of those who came before, and where were they?” He could feel her approval at his choice.

Jendon looked to the woman to secure her approval before turning back. “The last I saw was a note carved into the stones of the Black Hills.”

“What did it say, layman?” David hadn’t known he was going to use the term, but the troll seemed happy enough to be called such.

“All survivors welcome. Traveling on a southeast line. Safe Haven Refugee Camp. God bless the USA.”

It was almost the same as they'd found in the bunker, bringing the fighters a wave of excitement and discovery. Safe Haven was real. They would find it or die trying.

3

The conversation slowed, but the night flew by. As a faint moon spun overhead, the troll turned worried yellow eyes on the blonde still sitting alertly by the fire. "Must I stay?"

Alexa shook her head, gesturing at the reddish bottle of liquid that he'd pulled from his robes a while back and set by the fire to warm. "Until it boils?"

"Not a second longer."

"You may go in peace. Perhaps I'll never have a need of you."

Jendon lumbered to his feet, flickering eyes almost hypnotic as they changed from yellow to red and back again in rapid succession. "And if you do?"

"Then bring your wares and your mount. Both are at my leisure."

The creature bowed, openly bitter this time. He was seated in the cart seconds later. When he'd hooked up the horse or retrieved the harp, none of them saw, but they were gone as the steady clip-clop and harness jingle rang out

softly.

“Potions, charms, myths...”

The cart moved steadily away from their firelight, but Jendon’s voice came floating back to them.

*They came from the west,
Seven fighters to the end.
One stunning blonde warrior,
Leading six hardass men.*

*Through magic and death,
Demons and fire,
Clever ambushes,
and Nature’s ire...*

Alexa felt the moment they became a legend. She was filled with satisfaction and a longing to hurry, but she tempered her pride as they settled down for the night. There was a very long way to go. Tomorrow, they would reach Laramie and then head for South Dakota, where they would view Safe Haven’s message for themselves. This quest had only just begun.

Very tired, half of the group slept soundly just minutes later. There could have been grumbles and whispered complaints, but there was only light snoring and the light steps of those on guard. All of the males were content with the strange new life that Alexa had given

them. For being in the nuclear wilderness, it was nearly perfect.

4

“They burnt it!”

Corbin surveyed the damage at the old bunker with a keen eye, ignoring the mutters of Paul and his soldiers. If Alexa had them set it on fire, she’d found something to prevent anyone else from knowing. What had been here?

The commander turned slowly, taking in each small scene until he had a clear idea of what had happened.

“I feel him.”

Paul’s words caused confusion for everyone except Corbin, who turned his way. “Where?”

Paul’s eyes were closed. “Everywhere. He’s been here.”

Corbin waved at the men, telling them to branch out and search the charred rubble. All he needed was a sign.

“Damn.”

Shane’s voice said it was a shock. Most of the men started to move into the next room.

“No!” Corbin glared. “Stand watch.”

The new men he was forced to work with were untrained, undisciplined, and on the edge

of revolt. The big bunker hadn't sent fresh provisions or promotions in a month. It made handling these men a careful balance. Not that Corbin was worried over his own safety. He wouldn't be taken down by a mere mortal and he hoped these men knew it. The stories floating through the bunkers should be enough to tell them they were in over their heads if they thought to attack him and win.

“Over here!” Shane called.

Corbin and Paul stared at the sprayed words in shock. Two of the monitors hadn't melted from the fire, protected by damp rolls of carpet.

Safe Haven.

Alexa had her first clue.

Elated, Corbin marched toward the rope ladder they'd used to get down here. “Burn it again, and this time, make sure it's right.”

“But the report...”

“Should say it was Nazi vandals.” Paul informed Shane, earning a nod from Corbin.

No one else could be allowed to find these clues. If the big bunkers found out where Adrian had gone, they would probably nuke it.

Corbin marked the location on his map and settled back to be driven to their evening camp. The hunt would continue. His mood was great.

Up before even Daniel this time, Jacob and David began the morning with quiet work, hoping to please Alexa. They made coffee, pancakes, and Spam with MRE bacon refried into gravy to go over both. It was a warm meal to help them stand against what looked to be a cold, dreary day.

Edward and Mark were on duty, their rested faces showing pleasure at how well the new men were blending in. Seven strong, there would now be new sets to learn, new forms and fighting styles to practice. It would be a welcome change from the weeks of repetition they'd had since picking up Billy.

Alexa gravitated to the good smells as soon as she woke. She sat near the fire and accepted the plate of food.

The other fighters who weren't on duty joined her.

Mark was eager to have their route confirmed. "Outer edges of Laramie by late afternoon?"

Alexa stabbed a bite with her bent fork as she answered. "Maybe a bit later, if we have to hole up while it blows over."

The clouds in their path were ominous, but still half a day away. What would reach them soonest was the wall of rain leading the storm.

They would be soaked before their normal lunching time if Alexa kept them on the road in it, as she sometimes did. Before they broke camp, the wind started to gust.

Hours later, it still hadn't eased.

Sensitive to the changes in the weather, David moved out of formation to reach his teacher. "Something's happening." He jerked a thumb upward, where the sky had turned to a serene shade of blue. "There."

Not sure how to handle it, Daniel waved him to the front. "Tell her."

David moved quickly to Alexa's side, but not so fast that she didn't see him coming. He'd worked around skittish animals all his life. He knew better than to approach someone like her from a blind spot. "There's trouble."

Alexa's attention was already on the beautiful sky. There was even a bright peek of long-lost sun through the heavy grit, hoping to further convince them of their safety. She spun a finger to halt their group. "What do you suggest?"

David lifted his chin against the scorn he had expected. His nature was close to serene most of the time, but being laughed at or made fun of would send him into an instant rage. Ghosts of the past like to rattle those chains.

David had learned swinging back was the only cure. “Watch and wait.”

“Agreed.” If he was wrong, they had only lost time. If he was right, then his place was proven to her. “Ten-minute stop. Stay close.”

After bathroom pauses, all of the fighters gathered back around their leader, and waited tensely. The senior men knew Alexa had chosen each of them for reasons beyond their skill with a gun; they had more than just that brutal duty to perform. Was having a sense for trouble coming a part of David’s purpose on this quest?

Seconds later, that appeared to be the truth.

The invisible cold front swept out of the damp trees above them and then sank down over the road like a bucket of ice. The wind was nearly frigid, sending chills through her body. The difference in temperature told her what to expect.

Alexa untied an end of the rope that was coiled passively around her waist. “Link us up. Do it quickly.”

The fighters hurriedly tied themselves together and moved toward a nearby tree at her wave.

David started to say he didn’t feel it anymore... “Down!”

The warning came too late. The wind slammed through their tied group and sent David onto his back, as if he'd been targeted and shoved. It jerked the closest men toward him, but they didn't fall.

Startled, David quickly regained his feet.

Alexa motioned for them to tie the rope around the tree. Clearly, this was no ordinary storm.

Now, in a loose circle around the trunk, noise roared at them from the left, but the blast of slicing leaves came from the right. A shower of tattered branches and foliage spun down to envelope them. The earth shifted under their boots.

Alexa predicted the trap and quickly cut one end of the rope. "Up!"

The last boot was barely off the ground before the dirt began ripping itself apart in furrows, searching for them. All around the tree, the ground rose and caved in, rose and caved in.

Grrrr...Creak...

Nature shook the tree, threatening to rip it from the ground. The fighters clung to the trunk and limbs, ropes now tangled among the swaying branches.

The wind came back suddenly, slamming into the tree. The insects living on the tree

began to attack the fighters, trying to make them fall to keep Nature from destroying their home.

The tremor storm increased, sending out waves of violent upheaval that split the ground under the roots, forcing them upward.

“Grab him!”

Jacob lost his hold as the slimy trunk jumped out of his grasp. He hit the branch below, smacking his head and jerking all of them toward the ground.

Alexa hauled on the rope, wondering at the quick flash of Déjà vu, but she didn't have time to ponder it.

Edward and Daniel were helping her now. Straining, they pulled the others back up.

Crack! The grinding noise was ear splitting as the earth tore itself open.

Alexa held out a hand, choosing to return what she had taken all those months ago. Brown energy shot out of her palm and sank into the vibrating ground.

Silence...

Stillness...

It was over.

Sympathetic to the jumpiness of her men, Alexa grinned. “Who ordered the blowjob?”

The unexpected quip brought snorts and a renewed sense of calm. To David, she gave a

subtle nod that made his mood brighten. He was instantly sure he would crave that feeling for the rest of his life.

Alexa waved her men down. She'd only been through one other tremor storm. It had allowed her to escape from Regan's ambush in the desert. She now had a fondness for them despite their evil nature. They were Nature's assassins, and totally ruthless. That was something she respected.

Alexa looked to the distance, where the real storm was still rolling heavily closer. "Come, my pets. Let's get in a few hours on the redline before it hits."

6

Hours later, the fighters were taking shelter from the storm in a barn with heavy leaks and the bones of animals still in dusty pens. The farmhouse had been collapsed.

Alexa collected the bones and spent the time grinding them into ashes, then filling her pouches with it. Her men observed in fascination, finally understanding Jendon's potions were made with the bone dust of the dead.

"Human is more powerful, but any bones will do. Laymen are magic users. The dark

charms are their strength, but also their curse. They cannot gather the dust themselves. They react to it instantly. Always be generous in your dealings with them or your purchase may be cursed.”

That brought more curiosity as she stored the bags and wiped her hands on the rough ground.

“Time for a lesson. Enough correct answers will earn a reward for all.”

Her eyes swept them, pleased to see each man had found something useful to do with their time. They were learning fast. “How many different animals and how much dust from each went into the pouches?” She began rolling a smoke as they called answers.

“Bull, chicken.”

“Goat.”

“Cat?”

“A quarter of each.”

“And why a mix at all?” Alexa wasn’t surprised when it was David who knew.

“They are domestic and therefore, equal in power. Uneven mixes will ruin stability.”

“And the last pouch of leftovers? How even was the mix?”

“Half, a quarter, and a third each of the remaining.”

Jacob’s fast response had all eyes turning to

him.

The rookie shrugged, young face reddening. “I saw the even distribution and wondered what the rest would be used for. I was looking for it.”

“Very good. The answer to that question will earn someone honor guard.” She stood, not wincing at the stiffness of her legs. “Let’s share a twist and think.”

None of them were able to guess what the unevenly mixed bone dust was good for, but they spent the half an hour watching as Alexa ground handfuls of this and that from the many pockets in her cloak.

She put it into an empty pouch and then dumped a portion of it into a dirty glass vial. When she added water from her canteen, it turned a deep, dark green liquid that seemed to smoke and bubble.

Alexa held it up as she led them out into the light drizzle of the storm’s wake.

“Grab quickly when I tell you.” She moved to a limply struggling apple tree nearby. It was dying; sparse branches held only tiny, immature green balls.

Alexa threw the vial at the base of the tree with a sharp movement, shattering it. The emerald liquid sank into the ground. For a long moment, there was nothing.

Rustle.... Soft and odd, it was the sound of new life spreading through the tree. The nickel-sized apple balls began to grow; the leaves around them turned brighter, healthier.

The men watched in amazement as the tree burst into full bloom with a speed they couldn't properly track.

Alexa got closer, ducking as a growing branch shot out. "Get ready. Carry bags and catch."

It would have been something entertaining to see—six men catching apples that a very fast blonde woman was throwing, but for the thinning woods and thick black corn, they were alone.

The tree was magnificent, stunning in perfect contrast to the withering branches that struggled around it, but the fighters sensed more coming than just a miracle grow session to replenish their stores.

"Enough."

Each small pouch was full as Alexa stepped back, including hers. She gestured at the now creaking and groaning tree. "Now see what an uneven mix and greed causes."

The rookies, both chewing generous mouthfuls, struggled to keep it down as the tree began to die.

Its beautiful leaves and fruit molded on the

edges, then the middle, then fell like Christmas ornaments. It happened in seconds. The snapping twigs echoed like gunshots; larger branches started to crack and fall. The earth shifted as the roots withered violently beneath their boots.

Crackkkk!

The thick trunk split down the middle with a final, heart wrenching crack.

After that, came the sounds of the rookies forcing themselves to swallow.

In the distance, another noise came, unmistakable as well. A piercing scream of pain and rage rose on the wind to howl at them. Nature had gotten her stolen energy back, but lost a tree in its place.

Alexa spoke pointedly, wiping a fat, red apple on her sleeve. “Our enemy has weaknesses. Never doubt it.”

She bit off a small piece of the juicy fruit as she headed for the road. “Don’t waste even one of those. It will be long before I’d do such again without better cause.”

7

Now that her crew was complete, Alexa was ready to tighten the bonds with her men. As they sat around the fire, she could feel them

wondering what else they might face and of course, where she'd come from. They all wanted to know about the rats on their trail, too. Would either of her new men have the sand to ask? Edward had wanted to, but after rescuing the children, he'd understood he wasn't supposed to question. The rookies didn't have that sense yet.

As she had the thought, Jacob turned to her.

“How do you know so much? Why are you so different?”

There was silence as the others froze.

Alexa considered his request only briefly. These seven would be with her when she found Safe Haven. That was a long trip to make without knowing what your leader stood for. In her case, it was more of what was inside, but they would understand that before long.

She pinned the rookie with a merciless look.

David moved subtly away, wary of the response.

Alexa leaned forward and fed the tension with another hard glare, not caring for David's need to protect his own ass. “In return, I may ask for your story, Jacob.” She brought her hand up to her face and stroked her cheek, telling them all which tale she'd requested.

Jacob nodded reluctantly at the trade. “As

you wish.”

“Twist a smoke and pour us all a drink.” Alexa settled against a damp tree trunk. “It would seem that story night has come.”

The men moved quickly, each admiring Jacob for helping them get something they’d wanted, but had been unable to attain on their own. Only a rookie had such leniency. They were grateful he’d used the free pass before learning that rule.

Alexa inhaled deeply, drawing smoke for a long hold that sent waves of dizziness through her mind. “After the war, I was a prisoner, like all of you were in one form or another.”

Ghosts moved through tormented halls in Alexa’s memories, gliding by death and betrayal with a human face to push open a bunker door to the past.

Chapter Eight
The Utah Facility
January 2016

1

“**N**ow kill him!”

Unable to reach the one commanding her through the intercom, the woman did as she was told.

The soldier, like the countless others they’d forced her to hurt, wanted only for the days-long hell to be over. He squeezed his bruised eyes shut as the fire flashed out. Her tormented words led him into the light. “I’m sorry!”

There were no tears. Alexa had few left to give away now, but the woman watched him burn in horror. How many did that make? She’d stopped counting when the number went beyond fifty.

“Excellent. Return to your room.”

The woman mentally finished the order. *And take your meds.* Now that she’d performed for them, her captors wanted her back under control again. Drugs were the only way to accomplish that.

“And take your meds.”

Her eyes went over the terrified child they’d used to force her cooperation. *So, drugs aren’t the only way.* In those shellshocked depths, the woman could see the death that waited for him here no matter how well she pleased those in charge. This boy had the marker, too. They would never let him go.

Alexa waited for the door to slide open, trying not to be crushed by what she’d done. The soldier’s life had protected the child. After the war, it was more than a fair trade, and yet, there was a sense of doomed resignation that followed her back to her small cell. Willing or not, it had happened by her hand, her mind. She was no less guilty than those who played with her powers at the harm of others. If she just gave up...

Alexa flinched away from the thought, mind becoming a mask of hatred. *Never! They will make a mistake and I will get free!*

The woman went to the waiting tray, picking up the small cup with an eager hand. The pills went down fast.

She settled on the floor next to her cot. Eyes closing, her mind began replaying the past, bringing her relief from the newest chain they’d forced her to wear. She might get away from

this place one day, but she'd never outrun so many ghosts.

After a long moment, the drugs began working; her hands rose as she dozed. They moved in graceful, precise movements that few of the watching scientists recognized. In that moment of drug induced trance, she was a fighter cleaning her guns, preparing for battle.

2

It was a month before they woke her again. She only knew because of a leaf that someone had dragged in on their shoe and left outside her cell.

It was spring now, more than three years after her capture. While staring at that leaf and realizing how much time had passed, she'd never felt more alone.

Alexa had been in Hawaii when the war came. After the bombs and the tidal waves, the rioting had devastated that island state, but with the ocean so angry, leaving hadn't been an option. Even when the mental calls had finally come, smashing through the old lava tunnels like thunder, she'd been unable to answer. By then, she had her own wards to care for. She'd found the children abandoned in a school two days after the bombs and tried to return them to

their families. After only a short time, she'd understood those people were dead. Why else wouldn't they have come for their babies? Still, she'd kept searching; their tears demanded it. Three mothers and one blinded uncle had gratefully accepted the gift she'd given, but the rest were left to her. She'd also tried to answer her father, to tell him that she couldn't leave the kids. It had drawn the attention of Corbin.

Alexa shuddered. The commander had been out trolling for survivors and found what he'd least expected. She had been caught off guard, making it easy for the government to surround them and force her surrender to keep those with her from being killed.

“Come to the lab.”

The voice from the wall speaker sent heat into her gut. The rest of those hurting kids, she'd begun to love. They were all dead now. The horror was staggering.

The halls she walked through were sterile, devoid of life, but flooded with offensive colors meant to keep the captives in mental chaos. There was no relaxing here, no adapting or thinking time. You survived if you could. That was it.

The narrow steps twisted downward, lined in shiny metal grates with cameras that measured weight, pulse rate, and balance in a

single step. At the bottom of these prying stairs, another gateway scanned her, spitting out brain and organ conditions. Quick lights and sounds drew hearing and sight results, and for all of this, the woman was grateful. Handled another way, it would have taken an hour and all of her strength to get through it.

The sight of the test room never failed to give Alexa pause. Above, was a balcony-like viewing area. *That's where the voice comes from, the one that forces me to kill.*

“Sit behind the glass wall.”

Alexa did as she was told, listening to the soft hiss of the door sliding closed behind her. She always did. They'd held her, forcing her to explore the dangerous power inside so they could see what the others here would be capable of when they grew up. Then, they could breed them into a perfect weapon.

Her kids, her warm, human kids, were long gone. She didn't remember the attack, thanks to the dart that had taken her out of the fight before it began.

“Burn his arm, nothing else.”

The soldier fearfully waiting was young, already in pain from what looked like multiple burns from other sessions.

Alexa closed her eyes. They would kill one of the kids if she refused. *I have to protect the kids like me from this room.*

Flames shot out in a narrowed band of burning ribbon that seared off a layer of skin and sent screams down the halls. The glass room was bulletproof, fireproof, and a few others, but sounds were a tool the soldiers used. Every child hearing the level of agony in those hoarse pleas knew who was in the dreaded room, who was causing it, and of course, why.

Alexa was keeping them from being hurt; the guilt of it bonded them to her, as their captors had known it would. Many of these children were incredibly talented despite not being old enough to have the full power of a descendant yet and the government used them against each other to prevent rebellion. If one complex broke free, two were destroyed in retaliation. It was an awful snare.

Determined to regain the world of lavish power, those in charge of the remaining government had chosen to continue the old ways and keep blending the power. Like those who'd come before them, they were trying to make themselves as strong as the descendants, attempting to steal their gifts through experiments that included the embryos from

human and descendant specimens. In short, they were still playing God.

“Make the soldier burn without dying,” the voice ordered. “Or we will bring in your cousin, Tomas.”

Alexa obeyed.

3

One of the guards, a redhead with a cruel sneer, enjoyed his job so much that he'd been promoted to guarding the bottom floor. Only the important specimens were held there. Regan loved the daily sessions he was now a witness to. He also looked forward to helping, to drawing blood.

Regan had been a killer long before the war. The trail of bodies he'd buried across the United States was so large that even he didn't remember them all. Most had been enjoyed through a haze of drugs and music. Now, he had little descendants to play with, but he liked Alexa's sessions the best. He wasn't sure why. The others were bloodier. Some even went as far as rape—a highlight for the guards, for sure, but the woman in cell #17 was special compared to the others being held here.

Regan studied Alexa's ass as she entered her room, body tight. He'd almost had her

twice over the months he'd been stationed down here. The killer was determined that she would be the victim he hadn't had since the war. When you were living in a compound, murders were noticed and often caught on camera. He'd had to content himself with beatings and torture on other floors before they'd brought him down here and made him happier than he'd ever been. Down here, the pain and blood stayed on the ground so much that he didn't have to do it himself to feel it. Except, he missed it.

Seeing Alexa first brought in, naked and bloody, had given Regan a flash of his past; he'd been stewing on a way to get her ever since. He thought those heading up this little torture palace might want her gone soon. Even asleep, her brain charts were flying. She was dangerous and should be eliminated soon. That narrowed his chances to catch her at the right time, but it also said if he killed her, they wouldn't be as mad. Regan did not intend to be tossed out into that apocalyptic nightmare that they sometimes watched on the screens, but he sensed this woman might be worth the risk.

“Lights out in three...two...one.”

Darkness flooded the quiet halls of the bottom floor.

Regan slipped from his post. Nothing ever happened on the third shift, so the guards often snuck off to amuse themselves. He wouldn't be missed.

Alexa swallowed her pills as usual, but as soon as the lights went out, she shoved her finger down her throat and brought them back up. The leaf had fully roused her. This time, she wouldn't go back to sleep willingly. The sense of time running out had been too heavy to ignore as she'd stepped over the soldier's charred body. After a few more awful orders, they'd made her kill him.

Alexa listened to the walls around her creak and groan with the aftermath of the days' misery. If she didn't get out before they broke her like this again, she would die. This session had been brutal, going far beyond the normal exploration. It was as if they were trying to figure out the very worst that she could do.

Alexa removed the sheet from her cot, and then one of the wooden legs. Through the children, the soldiers would make her attack free survivors next. It would drive her insane to do that. Did they know? She was almost sure of the answer. They didn't need her anymore. They had other specimens—younger, more controllable experiments that could be used for

offense, defense, and everything between as soon as they came of age. Many of the hundreds of kids being held here were teenagers on the brink of inheriting their full gifts.

How long had this been going on? How many people had known of the hive of soldiers and scientists hiding beneath the Utah proving ground? How many kids had seen these halls, died in them? With so many available, the scientists weren't careful about preserving life. She suspected the furnaces here had been busy long before the war.

Alexa moved toward the door, staying low and quiet. These cells had infrared capability, but they hadn't used it on her for more than six months before they grew bored with watching her sleep. She'd overheard that comment and stored it for her future escape. That time had finally come.

Using timbers from the cot leg, she forced the bolt back on the door and heard it give under her talented hand. Escape was one of the first things she'd learned from her father and it was his lessons she would depend on now.

Commander Corbin was in charge of the Utah complex. He'd held the post for more than ten years. In that time, he'd seen the special ones come and go. Most were killed when he ran out of tests to put them through, but a rare few were kept alive for creating the perfect human weapon. During Corbin's reign, there had only been three of those—two children and one adult female.

They'd found Alexa by accident as she sent out mental waves, searching for her father. It wasn't hard to lead her into a trap with the Hawaiian kids. The data they'd gathered from her was invaluable. Until her, no adult female had ever been held for more than a month before escaping or starting to go insane. Because of that, Corbin had been careful to keep her drugged between sessions to prevent a repeat.

The power inside was one that resisted being used for any purpose other than light. To make them kill was to drive them crazy from the inside, where the guilt tore them apart. The government wanted to know how to stop it from happening so these gifted beings could be used at their whims. His was one of several similar projects going on across the country, but this was the most important. In this bunker, they were also trying to crossbreed the two

DNA strands and produce a genuine species of evolution—one free of the rage disease, which was the newest threat to human survival.

Corbin watched the light above cell #17 change to green, meaning it was unlocked. She had to know the death orders were coming. An escape attempt now was wise on her part.

The Commander turned toward the button that would send the lights flooding into the halls and expose her, but he hesitated to push it. What if she was the one to start the quest?

The Legend of Safe Haven.

Aware of not being alone in the room, the commander hit the button with a regretful sigh.

The alarm blared loudly, thundering through the halls until running feet were the second loudest sound. Soldiers swamped the bottom floors, searching for the escaped captive, but there was no sign of Alexa.

5

Alexa was weak physically. Her mental gifts fed off her emotions, as they did with all her kind, but the years of being drugged had turned her into a quivering mass of limp muscles that could only hold her upright for minutes at a time. When heavy hands had

grabbed her, she hadn't been able to stop the man from dragging her into a dusty closet.

Regan fumbled with his clothes and her robe, forgetting who he was about to hurt with no child around for insurance. He didn't talk; he didn't need to, but he smiled at her fear as she heard his pants fall.

Alexa turned her head, mind searching for a way to save the kids. His thrusting hips she deflected with her leg, catching him where it hurt most without meaning to.

Regan's hands went around her throat as he fell, dragging her down.

Alexa gasped for air as he choked her.

Plans ruined, Regan squeezed harder as the waves of pain wracked his flesh. The haze of blood slithered over his sight. He watched the tears roll down her cheeks in the flickering light of the lantern he'd set up before grabbing her.

Pulling from his lust, Alexa sent a blast of rage into his body that threw him across the small room and into the wall. The kids couldn't feed from an impure source, but she was already damned and had no such limits.

Regan slumped to the floor.

When he didn't move, Alexa struggled to her feet and moved toward his unconscious

body. In fact, a good meal of killer was just what she needed.

With the alarms going off, the captives that weren't locked in had come out of their rooms to clog the halls. It was easy to duck her head and pretend to be one of them. Even her healthy energy was covered by the fear and excitement racing through the kids at the news of an escape. They now had as much hope as was tolerable.

Not sure where to go, only that it had to be up, Alexa followed groups of guards, watching where they went, where they snuck off to. When she felt she had drawn too much attention, she ducked into another closet or dark area, staying a short step ahead of the squads now doing a full search. They'd made a mistake by keeping her presence so low profile here that their own guards had no idea what she looked like. With Regan's uniform on, they still didn't.

6

Corbin watched the dot on the screen get closer and closer to the ground floor, almost willing her to make it. In all the time they'd held her here, there hadn't been a single whisper of Safe Haven, but the ruthless

Commander knew that's where she would head as soon as she was free. He had been sure she knew. The markings on her body were his attempts to make her tell where they'd gone. After a while, he'd realized that if she knew where the legendary camp was, she would already have headed there instead of spending so many months caring for the tattered island children.

But if Alexa left here now, she would search for it, especially since she had this secret to share with the Alpha. With her gifts, she stood a real chance of finding it. All they had to do was follow her.

Corbin watched the dot head up the final flight of stairs, amazed that no one had stopped her yet. He wouldn't help her escape, but he wouldn't do anything else against it either. Corbin turned off the tracking monitor before joining his men on the bottom floors to help with the search.

Lurking in the shadows, one of Corbin's most clever scientists waited for his captor to be gone before stepping toward the screen. Paul had his own suspicions about why the commander hadn't told anyone where the escaped woman was, but he didn't trigger the second alarm to expose either of them.

Like his boss, Paul wanted to know if Safe Haven really existed, but not for the same reasons. Corbin wanted to conquer it and use its secrets, to fulfill the duty he'd been charged with by those pulling his strings. Paul wanted to live there. He'd dreamed of a world of peace, where he could be accepted and be with others like himself as they served the human population that their Creator had loved so much.

The scientist turned on the tracker in time to watch the small dot exit the compound through a service door used for bringing in fresh supplies. Within minutes, the woman was out of view of even the nearest guard tower. Paul switched the screen back to darkness. When Corbin finally found Safe Haven, someone would have to kill him so he didn't ruin it. Paul hoped he might be the one chosen for that duty.

Now

“It took me a week to gather enough weapons and strength to go back. When I got there, the compound was abandoned.”

Alexa's voice, full of ragged and miserable emotion, snapped the six males back to the darkness around their fire.

Alexa shoved to her feet, suddenly weary.

She'd been sure her escape would cause the deaths of those kids, but she'd abandoned them anyway to reach Safe Haven and tell Adrian of what was happening here. It was a sin that she would never be free of, but one she would repeat if needed. Nothing would stand in her way.

Alexa moved toward the shadows for a moment alone.

Her men understood their dreams wouldn't be enough to keep her nightmares at bay tonight. She would be on watch until dawn. Each of them looked to Edward expectantly.

The Horseman grinned, eager enough to tell them what he knew of her next adventure.

"A lone woman limped into my town on a sunless afternoon..."

When the tale was finished, the fighters wore stunned expressions that said they weren't sure if they believed it or not.

"Let's turn in."

Four of the men immediately began preparing for sleep at Edward's order.

Jacob, who had no doubt, met Edward's eye across the fire. "You were the first. You've been with her the longest. Do you regret it?"

"No. This *real life* has been all I asked for and more. Come soldiers, magic, or terror, I

will follow her and I don't care about the cost."

8

Rick listened from the darkness, a grinning ghost like he'd been so many years ago outside Safe Haven's glowing borders. He now had a weakness to use if he was able to take her hostage, which was unlikely, but he knew something that her men did not. After his time around so many descendants, Rick understood them. It hadn't been the Alpha gene that had sent her from the compound alone. It had been the need to right the wrong. It was who *they* were, these fixers of the world.

Rick loathed each and every one of them. He might have liked Regan's job, and done it well. The government wanted to use her to create a weapon and a stronger breed of human. Corbin wanted her to find Safe Haven, as did Rick, but he knew better than the commander what might work. Her bond with these six men was what the one-eyed man hadn't taken into account. It wasn't lack of knowledge that had allowed Adrian to leave his own people behind. Alexa was foolish to think he hadn't known—the same way Corbin was foolish to think she was strong enough to conquer the bond just because she was an Alpha. Those with the

marker were sworn to protect the human race, not their own. He'd left them to save his sheep, the same as Alexa would. If Rick could kill some of her men or take them from her, she would bargain for them.

After watching how Adrian had lovingly trained and protected his human teams, Rick understood it better than Alexa herself. When he'd said there wasn't anything he wouldn't do, anyone he wouldn't sacrifice to see Safe Haven thrive, Adrian had meant his *own* kind, even his children.

No wonder he was such a perfect leader back then. If only I had known his true weakness! I could be leading that refugee camp right now instead of barely being back from the dead just to slave under the curse of a petty thief.

Chapter Nine

Bridges and Betrayals

1

Their first sight of Laramie was as they'd thought it would be—isolated and ominous. The graveyard of cattle was particularly disturbing to the fighters. Beef was a rare food now. The sight of those large bones was a reminder of their near extinction.

Alexa heard what could only be a healthy insect population. “Gloves on.”

That left their faces uncovered, something the men were all protective of enough to be distracted by the concern. When she donned her full cover, they did as well. Once the goggles were slid into place over the cloth, not a single inch of their skin was exposed.

The water had surrounded the small station on three sides even before the waves had crashed downstream and the tremors had widened the banks. Now, the whole area was an island, its treasures made unreachable by even a small skiff. The debris in the murky water would refuse to budge for their poles or

maybe it would shift at the wrong time and turn them out into a liquid cemetery. Alexa shook her head. There was no way she would put her men so close to death's hand.

Edward thought of how far he'd come since they'd met in Utah. Without thinking, he began to uncoil the rope around his waist, mind on the changes their leader had encouraged in him.

The other males followed his lead automatically, drawing Alexa's attention. *He's my right hand.*

Alexa gestured at the row of trees. Their huge trunks were mostly submerged beneath the polluted liquid. "Tell me how we do it."

Edward straightened his shoulders, proud that he could. "We zigzag, and stay over the larger debris to maybe have a few seconds of extra time."

"And if I said we swim?"

Edward was now aware that the others were viewing him oddly, but he chose to concentrate on the matter at hand. "I follow your lead."

She showed no reaction, but he still had to fight the urge to fall at her feet as her pleasure rolled over him in waves. His tolerance was only so good, even now.

The woman grunted her approval when he didn't move. "You grow stronger daily."

Edward was unable to keep the awe from

his tone. “Because of you!”

Alexa leaned forward to stroke his cheek softly with her roughened fingertips. “I have a great fondness for you, as well.” She turned to them with the rarest emotion they ever saw from her—love. “So, of you all.”

Alexa moved toward the line of decaying trees. “Now come, my pets. Our newest adventure waits.”

The rookies followed carefully, both still a bit stunned to find themselves already so thick into the quest. They hurried to help with the small camp when Daniel called it. Alexa wanted to wait out the darkness, the new men assumed. Traveling at night was not highly recommended, but they didn’t question the order of no fire.

Their camp was cold, basic rations as darkness fell thickly upon the post-apocalyptic land. In minutes, there was only an occasional glint of calmly swaying branches and water ripples, and then nothing. Not even a flash of skylight remained to show each other, and yet, there was no fear, no senseless conversations just to be comforted by the sound of their own voices. They were with Alexa. Her brightness was clear even in the pitch black.

A light flared a short while later, far to their right...then another. Tiny, glowing flames buzzed and dove in the distance, but seemed to get no closer. To their left, a third beam of brightness came. This one moved purposefully, heading north toward Laramie Station.

All six men knew when Alexa stood. Without being told, they followed.

The light appeared to be floating, a carried lantern perhaps. The seven fighters moved steadily closer, almost silent despite the unfamiliar ground. They were tracking prey, something each of them instinctively excelled at.

The flame stopped suddenly near the water's mossy edge, and then it vanished. Slowing, the trackers inched closer, watching, waiting.

As the darkness brightened again, the males saw it hadn't been a lantern, but a glow stick wrapped for control of the shine. The furry man carrying it was huge—seven feet at least—and easily supporting the weight of two heavy looking bags over each thick arm. His clothing was black, as was his long beard and hat, but the skin under them was alabaster white and glinted even in the green glow of the stick.

“Can passage be bought here, Ferryman?”

The fighters watching were shocked to see Alexa now standing only a few feet from the heavily muscled giant. Each of them moved carefully into place around her.

The Ferryman looked like he was half-human, half-beast. The enormous mounds of his arms said it might be true. Each bicep was easily the size of a human chest.

“That, and more, these days.” His tone was deep and quiet. He glanced at her with slightly curious black eyes. “For the right price, anything can be.”

Alexa dug under her robes without care for his unease, but the movement seemed to break the tension instead of increasing it. Closer now, the other two lights flitted and dove happily around the flooded forest.

A bag sailed through the air; the jingle of gold was cut off as the big man caught it. Before he could protest, Alexa gestured toward the battered pouch.

“Your price is in there.”

Interest growing, the beast-man peered into the bag and then glared at her. “You know this is far too much.”

“You will wait or come back when our time here is finished.” Her tone was sharp.

The men understood she was securing their return passage.

Greed flashed openly as the Ferryman raised a bushy brow. “What if you don’t need a way out?”

Alexa smiled coolly, confidently. “Then keep it and owe only a kindness to the next hardasses to seek passage. How much of a kindness is up to you.”

Unlike Jendon, this one didn’t hesitate. “Done.”

He pointed at a nearby trunk that was so dark with decay that it was barely visible. “Light a few of those when you’re ready. I’ll come one click from your light.”

“We would arrive before dawn.”

He nodded again, pouch disappearing beneath his robe. “Half an hour, mistress, no longer.”

“My thanks, Ferryman.”

The tall guide surprised them all by scowling. “For taking you to your death? It’s *my honor*.”

The six males knew her magic was already working on the strangely stoic carpenter. He would come when called.

Alexa turned to her waiting men. “Lighten by a third. Leave it at that tree. No one will bother it.”

Not questioning how that was possible, each of them did as instructed. Her senior men

subtly watched to see what she removed. Her true weight was something they were curious about. When she removed only her long cloak, Billy gave Edward a nod to acknowledge his guess of 125 lbs. being right.

With her cover gone, any of them might have expected her to seem less somehow, but the opposite was true. Only the Ferryman stared in surprise. Even the rookies knew to take only small glimpses of their leader uncovered. Alexa was a bright, vivid swell in the darkness.

Edward threw out a hand to keep the Ferryman from falling at her feet. Arms full of his own steel, the fighter gave the huge man a hard shake.

Surprised from the trance, the beast man held himself stiffly in place until he was back in control. After a moment, the builder sent an uncomfortable grimace of recognition toward Edward. He stole only a quick look at the woman this time before turning back to the two large duffle bags he'd set down when she had stepped from the darkness. The carpenter began to pull things from the bags, snapping ends together with small clicks.

Alexa waited patiently with her men standing in a guard formation around her. The sounds continued steadily, increasing their

tension. Those noises would echo.

The Ferryman kept working. As the outline of a staircase took shape, each of her men recognized it and immediately dreaded stepping onto it. When the staircase grew, rising unsteadily upward, so did their concern.

The builder set aside the frame to dig through the bags again, coming up with a small gate and a single, two-foot thick concrete block, which he placed near the water's edge. He then put the frame's weakest side on the brick, clicked the gate into place, and surprised all but the woman when he hefted the bags over his shoulders and stepped up onto the first thin stair.

The carpenter went back to building. When he moved up to the next step, the first began to glow. The pale, golden light pulsed in time to his clicks and clacks, as did the next, and the one after. In a groove now, the carpenter moved faster and higher, creating a golden arc.

Jacob stared in astonishment, voice a bare whisper. "The stairway to heaven."

Alexa denied that. "It was never to there. It is only a conveyance between hard to reach places, nothing more."

Instructed, when she moved for the bottom stair, they still couldn't stop quick glimpses upward.

“It’s safe now for the lightest.” The words floated through the night, spreading into a wide ripple that they were sure could be heard much further than they could view.

Edward would have protested if needed. None of her men wanted to be split up. They were glad when Alexa didn’t take the bait.

It also brought relief to their guide. The Ferryman had taken many into Laramie, but only brought back three. He wanted her to be the fourth. The males with her, so dim in comparison, mattered only to her and themselves.

It was just over the half hour mark when his call came again, floating down from far above them. “The bridge is open. Slow and steady now. The bridge is open.”

It went out with a wave of power and yet, there was only silence in return.

“Not many takers.”

Alexa snorted at Mark’s crack as she passed him and moved onto the bridge.

“We come, Ferryman. Paid in full.” She stated it softly, but the words rang out, and then echoed up.

“I see you, party of seven,” came the Ferryman’s reply. “Passage is granted. Mind you close the gate, or owe for those who come after.”

Alexa waved Edward to drag, sure he would remember, then she made a curt motion that even the rookies understood.

Stay close!

“Waterline formation. No interaction.”

Meaning they probably wouldn't be alone on the bridge. Each man steadied himself and followed her onto the vividly glowing stairs.

3

The fog swirled around them right away, even though they'd seen none from the ground. The purplish mist moved thickly around their boots, muting the cracks and groans from the boards under their feet, but the awful sway kept them stepping carefully. The wood beneath them felt almost soft. It had a slight give that curled stomachs and raised awareness of where they were and what they had signed up for. Above them, the clicks and clacks also continued. The Ferryman was building even as they crossed.

“Rookies, down!”

The two men hit the bridge at her command, sending a ripple along the wooden stairs.

Edward shrank back as a huge, dark shadow swooped over them, just missing the newest

males.

“Our enemy knows we’re here. Rookie net.”

Mark and Billy immediately stepped beside the two men, tying ropes between their waists even as they kept climbing. The ends were handed to Alexa and Edward—Point and Drag—as they went up, connected in four places.

A voice roared at them from the purple fog in a female cry of rage. “Kill for me!”

Alexa grimaced. “Keep it tight.”

The four men moved closer to the front and back of the rookies. They all knew to duck as a rushing noise came from their right.

“Freeze!”

There was silence and an uneasy tension flying through the fog.

Crack! Crack!

Alexa’s guns barked loudly, startling even Edward.

A huge shadow slammed against the bridge above them and then vanished into the purple mist, squawking angrily.

“Let’s move.”

The fighters responded instantly, hauling shocked rookies snugly between them.

They felt it when they reached the very top of the bridge. A cool breeze and a lighter

colored mist marked the start of the climb down.

“Hello on the bridge...”

The six fighters felt Alexa pause and instantly hated the owner of the voice for it.

“We’d cross. Dust for passage.”

“I see you, party of four—price to be determined. Mind you close the gate or provide the next Judas a free ride.”

Alexa continued down the bridge, her words a bare murmur. “It’s the card player from River City. The rat must have known the words.” Her tone became grim. “Or perhaps Jendon is dead.”

The men considered that and understood the reason for her pause. To defeat a troll, the man had to be hard.

It was easy to feel the new feet on the bridge, an extra sway of running boots. They waited for the trackers to reach the place where the big bird had attacked them...

A female voice thundered in the darkness. “A deal has been made!”

Alexa’s tone held no fear in response. “She’s a bitter enemy, my pets, the Mother of all nature. Try hard to kill us on this quest, she will. Succeed, she will not!”

Because Alexa was so sure, the males were able to fall into their formation with confidence

not felt by those quickly catching up. It was a feeling that held her men in place as the ground finally became closer and the steps behind them echoed nearer.

The fog thinned suddenly, rippling to reveal only darkness, and then the Ferryman's voice echoed loudly.

“Party of seven, disembarking. Paid in full.”

Alexa grinned at the assistance, waving her men into place as the feet behind them sped up, almost upon them now. When she drew her weapon, so did her men.

Alexa moved to the very side of the step, blending into the fog. The others followed her lead.

She met Edward's sharp eyes, saw his hand tighten on the rope in his grip as he braced. She was pleased that he understood what would likely happen next. He'd more than earned his place on her crew.

Shadows flew down the steps, parting the fog.

The first to go by was a hulk of a man, the brawn of the group. His passage tilted Jacob off the edge in his effort to go unnoticed. He dropped heavily, but didn't scream.

Edward strained to hold the rope still, to keep Jacob from swinging into the sides. He sensed the rookie might still be in danger

despite being out of sight and he was glad when the last shadow went running by, damp cloak sliding across his face like a shroud.

The instant they were gone, Edward began to pull the rope, feeling the rookie's weight, yet no movement.

And suddenly he was being jerked right off the step!

“Pull!”

They hefted Edward back onto the bridge and then began to pull on the rope, all worried for the silent Preacher.

Alexa threw a handful of dust over the side. Emerald light flared, and then there was a volley of gunfire as the fighters saw the army of wood spiders advancing on Jacob's limp form.

The arachnids screamed in protest, but didn't stop at the bullets now flying through the rickety stairs.

Alexa shot one about to grab an unprotected leg.

Edward pulled harder on the rope, turning to twist it around himself. It provided the leverage to haul the rookie up by himself while the others gave cover fire.

“Duck!”

A huge shadow swooped over them as Alexa tossed a second handful of dust. The

glittery bone powder settled onto the bird's wings in a thick cloud. It was the last of her uneven mix pouch.

The flying terror moaned in delight as molting feathers began to fill with health. Like the tree, the bird was beautiful in its full glory...before it started to die.

“Move!” Alexa hauled on the rope with Edward.

Jacob slid onto the bridge as the bird began to moan again, this time in pain.

“Open fire!” Rick's voice was full of victory. He'd followed her knowing the odds of his survival were low, but the dead zone was where he spent most days anyway. If she knew where Adrian and Safe Haven had gone, he could have another chance to kill them all.

Bullets slammed into the stairs around the fighters, splintering the wood.

The senior men returned the favor, using the sweeping patterns that they'd been taught.

“Ugh!”

A grunt echoed in the darkness, followed by the whooshing noise of a body falling, and then a harsh thud as it landed.

Another lucky shot came through the fog and then Alexa held up a hand.

Her men stopped firing, all crouched protectively around Mark, who was lifting

Jacob over his shoulder.

Footsteps echoed again, moving away.

Alexa's voice cracked out. "Deny them, Ferryman, and the reward shall be great!"

The bridge trembled as the Ferryman responded with a sudden mist. The enveloping fog, the muffled thuds, and then shouts below brought Alexa's mocking laughter. "Trapped like the rat you are, Card Player!"

There was no answer.

"Here we come, traitor! Prepare yourself!" She openly mocked him, waving only Edward forward as she headed straight down the stairs.

Knowing what she wanted, he ran with her, stabbing at shadows to be sure no one was hiding in them as they had done.

"Coming to make a man of you!" Alexa's steps were no longer light, but shaking the bridge as they descended.

The intimidation worked well, sending them the sounds of two more thuds and wood breaking. Rick's men had deserted him.

"They flee their Master! Mine will never do such, and mine, you shall never be!"

Rick's fingers fumbled for another magazine, heart thudding in his chest.

"Here we come, traitor! Prepare yourself!"

That tone! It was the blond leader from Safe

Haven!

Rick shoved the magazine into place as flashes of the past invaded his mind. He'd been one of Cesar's slavers right after the war, the wolf sent in among the sheep to kill them all. And he'd failed.

"Coming to make a man of you!"

It was Adrian finally seeking retribution.

Rick heard his men abandon him, but he didn't think to follow. Of all the things he'd been, a coward was never one of them.

"They flee their Master! Mine will never do such, and mine, you shall never be!"

Rick crouched low, aware that he was about to die again. *This time, I'll take Adrian with me!*

Lost in his own mind, the traitor saw the fog part to reveal an angry, glowing man wearing dog tags and a ferocious grin of razor sharp teeth.

The vision thundered as it rushed toward him. "I sentence you to death!"

Rick emptied his gun wildly. "Die, damn you!"

Instead, the man's mouth opened to reveal spiked teeth quivering in anticipation as he lunged.

"No-no-no-no-no!"

Crunch! Thud!

Fire blazed at the base of the stairs. The screams of the man matched that of nature as the dying bird finally plummeted to the ground. The skeleton hit the murky water below and shattered into bone dust.

The wind picked up, growing into a furious blast that ripped up huge, dead limbs. Sprays of water pelted the bridge with an angry barrage that the fighters endured with tight grips on ropes and quick reflexes.

A minute later, there was silence.

Before any of them could speak, Jacob stirred from the wetting. Confused at being slung over Mark's shoulder, the Preacher glared. "Are we there yet?"

Alexa's lips twitched, laughter snorting out, and then the sound echoed from her men as well.

"Aye, rookie." Edward slapped Billy on the shoulder in recognition of a good battle that sent water spraying in a thick splash. "The ground lies just below."

4

"Do we follow?"

Corbin snorted in response to the guard's uneasy question as they listened to the gunfire echoing down from the glowing stairs. Alexa

had been easy to track so far, but they would have to wait her out this time. If they attempted to cross that arching gateway, he was sure it would collapse. “At your own risk.”

“Should we update command? Tell them she has six men now?”

“At your own risk.”

Shane wisely fell silent. Clearly, Corbin didn't want her recaptured.

“Why don't you personally take them a brief report? The Rabbit will write it up for you.”

Paul kept his head down, not revealing how much he hated that nickname.

Shane nodded, eager to tell those in charge what they'd been expecting to hear, what they were paying so well to know. The Commander had decided not to go back to the complex or the rule of the government...at least, not until he had Safe Haven's location. After that, he could name his reward and they already knew what he wanted—Alexa.

Corbin looked around. His very human soldiers would be of little use until she was back on the ground. “I want watch towers set up. They'll have to come out of there to continue the quest. Set it up.”

5

The fighters stepped indifferently over the smoldering pile at the base of the stairs as they left the bridge, but the senior men knew Edward would have a story to whisper later. The crunching noise was one they wouldn't forget.

The Ferryman had come to the bottom of the glowing steps, covered in layers of sweat and concern. He hadn't wanted the woman to die. He'd wanted to warn her of Nature's guardian wings, but his ways and laws were set in the seal. Break them, he could not. The early disembarking call was all he'd been allowed on his own. Denying the first four an exit had only been possible because she'd asked it of him and offered a payment.

Alexa strode confidently from the bridge, ignoring the Ferryman's pleasure at only seeing her party. She tossed him another heavy pouch that he stashed away without viewing its contents.

"I was worried..."

Turning from his wasteful words, Alexa paused at the edge of the glow from the stairs, evaluating. The Ferryman had brought them down within sight of nothing.

After another moment to let the men have their look, Alexa led them into the outer edges

of Laramie, Wyoming. Things were about to get rougher.

Chapter Ten

Hoppers and Helpers

1

It wasn't the same here. They noticed the differences right away. Instead of dying trees and swampy fields, Laramie was more like a lush jungle than a dead cattle town. Odd sounds echoed, like an owl hooting and frogs softly croaking. It was another world. Isolation hadn't hurt things as badly here. The wildlife they'd missed so far on their trip was here in abundance, from the small shapes of darting rodents and hares to the wide clouds of insects that hovered around the fruit trees. Their eyes couldn't keep up with all the movement.

“On your right, rookie!”

Jacob ducked.

The thin green snake hissed angrily as they went on. Curled around a moldy limb, the reptile had been nearly invisible, but not to Alexa's sharp gaze.

The men moved a bit closer to each other and to her, away from the thick trees and weeds that bordered the path she'd chosen. Alexa

showed no such worry. It was her way.

“Last call, one and all. The bridge closes.”

The fighters couldn't see it anymore. There was a slight unease among them as muffled clacks and thuds echoed next. The Ferryman was taking down the bridge. They were securely inside Laramie, with no way out.

“There is always an exit, my pets.”

All six men pushed aside the tension at her words. Now was not a good time for nerves.

The fighters saw the light at the same time and heard the moan.

“Help...mercy.”

Alexa and her hardasses found him around the next bend of the trees. They approached the rat carefully despite the left leg bent behind him at an ugly angle. Mosquitoes were currently eating him alive in tiny plunges.

“Mercy, lady?”

The blonde ran quick eyes over the other corpse that had deserted the Card Player, gun still holstered. “You've earned it now, I think.”

Her tone was unnaturally gentle. It made her men brace.

The defector's expression filled with relief.

Bang!

Calmly holstering, Alexa turned back to the faint path. “It was a bullet less than you deserved.”

Each of the men moving to catch up felt the reminder that traitors would be dealt with harshly, but it wasn't a great concern for them. They knew their own minds. There was no other place, no matter how safe, that they would rather be.

2

The dawn's meager light was starting to break when Alexa stopped them with a silent hand.

Finally gaining respite from the insect clouds that had been hovering all night, they picked out rabbit, deer, and wolf tracks. There would be fresh meat if one of them could get a clear shot with their blade. Wasting bullets to hunt was against Alexa's rules. If they missed with a knife, then they ate whatever they were carrying for such a time, or nothing at all.

Alexa made a sharp left, moving into the thickest part of the jungle; the land grew silent around them. She went faster, still making no noise.

Her men tried hard to do the same as the thick, damp branches clung to their cloaks and dove under their muddy boots to trip them.

“Tracks.”

The men's eyes were unable to make them

out beneath the half a decade of debris, but they didn't doubt her. After a moment, they too could feel metal rails under their boots. She'd found a train track to lead them to the station.

In the distance, the bridge noises stopped.

The jungle thickened as they walked, becoming a nuisance to get through, and the ground grew damp. They were nearing the edge of a flood plain.

“Someone go to higher ground.”

Edward gestured to Billy, who scaled a nearby tree as if he was part monkey. He made motions that Edward translated in the dim light creeping over the horizon.

“Woods for two more clicks in our direction, then a building, rectangular, one floor. He can't see around it for the trees.” There was a short pause. “Ripples to our right by one click and again to our left by triple that.”

There was silence as they waited for Billy to come down. He spoke softly. “There might be the wall of a town beyond the building. It was hard to be sure.”

Alexa turned them back to the tracks in time to spot another danger. “To your left, rookie.”

This time it was David who ducked the dark shape flying at him. Caught off guard, he

flushed, loathing being embarrassed. A second later, the large bat went crashing into the forest behind them and slammed into the ground.

Ahead, Alexa's voice overflowed with triumph. "Excellent."

Not sure exactly how he'd brought the bat down—he hadn't even moved except to duck—David fell back into formation, content that he'd pleased her somehow.

The two clicks went fast, with mud now squelching, pulling on them. The jungle ended abruptly, cut off by a crumbling wall of bricks they moved over carefully. Ahead of them lay what they'd come for.

The train station's main building was a dark, vine covered shape in the distance, with tracks spread out across the area in front of it like a web. But the tracks were empty. No railcars, no maintenance vehicles, no other signs that the old world had ever existed—there was just tracks and water.

Alexa swept the small station, seeing how the murky liquid was slowly covering the ground around it. "Underwater, all of them."

The train cars were in the far corner, with stagnant water rippling gently overtop them. Car after car glinted occasionally with the movement of the debris-laden liquid.

"I assume we all swim?"

All of them nodded.

Alexa led her group toward a single line of cars that were away from the others. Mostly buried in muck rather than water, the mud pushed up to their ankles as they neared it. Dark, ominous slop shifted under their boots.

Alexa halted them, free hand bringing out a pouch of dust. She tossed it ahead of them.

The marsh grass burst into life. As it grew, the ground under them seemed to tighten, firming up enough to stand on without sinking. She threw another handful, stepping forward. The bone dust caused the quickly growing greenery to drain the water.

Alexa threw a last handful on the ground outside the large railcar; the water receded a full foot, showing them the edge of a door. “Use your own pouches to knock it back a bit further, but carefully. Too fast and it may sink deeper.”

The men sprinkled it under her watchful eye as the earth under their feet grew, groaned, became solid.

Now partially uncovered, half of the train car still remained buried in the mud. It would have to be dug out unless their fearless leader had another trick up her sleeve.

She did. The blonde had drawn on her carry bag to eat one of the juicy apples they’d

gathered. Around them, the lush weeds were dying as fast as they could, becoming instant, absorbent mulch. When she was down to the core, Alexa placed it behind the railcar's door and then dumped the last of her dust over it.

Like its parent, the tree grew fast, roots shooting through the mud like arrows.

Crack!

The boxcar moved, lifted by the apple tree roots growing under it.

Bang! Thud!

The adventurers retreated several yards, watching as each seed absorbed the dust. The men waited resignedly for the dying to begin, but were surprised when there was only silence and the thick smell of ripe fruit.

“On seeds, dust gives quick life that remains, but the fruit rots the instant it's picked.” Always teaching, Alexa plucked an apple from the nearest branch and bit into it. Before she could chew, it turned to a black dust that fell from the corners of her mouth and hand.

She gathered enough saliva to spit. “Edward and Mark, up. Billy and Daniel, down.”

That left the rookies. Neither of them hesitated to go after her when she pried the door open and disappeared inside the sloppy darkness.

Very aware of how much noise they'd just made and unwilling to admit to how much it bothered them to let her get out of their sight, the four men on guard stayed alert, each hoping the rookies were all that Alexa's choice of them said they were.

Despite being mostly underwater, the skids of supplies were neatly stacked and though dirty, not all damaged. Molded, paper-thin material covered the area that was no longer underwater. Alexa stepped carefully through the ankle-high debris, glad this car was still half buried in the mud. It would muffle their noises from the animals calling this swampy station home.

“Seven of each. No more.” Alexa moved toward the farthest stack of cans, soupy brown water rippling away from her boots.

The rookies moved uneasily toward a nearby skid as she faded into the dimness. None of them liked being split from her, no matter the distance, and then there was the way she didn't make any sounds. It sometimes made them wonder if they'd imagined her. The new men felt it more strongly than those who knew this was reality now, but it was an uneasiness that was strictly hidden.

The skids nearest to the door were useless,

crushed cans that had exploded in the heat. The faint scent of rotten tomatoes floated to those waiting outside, wishing she would hurry.

The rookies carried armloads of their find out of the railcar one at a time so Alexa was never alone, which pleased the watching fighters. It wasn't that they were afraid she couldn't handle what came or even that she might vanish and leave them defenseless. It was more a feeling of duty to watch out for her in exchange for her letting them come along.

The small stack of cans and jugs grew steadily. When Alexa added her load, it nearly doubled.

“Get it split up. We'll prepare it when we make camp.”

The fighters took one of everything, placing them into a single, bulky duffle bag that was taken from their pockets. Later, when there was a fire, they would verify the goods were still edible and then smoke them to reduce the weight they would have to carry.

“No water.”

Edward's comment drew a nod from the woman. “We need to keep searching.”

“Which car?”

That was the problem. She didn't answer the question. It was impossible to tell what the submerged railcars held, but she only had

enough dust in her remaining pouch to uncover one.

“David will choose.”

David was surprised, but he didn't hesitate to step forward and scan the sunken tracks.

Alexa gestured. “We'll hear your thoughts, too.” It was his turn to teach them something. It was how they'd already made it this far. What one of them could do, the others learned as well.

“The weight of the train has to be evened out. Things that are very heavy will either be split among every car, which is unlikely, or there will be a number of heavy cars together.”

David looked around carefully. “Bottled water was very popular before the war. Most trains would have been carrying it, no matter their destination, and these are clearly packed for a trip out.” His sharp mind calculated the distance. “Only five cars on this one. I can't be sure.” He moved around the side to stare at the next row. “Maybe.”

The rookie kept moving, fully into the process of elimination now.

Alexa waved two of her men after him, staying by the treebound snipers.

Minutes later, all four were moving quietly back to her.

“Ten rows up, the cars are deeper, heavier.

A few hundred yards in, the cars almost vanish from sight. Very heavy. I want to go under to see the markings. I'm almost sure it's a liquid goods lineup."

"Three hundred yards. We don't have enough dust for even a quarter of that." Edward knew Alexa would never send them into water of any kind without a better reason.

"I'm fairly sure we can stay on top of the cars all the way, but we'd be up to our knees by that point." David didn't like his own idea.

Alexa looked at Billy. "Anchoring points?"

"A metal post. No way to know how sturdy it is after all this time."

"Show me."

Without being told, the snipers followed, never allowing themselves to be split up or out of sight. They moved from shadowy branch to damp ground and back carefully. If anyone came, they would see only five fighters and begin their plans with a dangerous miscalculation that could cost them the battle.

Alexa scanned the softly shimmering sea of submerged railcars, agreeing with David's choice. The water they needed was there. Now, they had to get to it. "Daniel, tell us why his plan won't work."

His words were fast. "It'll be easier to show."

Alexa gave her approval, pleased with his methods. "As you would."

Daniel drew his Colt first and then handed the end of his waist rope to Alexa, making the rookies take an uneasy glance around to verify what the others were doing, what they should be doing. No one else had moved, so the new men turned back to see Daniel climb up onto the first roof.

The murky liquid rippled outward gently. All of them were relieved that the huge car didn't shift under his weight.

Daniel moved forward as the metal groaned in protest.

"Movement, twenty yards to the right."

Daniel stopped at Mark's call from the trees, waiting.

"Fifteen yards."

The rookies tensed, now understanding Daniel was putting himself in danger to teach them something important.

"Ten."

They both wanted to call it off now, but they already knew Alexa wouldn't allow it.

"Five and comin' fast."

Daniel began to ease back carefully, keeping his eyes on the churning waves they could all see.

"Three...two...now!"

A greenish gold shadow leapt from the water, sending dark droplets spraying.

Daniel jerked back to let the fish sail by. As it went over the railcar, they all saw it snap hungrily at the fighter with a mouth of spike-like teeth.

“Three more, on your left.”

Daniel moved quickly from the car and watched the faces of the new men as the show began.

The three amphibians leapt from the water at nearly the same time and were met by the first, taking a second try. Teeth lunged like darts; blood sprayed as all four hit the water.

“Did it have legs?”

“What the hell...?”

The questions were stopped by a noise that brought images of water rushing...then there was movement everywhere. Large, fishlike hoppers jumped out of the muddy brown water, jaws clamping down on anything in reach. Each vicious snap triggered another rush of predators to the disturbance.

Large fish snatched the scaled hoppers in midflight and then even bigger carp swallowed those. The surface became alive with carnage.

Alexa moved her men to the cover of the thicker trees.

The noise went on for a long time. While they waited, Alexa pulled things from her pockets and placed them on the damp ground. Not sure if the hoppers could survive on land, the males watched alertly.

By the time the water was deceptively still again, Alexa had slip knotted a length of rope that was nearly a hundred feet long. She tied one end to a clever pulley system that could be placed around a tree for more leverage. There was no going into the water, so they would have to pull the railcars out of it instead.

“Billy, Daniel—find a mule.”

The two men hurried off.

“In the far back corner, there are drums of kerosene. We’ll need them all.”

The two rookies moved that way without waiting for Alexa to point at them.

Alexa sent Mark with them as a guard before turning to David. “We have to clear these tracks up to the first switchover plate. I’ll pry, you guard.”

For the next hour, there was only the sound of their work and a jungle of unnatural creatures watching them. These animals stayed back, afraid of the woman and her fighters, but they whispered to each other and to the Wind. Man had returned.

3

Luckily, the mule was near the changeover point and still on solid ground. Once the tracks were cleared, and the plates manually forced open, five of them carried drums to the waiting engine. Kerosene was really only number one diesel fuel, and with the way it had been stored, it should still be usable. It wouldn't work as well or for as long, but it should buy them enough power to move the sunken train.

Alexa pried the cap off the mule's front end, glad to see no pockets of water resting on the bottom of the tank. Everyone tried not to breathe in the fumes as they took turns carefully pouring the drums of kerosene into the tank. It was only half full when they were done.

Alexa waved Billy forward. "You drive. We'll ride."

Billy quickly pulled himself up into the huge transport machine. Used for hauling railcars around the station, the mule was basically half an engine car with twice the amount of pulling power. It was perfect for their needs.

Billy turned the key that he found in the ignition, but there was no response. He nodded

to Daniel. “Give us a spark.”

The Biker pulled a compact charger from beneath his cloak, glad he’d chosen not to leave it when they lightened their weight before crossing the golden bridge.

A minute later, the yellow diesel engine light on the dash flickered to life.

“... oldies but goodies, folks and we’re gonna play them...”

Billy hit the button, ejecting the cassette with a frown. Who the hell put a tape player in a mule? You’d never be able to hear it, even at that volume. The light on the console went out, telling him the engine was warmed up. Billy pushed the button with braced ears.

The engine belched out a small cloud of smoke in protest before hungrily roaring to life.

In the distance, those odd, nervous creatures watching them fled for dens and sentries. The Mother would have to be told. Man was not allowed to be here!

It took them almost an hour to get the mule into position. They had to run it over two other sets of tracks, and it made all of them, including Alexa, worry whether there would be enough fuel left to pull out the railcars.

It was hot, sweaty work to get the ends attached. They had to use Alexa’s pulley

system to close the last five feet because of a dip in the tracks. The rails hadn't split, but they were close to it as the weight of the mule rolled across them to be locked into place.

The men on duty swept continuously for trouble. As long as they'd been here now, making this much noise, anyone could be waiting nearby for them to do all the work before trying to take it from Alexa's hands. Edward stopped a grin at that thought and then sent his attention back to the watch. He'd like to see someone try. As annoyed as she was at how long this was taking, few thieves would stand a chance.

"All right. Slow jerks forward until it breaks loose, and then slow and steady over the shifting debris."

Until, not if. There was no doubt for Alexa that it would move, and because of her belief, the males were also sure of it. If Alexa said it, then it must be so. She'd proven herself repeatedly on their trek.

Billy signaled he was ready; the others moved back.

Alexa drew her Colts, eyes on the water. When her men did the same, she grunted in satisfaction. "Jacob, stay with Billy."

Jacob pulled himself up onto the foot rails of the loudly idling engine.

She sent David to the other side. “Stay with them.”

It was an order they took well, expressions indicating that nothing would happen to Billy while they were watching.

Alexa circled a finger in the air.

Billy opened up the throttle, giving a single, vicious jerk.

The engine shot forward against the taut ropes, sending a jarring vibration down the length of every car, and then out into the center of the water.

Oddly muted metal noises came to them as debris shifted, and then there was only the engine for a count of five and the calmly rippling water while Billy waited for her call to go again.

Alexa spun a finger.

Billy gave another hard pull, watching in the mirror as the violent shudder spread into the muddy water. Debris was moving under the surface. Floating freely to see air for the first time in half a decade, the brackish water around the cars began to brighten as the bottom silt moved.

“Here they come. Movement from all sides.”

At Mark’s call, Alexa gave the motion to pull it again.

“There’s something big about fifty yards center. Huge.”

Edward sounded nervous. Alexa took a few steps back to ease his concern as the third jerk sent more movement through the water.

There was a dull thudding noise from the railcars. Alexa motioned again, nodding. “It’s loose enough. Pull them out now.”

Billy increased the power and let the mule do its job without holding back. It lunged forward, straining.

The sounds of groaning metal overpowered the noise of the engine. Water ripples swelled as more debris floated to the top as the mule lunged again, sending another shudder through the water.

“Five yards. Get set.”

The mule struggled, engine growing louder. A sudden horrendous noise echoed, making the rookies wince as the railcars began to inch forward. Then the air was moving too, and the men all struggled not to open fire until Alexa did.

The hoppers flew onto the moving railcars, covering them while trying to bite the train into submission. They attacked the lead car repeatedly, hitting each other in the process as more and more of the mutated insects joined the offensive.

The railcars were slowly moving forward now, lifting the surface of the water in an endless fall of mud and debris.

The hoppers clung to the cars, each one covered as it slid from the angry waves.

Alexa fell back further, pacing the mule. The people hadn't been noticed yet as the furious mutations tried to kill what was making the most noise.

Another disturbance rippled in the churning water.

This one was a massive swell that pushed up and out to the left of the emerging railcars. The seven fighters had time to register bulging, *intelligent* eyes, and then the creature was back under the ripples.

“What the hell was that?”

There was no time to answer Daniel as the railcars began to roll faster, bringing hundreds of the sharp-toothed mutations onto the land. The fighters watched the large, clumsy jumps of the hoppers with outrage and twitchy fingers. Abominations offended them. Their grips tightened on guns, now eager for Alexa to call it.

The slight movement of their hands drew buggy eyes toward them.

The warriors braced as they were spotted. Nearly two hundred of the hungry hoppers

were out of the churning waves now, with more lunging for each car as it rose from the flooded land. Near the waterline, another large ripple began. Drawn by the noise and vibrations, the old amphibian moved uneasily onto land for the first time since the war. Enormous and always hungry, the toad began snapping up the chaotic hoppers as they dropped from the cars.

Hoppers squealed in terror and rage.

The mutations further away turned back at the cries. Then they attacked!

The fighters watched in amazement as the hoppers began to jump on the toad, their sharp teeth drawing croaks of pain as blood and poison hit the air.

The warriors followed Alexa as she backed further into the shadows of the trees, but none of their eyes left the brutal battle. If the hoppers lost, her senior men were sure Alexa would try next. She wouldn't allow a threat like that to live unopposed.

The toad was being driven back into the water now, its barbed tongue doing little damage against so many. Blood sprayed again as one of the reptile's eyes was scooped out by a furious mouth.

The men felt Alexa relax when the squirming, chirping mass fell below the churning water. Without its sight, the threat

wasn't so great that she would have to step in.

Drawn, the other hoppers had mostly headed for the water as well. When Billy brought the mule to a jerky stop, only a few dozen green and gold mutations remained near them. Those few were moving slower now, some gasping as they began to collapse.

“They can't take this air for long. They need to be in the water to survive.”

Alexa's voice was very low, but it still made two of the mutations twitch their way. It was shocking to see how fast the woman killed them.

Her blades made only an unnoticed thud in the ground; both creatures were dead before the hilts stopped moving. It was an unneeded, but still powerful demonstration for the rookies.

Billy had stopped with the line of railcars well out of the water, but the group stayed still until not only the hoppers nearby were dead, but the surface of the water was calm again. It was impossible to know what sounds would draw the mutations back out.

The train cars were covered in mud. Brown water ran from them in large streams, with thick green and black silt on the sides and top.

The mule cut off. The silence in its wake was deafening. They noted the stopping of the engine had no effect on the creatures lurking in

the water.

Alexa pulled a small tool from her belt and held it out to David. “Pick.”

David moved only a few yards before pausing. The two cars he was eyeing looked the same to the other men, but there was little doubt he’d seen a sign the rest of them had missed when he pointed to one.

David chose the car with no debris blocking its lock. He slid the metal cutter against the slippery lock. It didn’t want to give up its treasures, but the new man was used to working with unforgiving metals. The chain fell to the ground with a loud clank a moment later.

All eyes went to the water, waiting.

There was no response.

Alexa motioned Jacob and Billy forward to open the door. Dirty water gushed out as they forced it back. It rinsed the side enough for the others to see the Ice Mountain logo.

They were elated to discover most of the bottles and jugs undamaged. The fighters filled their canteens and watertight pouches happily, then took another share that they could carry. Their only displeasure came from having to leave so much. There was enough fresh water here to last them for months.

Alexa felt their concern and frowned lightly. “It will serve others, as well. Do not

covet. Our needs have been met. It is more than enough.”

Chastened, their feeling of loss eased.

When Alexa began to get set for travel, her men followed. They had gotten what they’d come for. Now, they had to get back out.

The rail yard building was a one room hut made of cheap wood that had warped under the onslaught of water. The light they’d seen was only an illusion caused by the glow of a sunray off the metal roof.

The fighters moved around the crumbling shack, ignoring the slight sounds that suggested someone might be lurking inside. The ghosts of the past were not to be disturbed unless you were in desperate need and even then you had to be able to pay the price for such a grievous error in judgment.

Alexa stopped them as they rounded the corner of the shack, hand coming up in alert. On the ground near the shack’s broken window was a rotting body. It was missing a head. The ground under the jean-clad woman was stiff with dried blood. Her skin was full of holes.

Alexa sent her boots onward. A small cloud of gnats followed; she stepped faster to leave them behind.

The ground gradually dried as they headed away from the station, but Alexa didn’t call a

break for lunch. She had them eat on the move. They had enough now for two full weeks and even the soreness at the end of this day from the fresh weight was a welcome price to pay.

Alexa moved them steadily north. She wasn't one to sit and wait for darkness so they could call the Ferryman.

The wilderness around them became a full jungle again soon after the railcars were out of sight. It was a lush, thick oasis of green mixed with brown debris. None of them spoke as they walked. The uncommon surroundings had them all a bit uneasy. Even Alexa twitched when an unfamiliar noise for any area floated through the trees. It was a sound none of them, not even the blonde, expected to hear. It was uncommon to any of the devastated towns they'd come through, but here, it was a shock and an omen.

“Waaa...” The child's cry was miserable, piercing, impossible to ignore.

Alexa paused as she concentrated.

Her men wondered if she would seek out the source to ensure the baby had someone to care for it.

Alexa moved suddenly, tracking the noise, and her men followed. Apparently so.

“Waaa...” It was pitiful, desperate.

Alexa's pace increased.

It was as though she was being pulled

toward the sound. Her men stayed close to her as they spotted the outside wall of a small village. They were sure nothing good would come from the place upon first sight.

“I agree.” Alexa sighed softly. “But I was not made to go around that type of need. We’ll assist if possible. Watch your six. Anything might be waiting for us.”

Chapter Eleven
Hunting Ground

1

Laramie Estates had clearly been a secluded community before the war. Eight buildings were in a circle that were connected by a high, stone wall with thin, narrowly arched doorways. A wide, brick walkway made a neat oval turn to the center, where a community well sat. Made of oddly colored stones with deep furrows, the rocks around the well were falling, crumbling into dusty debris that was dotted with white droppings.

Much of the small engineering village remained intact, even mud-spattered glass was still in most of the small windows, and yet, there was a feeling of horror that lurked heavily over the courtyard. Each of the fighters rested a hand on a holster as they entered.

“Waaa...”

It came from the well. There was no doubt. Confusion came first and then suspicion.

Alexa directed her new men to the center of their group as they began a sweep of the dark

homes that surrounded them.

“Waaa...”

Alexa ignored the pull of the weakening cry. She needed to be sure they cleared every room that might hold an ambush. The baby’s distress followed them relentlessly.

The houses were all simple three bedroom flats with a short attic space. The once colorful decor suggested these families had been South American. Beds were still neatly made, although cabinet doors were gone, revealing stocked shelves. With the rail yard so close, starvation hadn’t been their enemy. What had?

As if in answer to their thoughts, daylight broke suddenly; the rare sunbeams brightened the courtyard. The miserable cry cut off.

The silence it left was almost hostile.

Alexa circled her men back to the main entry, waiting. The shadows there were enough to shield them from the sun’s glare and from view as they waited tensely for whatever was coming.

A large shadow hit the ground across the courtyard, ominous in the size and the whoosh of wings. The bird dove like a streak, heading straight for the well as Alexa and her men watched, stunned by what they were seeing. Had the baby known the bird was coming? Was that why it had gone quiet? Was the sun an

alarm?

The vulture was as tall as Alexa, with a wingspan nearly double that. Huge and heavy, the bird's body was unable to fit through the average opening. Angered, the enormous bird dug thick claws into the crumbling stone, causing a large chunk to crack off under its powerful talons.

The hungry predator gave a shrill cry of excitement, trying to squeeze its head through again. It was clearly digging into the infant. Was a parent down there, too? Unlikely. Who could let a baby cry that way and not comfort it?

The vulture paused suddenly, long, red beak tilted into the air as if it had smelled something. Had they been scented? The fighters got ready.

The bird let out a furious screech, broad wings unfurling to make an escape. The rock under the massive talon crumbled. The piece fell into the well, bringing a child's startled cry that snapped the vulture's attention back. It hesitated, torn.

There was silence from the baby after the one surprised wail. The huge vulture turned ugly yellow eyes on the shadowy doorway where Alexa and her fighters stood. It was as if it knew they were there, but it couldn't match their scent, thanks to the dried mud covering

them like a shield.

As the bird flexed, turning slightly, each of the fighters saw a gaping wound and understood that body shots were useless. This terror had likely taken the villagers, leaving no destruction, no signs of a battle. Its nest would be a different scene all together.

Alexa muttered so softly that only Edward and Mark heard. "Cry."

The sound rose obediently from the darkness. "Waaa..."

The bird could resist no more than the fighters. It turned back to the well, shoving its fat head into the hole as it let out an unearthly shriek.

Alexa led her men out of the shadows, drawing her guns.

The bird pulled back too late to avoid her shockingly good aim.

Crack! Crack!

The bird's eyes vanished into a splatter of gore, and then Alexa opened up her Colts. As she fired, a second big shadow swooped down into the courtyard. This bird wasn't as large, but its smaller size made it faster. It ran toward her warriors with piercing shrieks of fury.

"Rookies down!"

The two men dropped as Alexa spun, guns blazing. The smaller bird was hit, but it only

slowed. It was Jacob with his .357 that made it pause when he fired twice from the hip.

The smaller vulture screamed in pain as its eyes became gushing wounds. It struck out in panic, rushing forward. The scarred Preacher fired again, emptying his newly given weapon.

The smaller bird staggered, wings flapping in an attempted escape.

Alexa and the others finished off the first predator with repeated headshots. They were there to back Jacob up as he reloaded. The smaller vulture took hit after hit; blood sprayed the plaza. A minute later, there was silence again except for their fast breathing.

“Injuries?”

There were none. Alexa nodded, pleased. “Very good.” She moved toward the well.

The smallest vulture chose that moment to strike, using its dying force to lunge.

Crack!

Jacob blew half of the bird’s head off before it could clamp down on her leg. Blood and gore splattered those closest.

The vulture thumped to the ground.

Jacob ignored the approval of everyone, including Alexa. He watched the two corpses to be sure they were dead.

Alexa nodded at Edward’s expression. Jacob was definitely a gunfighter. They were

both grateful he was along for this quest.

“Jacob and Mark will get the child. Billy and David on sniper watch.”

There was no discussion of the short battle.

Alexa tensed when her men disappeared into the well, but this is why they were with her. Alone, she had no hopes of helping the others they would meet during their travels. With these males, that didn't have to be. This child would be the first of many. It was impossible to guess how long the vultures had been coming to this village for food, but the stones on the well were nearly broken through. It eased her hurting heart to know that their reign of terror was over.

“Coming up.”

Alexa kept her eyes on their surroundings, fighting the urge to yank them topside herself. Control was the key. She governed her face into the impassive mask that her father had always worn. She would train them as he had trained her. In a year's time, there would be little they couldn't handle together.

“It sleeps as though it hasn't in a while.” Jacob gently handed the bundle to Alexa, who immediately uncovered its head.

Swaddled in a black blanket with not even a spot of dust on it, the baby was breathtaking in contrast. The beauty of ivory skin with

stunning yellow ringlets was remarkable, but even more so was its condition. The baby was healthy instead of starving like they'd expected.

Mark opened his hand to give a theory on why. "These were all around its basket." They were bones.

"Impossible!" Daniel spat on the ground as if offended by the very idea.

Mark shook his head. "Not if he's something more."

The Biker frowned. "What does that mean?"

The Convict's words were tolerant. "More than human."

Daniel's eyes looked to Alexa as understanding came. Perhaps the child was like their strange, hard leader.

Proving the idea, the baby stirred, yawning. Sunlight glimmered off moist, white fangs.

Each of the males took a startled step back, but Alexa only curled the child more securely into her grip and turned for the nearest doorway. "Guard stays the same. Jacob, set us up. We'll leave when it's dark enough to signal for the bridge."

The men noticed how careful their leader was not to let the bright sun burn down onto the child's fragile skin. They also saw she had the look and feel of a mother now that there was a

child to be cared for, but none of them asked if she was. Too many of them had lost family in the war to bring up so painful a subject.

Faced with half a day's wait, the group found useful things to do, such as preparing the supplies they'd gathered. There was also sewing, smoking, drying to be done. Through it all, they watched Alexa care for the baby and tried to hide their thoughts from each other as well as from her. That kind of happy family life had vanished when the first nuclear bomb slammed into their homeland. Not to mention, that was no ordinary woman and child, but a... Thoughts trailed off there. Alexa's origins were as foreign to them as the baby's.

Alexa studied the infant intently. The pall of horror hadn't lifted with its rescue. She wondered what to do next. They couldn't bring a child on this quest, but she also couldn't leave him here.

A hand moved carefully around her, holding out a small vial with a thick, reddish liquid. "He'll be hungry when night falls."

Alexa sat the bottle near the basket and waved Mark into the chair. He obviously had information that they needed. "Tell me what you know."

"It's only what I've read and never really believed in."

She nodded as if to say that was accepted.
“Vampyre.”

Alexa scowled.

Mark drew back, ready for her reprimand.

She shrugged. “They are a type of walking dead, are they not? Our country is plagued with such now. The war cracked the gates of our reality and the night has begun to slip through. I’m only surprised we haven’t seen more of it.”

Her words were a painful, terrifying trigger back to the war, to where they’d been. Only Alexa’s eyes remained focused on the future. They had an infant that was *more than human*. She used Mark’s description with a curl of her lips. More than, indeed. Should they turn him loose or endanger themselves by trying to take him where he belonged? Like the trolls, the new world’s vampires also traveled these roads. How to even begin such a fool’s... Her eyes narrowed. *Like the trolls*. “Jendon.”

All but the new men understood.

“Perfect. He’ll know where.”

She settled back contentedly at Edward’s comment. “Yes. As defenders of the undead called back to service, they will be guarding a coven. Jendon can take the child there.”

Relieved, the mood of her men improved. Alexa’s got worse. She didn’t know what was coming next, but it felt ugly. She closed her

eyes and tried to rest so that she would be ready for it. Sleep had to be grabbed when it was possible in this life. The days of orderly bedtimes were long gone.

2

Outside, the clear day faded into a chilly dusk with grim skies and a bite to the wind. It was time to go.

The stinking carcasses were still untouched by predators when the fighters strode back through the darkening archway. Each of them was refreshed from a short sleep rotation.

“Burn it.”

Jacob and Mark lit a torch and made a lap of the village, setting fire to the dark, decaying trees on the perimeter. Daniel and Edward ran alongside as guards.

Next to her, David was studying the wind deeply. She knew a little more of him now. He liked to cross his arms over his chest, even when he slept, and in one of his pockets was a small photo album where he was already keeping scraps of their travels. From Laramie, he was taking the small bones found with the baby.

Alexa met his eye over the flickering fire. “How are things?”

David didn't hesitate. "Under watch."

Alexa nodded, voice resigned. "I thought maybe we'd picked up more rats, but I'd hoped to be wrong."

David gave a brutal smile. "We'll handle it."

Alexa had no desire to stay and watch the brittle trees blaze. She shifted the pack with the sleeping infant more firmly onto her shoulders. "Aye. Let's go."

The flickering shadows of the swampy jungle faded, leaving only the distant glare of the fire as the four sweaty males joined them.

3

As the night began to settle in around them, the child woke.

"The bottle now."

Mark quickly placed the sealed vial in the baby's tiny, outstretched hand. Those closest watched in fascination as the child agilely twisted the cap and began to drink.

A minute later, the glass fell to the forest floor and the baby let out a loud belch, followed by a giggle. Alexa got them moving again as the child played contentedly with her braids.

The other normal needs of a baby never

presented themselves, allowing the group to reach a small clearing a short time later without another interruption. In the distance, clicks and clacks could be heard. Carried on the sharp wind, all of them were glad to hear the sounds. Laramie's outskirts hadn't been extremely dangerous, but it was certainly stranger than most of the places they'd come through so far. The males were glad for once that Alexa didn't seem to want to explore. Not all of the city was under water. The tallest peaks in the shadowy distance were actually vine and debris covered buildings.

The clearing was covered with large rocks and boulders. Something didn't feel right about this and it was more than just the child on her shoulders. "Ten minutes, full guard."

The others showed the rookies where to stand as Alexa gently took the child from her back and laid him against a natural rise in one of the mossy boulders.

As she did it, a new sound rose through the night behind them. Incredibly loud, the shriek of unbearable loss was earsplitting despite the distance.

Alexa's men fell into a tighter circle around her and the baby.

"Momma."

A first thought was to mistake the word for

the confusion of a lonely, abandoned child, but this was no ordinary baby. Alexa understood instantly. “*Your* momma. Wonderful.”

She evaluated for a split second and then spun a finger. “Fall in line, my pets, and cover those throats. His guardians are coming.”

Alexa drew with her left hand, barrel pointed down.

Her men did the same, following her one, hard rule. *Always do what I do.*

The jungle around them went silent.

Alexa looked away from the child for only a split second, but it was enough. Starving for fresh blood, the infant lunged for her arm. His fangs sank deep into her wrist.

To the shock of her men, Alexa only held the baby to her chest as he drank. An instant later, the forest parted.

There were three of them. A man was in front, flanked by two snarling females. Ivory skin covered with ragged black cloaks; their beautiful, furious faces were made ugly by glowing red eyes that promised no mercy.

Alexa’s men waited tensely for the fight to begin.

Alexa noticed the concern in those evil eyes. These were not killers, only survivors. Not that those long fingers wouldn’t rip out the throats of her men. Still, it was better than an

enemy who had no weaknesses.

It was a long moment as the trio took in her neatly lined up males and then lingered on the feeding child.

Without wincing, she shifted the baby more firmly into the crook of her arm. “Your family has come, little one.”

At her words, the baby’s head spun, fangs ripping from her flesh. Alexa used her sleeve to gently wipe her blood from the corner of its perfect mouth.

“Momma!”

The baby strained for the female with the stunningly round face like a china doll.

Alexa moved forward. “Of course.”

She switched him to her other hand as she moved.

Edward came forward with a bandage to cover the wound. He did it while they walked and then stayed on her right as she stepped confidently to the surprised vampires.

The trio of blood takers flinched backward half a step at her movement, merciless eyes narrowing in warning. She watched their fangs extend and voiced her thought. “He’s a very interesting baby. Will he stay this way or grow?”

Alexa’s question threw them off, breaking the tension a bit.

The doll faced woman looked to the male.

He didn't respond, but the female's eyes lost some of their fervor as Alexa gently put the struggling infant into her cold arms.

The six fighters watched her linger—*so close to death!*—to run a steady finger over one rosy cheek.

“We sought only to save him, nothing more.”

The mother, her baby back in her arms, nodded slowly, and the man lost some of his menace as well. Maybe this could end peacefully.

The other female had been carefully inching closer to the undefended men, the very *human* men.

“Slow your roll!” Alexa's voice snapped out like a whip. “I'm still close enough to take his life for any of theirs!”

The sneaking female froze as the male gestured angrily, snarling something only the vampires understood.

The second woman quickly retreated.

Alexa slowly did the same. “I could have killed him as soon as I realized what he was. Anyone else would have.” She took another step back. “I could have left him to the vultures. It wasn't my fight.”

That comment drew an agonized cry of

denial from the mother. The man put a restraining white hand on her shoulder that she shrugged off.

It was a shock to see such emotions from the undead. Alexa's men tried not to let it sway them against that sense of danger. The Vampyres clearly only wanted the baby right now, but what might happen later?

In the mother's pale grip was now a pouch. Her movement was so fast that even Alexa hadn't seen it.

“Take.”

Alexa did with no sign that it bothered her to touch the cold female, and then the trio of horrors fled into the forest, leaving a soft giggling echo.

Alexa opened the pouch wide to let her men see. Inside was a small, intricately carved horn with long green tassels. On the side was a crudely, yet beautifully drawn image of a wolf fighting a woman with long blonde braids. To the sides of these were six small stick figures, each holding what could have been a gun.

“A Caller.” Alexa smiled in appreciation as she stowed the gift. She caught Jacob's confused expression. “Yes?”

He shrugged. “I don't understand why his mother put him in the well at all. They could have handled those birds as easily as we did.”

Alexa grunted. “The father.”

Jacob’s brow drew together in confusion.

Edward explained. “The baby’s half human. His father likely hid him there and hoped she’d find him before the birds broke through the stone.”

“Why wouldn’t the Ferryman let them cross?” Jacob knew that had to be the case or the vampires would have left this dangerous place long ago.

“And what were those two lights we saw before he came?”

The rookies were banding together to ask their questions. David was now willing to split her anger if there was any to be had.

Alexa turned away without responding. The others would answer those questions and more when they finally made camp for a sleep shift. Her final moment with the card player would be among them.

There was little to say after that. The clicks and clacks of the bridge were near enough now to let them see a faint glowing outline. They were almost out of this odd place and each of the men were eager for it. So was Alexa. The sooner she figured out what to do for her injury, the better. She could already feel it starting to affect her and that was bad for the quest. She couldn’t shoot her way out of this

one.

4

Very near where they were to meet the Ferryman, Alexa tensed, stopping. Around them, the night stilled into complete silence.

“Up!”

Alexa’s order was followed by seven leaps into the nearest trees.

“Be still!”

They were a small group of motionless shadows perched firmly in decaying, brittle branches an instant later. For a long moment, there was nothing. Not even the sound of wind rustling came; her men knew to be ready. In the darkness, something moved toward them.

There were no footsteps, no shouted orders or torchlights in the distance, but the feeling of being tracked was unmistakable. Something was in the jungle, looking for them. Did it know where they were? The thought was common property; each of them drew their weapon.

None of the men was sure what to expect as the dark, damp bushes parted. It was no relief to see faces they recognized.

The three Vampyres, one with a napping child on her back, were arguing softly. Their

words were so low, they were barely audible, but the language was foreign to tense ears.

The trio stopped under the trees that the fighters were trying to blend into. All seven of them saw the baby stir. Its eyes opened. They were now blood red like its parent's gaze.

The three walking dead glanced up in unison. The male spoke. "We have come for you."

"But to what end?" Although their red eyes were impossible to read, Alexa knew. "There's a bounty on us."

The vampire mother's voice was chillingly alien as she forced English through cold lips. "I will not."

Alexa dropped from the tree and her men landed around her.

"Then why are you here?"

The male bared his fangs in disapproval at Edward's demand.

Alexa looked to the mother, ignoring Edward's question.

The female acknowledged her companions were not in agreement with her choice to spare them. "You have men. Those, they will not let pass."

Alexa's eyes narrowed into those dangerous chips. "They are mine. If not for their help, your infant would not be here."

The other female hissed angrily. The mother translated. “You don’t really need them.”

“I do.” Alexa took a step back, hands ready. “I’ll die for them with your debt unpaid!”

The mother turned to her companions.

Alexa backed up further. Everything about her said get ready to fight and her men took notice.

The trio began arguing, all ignoring the baby who was watching alertly from his seat. When the conversation settled down, the female turned back.

“If we let you go, we cannot stay here, but we cannot flee either.”

“Because he is not immortal yet. He can be hurt, drowned.”

The mother’s eyes softened only the tiniest bit at Alexa’s correct guess. “Until he’s older, no such water crossing can be made.”

“If not for us, he’d never see that day come.”

“To let you live, we must die or flee! Nature wants all humans gone, but especially the males!”

Alexa waved a hand toward the sky, where the golden stairs were nearly complete. “A way out.”

“One we cannot pay for! The Ferryman

never lets us cross.”

Alexa’s reply was soothing. “Tonight, he will.”

There was another short talk among the trio and then the words only Alexa had expected.

“They will not survive the coming war with Nature. Not even by your side.”

Alexa’s answer was far from emotionless. “Perhaps that is not what they were meant to do.” Her words grew more forceful. “Perhaps they will be witnesses when I stop our enemy. To die in such a way would be an honor for my crew.”

Alexa turned toward the glowing stairs. “The invitation stands, but the child will be the first to die if you cross me.” She spun a finger. “Rotating watch. Let’s go.”

5

The Ferryman didn’t react when Alexa and her men moved into view, but he scowled fiercely at the pale trio behind them. Before he could protest, Alexa gestured with her injured wrist. “Vampyre venom for passage.”

She extended her bleeding arm. “Imagine the price for each drop.”

The creatures behind her hissed in anger, but the Ferryman nodded curtly, moving

toward her with hungry lips. “Done.”

Their second trip over the bridge was without excitement and full of unreadable sweeps of the three, red-eyed vampires following effortlessly behind them.

As they reached the ground, Alexa pointed to a nearby stack of bags. “Get our things. I’d travel until near light.”

Each man was looking forward to the sleep shift that would come with the sun.

The male Vampyre spoke to Alexa. “We must hunt for him.”

Alexa didn’t set rules for that like the man was expecting. “Will you stay here or search for your own kind?”

“You know of others.”

“Yes. Don’t you?”

“We’ve been in Laramie since man’s war. There are no more like us here.”

Alexa studied him for a long moment. “You owe a debt now. Would you triple it, killer?”

The pale man’s red eyes flashed. “Agreed. And if you lie, we owe nothing!”

“Done.”

Alexa closed her eyes. The jungle around them went still once more. The air thickened, became sharper somehow as a ghostly green light glimmered at them from the darkness. It

slowly took the shape of a rope coiled snugly around Alexa's fist.

"Jendon, I call you!" She jerked the wispy rope violently.

"I come!"

Alexa donned her cloak as Edward stood guard and the slow clip of a shod horse came through the nearby trees.

The troll's reaction upon seeing their guests was one of shock, but it was the vampires who surprised the six fighters the most. Their tones became friendly; their stiff postures relaxed.

When Jendon began to talk to them in their own language, the fighters realized there would only be the seven of them again come daylight and they were relieved. It was a revolting thought that they might have had to protect the walking dead while they slept; the males were glad she wasn't asking it of them.

"My words are proven and so is your debt to me." Alexa drew the pale horrors back to her, tone without mercy. "In payment, none of you, the child included, will *ever* take a human life that has not been proven evil. I command it!"

All three of the nightwalkers flinched.

Jendon's tone was full of bitter understanding. "Come, Masters. Let me take you home."

None of the trio acknowledged her order, and no vividly glowing bonds appeared, but her men didn't doubt the same magic would hold the Vampyres. It was another relief that they wouldn't be free to prey on survivors.

Alexa and her men watched them go in silence, listening to the songs of tiny, mad hoppers in the cart's wake. Apparently, the mutations started out on land like normal crickets.

"We'll see him again." David meant the baby.

"I feel so, too." Exhausted, Alexa headed for the darkness, shifting her heavier pack more firmly onto her shoulders. As soon as they cleared this area, they would rest. She was in sore need of it. The pain from her injury was little compared to the drained feeling that was making it hard to concentrate. She would need to recharge before the next battle. "It's fine work we've done, my pets. We have supplies, clues, new friends, and a full crew. May the amazing adventures and moments of stunning glory continue."

“Your time has run out, Corbin. Bring in the woman or her body. You have three days to report.”

Paul didn't smile at the radio message, but he kept his head down anyway. Shane hadn't liked covering for the Commander's lies and it was worth a lot more to be a spy.

Corbin shut off the radio. Upon finding out that Alexa now had a full crew, those in the big bunker had started to panic. It hadn't taken much for them to believe he was at fault.

Paul smothered another grin. Shane had been sweet to him, so he'd told Shane everything. That thoughtful soldier was back at the base now, filling out reports on the last few months. Corbin would be hung for his lies and forgeries as soon as they returned to base.

“There they are.” Corbin gave the signal to fall back.

Paul carefully rolled them out of view. There would be this one last attempt to recapture Alexa and then it would all collapse.

Still fighting his happiness, Paul didn't care if Corbin found out and killed him for his part in the betrayal. It would be worth it to see the evil man punished. *I've been waiting for that most of my life.*

Chapter Twelve
My Mercy

1

Not posting a guard had been a mistake.

An hour after they settled down to sleep, the soldiers moved in. Alexa woke to see the jeeps and trucks rolling their way through the clouds of grit.

“On your feet!” She kicked at those who hadn’t moved, bringing them awake harshly.

The government trucks were flying over the uneven Wyoming land. Masked men with rifles slid into view.

“Fall back!” Alexa saw that all her men were now up with guns in hand. She took off running toward the shape of the only building in sight as the soldiers opened fire.

“Ugh!”

Alexa hit her knees as the well-aimed dart plunged into the back of her neck. She was certain that Corbin had fired it.

She staggered to the dirt.

Her men rushed over to carry her along as they fled. After her story, there was no doubt

about who was chasing them. The men used their natural strength to stay ahead of the vehicles that were being pounded by the fast flight over unforgiving terrain.

Unable to help, Alexa's body was hurriedly slung over Edward's broad shoulder when they ducked into the front doors of the water treatment plant.

They didn't stop once inside, but moved immediately to the lower levels so that the soldiers would have to come in on foot. Above them, the engines circled, rumbling angrily.

Alexa's men pounded down the littered basement stairs. Edward motioned two of them to search for a way out while he carefully pulled the dart from her neck. She wouldn't have headed this way if it was a dead end.

A clear liquid oozed from the hole in her skin. Edward sent his mouth to it, drawing out as much of the drugs as he could. He felt his tongue start to go numb and spat before he could swallow any of it. He repeated the process until he tasted only the coppery salt of her blood.

Daniel handed him an already taped bandage.

Edward slapped it on as the door above them crashed in. "Move! Move!"

Mark found what they needed. "Over here!"

The fighters fled into the sewer with Alexa's body now over Daniel's shoulder. Every time they had to stop to pick a direction, she would be shifted to a fresh man, keeping them all moving quickly through the slimy darkness.

The tunnel floors were mostly dry. Flooding hadn't been a problem here, but there were huge cracks in the gray walls that kept the fighters watching for a collapse. All sorts of debris was in their path. Alexa's resourceful crew snatched up items of value.

As they moved, the horrors of the war that had been undisturbed for half a decade crumbled under their feet. The bones snapped like wood. Each one sent a fresh chill of hatred through their hearts. The very people who'd caused all this were the ones chasing them, trying to take what was theirs. They fled by underground tunnels that could have taken them in any direction, but Edward kept them moving to where they would have the advantage.

When the others realized where he was taking them, they stepped up the pace. Cheyenne would be the perfect chaotic site to hunker down and wait for their leader to wake up and tell them what to do next.

Corbin stood at the entrance to the sewer as the large group of men behind him frowned impatiently. They didn't understand why he hadn't ordered them to follow the fugitives, but they hadn't been there for Alexa's sessions.

"Is it working?" He glowered at the white garbed man on his right.

Busy fumbling with the dials of a handheld computer, the bipolar genius jerked.

The computer flew into the air to be caught by Corbin and handed back. "At ease, Rabbit!"

The soldiers snickered and laughed. Chasing Beth Rider was currently circling the barracks, but the scientist had been called a scared Rabbit long before they'd found the book.

Flustered, Paul flashed a happy grin that didn't match the years of servitude on his weathered face. Though only twenty, he appeared to be a grandfather, complete with huge knuckles and a hunched back. "It worked!"

Corbin tore the screen from his hand, cruel face fixating. The tiny dot moved east. What was there? They hadn't been close enough to see which of the black cloaked fighters had been hit, but it didn't matter. She wouldn't

leave one of them and they wouldn't abandon her. "We'll wait and see where they come up. They'll think we've been left behind."

One of the men was sure of Corbin's shot. He'd seen her stagger. "Won't they leave her body with the tracker?"

Corbin turned around in a blur. He pulled the trigger, not worried about the noise carrying as the ignorant man slid to the dusty floor.

"Anyone stupid enough to kill her will meet the same end!" Corbin holstered and headed for the stairs, dropping the screen back into Paul's twitchy hands as he went. "Alive or not at all, gentlemen. If you can't dart them, let them go."

As he disappeared from their view, there was a short conversation that Alexa would have found interesting.

"He's in love with her."

The Rabbit's flash of intuition drew the stares of three dozen soldiers.

Paul looked down at the dot on the screen, seeing they were headed toward Cheyenne. "It won't matter when he gets her back, though. He's been obsessed with finding Safe Haven as long as I've known him. Something as powerless as love won't keep him from finding out everything she knows this time. I don't think she'll survive it."

3

They didn't travel for very long before Edward stopped and ducked into a wide intersection with several tunnels branching off into foreboding darkness. It would be easy to get lost down here and wander in circles for days.

Hearing no sounds of pursuit, he gently shifted her weight into his arms. "Give us some light."

The wound on her neck was already clotting, but her face was pale.

Jacob frowned. "What was it?"

"Knock out juice." David helped Edward move her to the floor. "If she's unconscious, she can't draw from us and fight back."

"How long will it last?"

David shrugged. "Hard to tell. I'd say twelve hours at least. They'd need to be careful with her."

"We have to hole up somewhere."

"They'll be on us as soon as we pop up a head." Jacob remembered his days as a soldier. "Those darts are trackers, too."

Daniel shrugged. "Then we'll make 'em come down here for her."

David shook his head. "We only have a couple weeks of supplies. They can track her longer."

Alexa's men only knew the details from her story; they tried to remember every word as they struggled to form a plan to save her from being recaptured.

“What if we surrender...sort of?” Billy loved the lethal way she and her kind had trained his mind to work. It was as dangerous as his hands.

Silence held them all for a full minute as each man considered the images that brought, and then they went further into the development. If an idea couldn't be planned, it couldn't be done. She'd taught them to think it through from start to finish before taking action.

Edward liked the idea. “We have to do it now, while she's still out. They'll take our guns and separate us into different jeeps for the trip.”

“What if we use a decoy instead?”

They looked to the angry Preacher standing watch with his gun in hand.

Edward understood right away. “Half of us go one way, while the other half closes the trap?”

Jacob gave a curt nod. “If they think all of us are in the first group, a second wave would give us the advantage.”

There was silence except for the creaks of the sewer around them as they considered the

idea. It wouldn't be hard to cluster together and give the impression of seven where there were really four.

Billy pointed out a flaw. "We'll need her awake for that. We'd have to wait until she's ready. They'll know the juice has worn off."

"Maybe not. I got a lot of it out. She might come around sooner than they think." Edward spat again, hating the taste.

Jacob finished the deadly plan, hating the death he was suggesting, but eager enough to be a part of it to secure her freedom. "When we come out, the first group turns and we catch them between us."

"Carefully." Mark had lost friends to careless crossfire.

"Yes. It'll be a blur, with movement everywhere." David was starting to feel the need to get on the move again. "Are we agreed?"

All their heads nodded. It was a big risk to plan this and give her only an hour to confirm it or change it. The location she would have no choice on.

Edward went over as much of the area as he knew, not pulling up much.

Billy, on the other hand, had driven those streets. He began to grin as he zeroed in on

their solution. “Wait. I think I have something better. Get the map back out.”

4

“We’re picking up a message on the short wave.”

Paul’s words drew Corbin from his stare at the apocalyptic landscape. He had spent the last hour trying to outguess Alexa’s reaction to their ambush. He’d insisted on being left alone to concentrate. “Who is it?”

“Alexa’s crew. They’re trying to surrender, I think.”

The scientist’s voice was reluctant, worried. Corbin locked eyes with him. “What is it?”

“They said she’s dead.”

Corbin’s heart turned to ice. “How?”

Paul shrugged, hating to be the one to deliver the news. “The dart got her in the back of the head and did some type of damage. They said she had a seizure and stopped breathing.”

Corbin strode to the small communications area they had set up inside a big green tent. He moved toward the radioman, gesturing him aside impatiently.

The recording wasn’t comforting. The cold attitude of the hardass who’d made the call hid

deep grief. Corbin listened in growing rage.
Dead!

“We’re not like her. We require safe passage.”

“Where’s the body?”

“With us. We’ll deliver it or leave it, your choice.”

“What do you want in return?”

“To go on unharmed. Most of us still had relatives to find when we were...drawn to her.”

“I’ll talk to the boss and call you back.”

Corbin looked to Paul. “Where are they?”

“About a mile from where they went in.”

Corbin looked at the motionless dot on the tracking screen. It was normal for the juice to keep working even after death. It led them to the bodies that way. “Do you believe it?”

Paul reluctantly nodded. “He was only concerned for their lives.”

Corbin wasn’t so sure. “What proof did they offer?”

“Her guns. We fetched them from the meeting place her man suggested and ran a test on the skin cells we found. They’re hers.”

At that, it started to become real for Corbin. Alexa wouldn’t leave her weapons behind for anything. “Where do they want to meet?”

Paul gestured at a red marker on the wall map. “They just want it to be soon. There’s a storm coming and they don’t want to be caught in it.”

“Agree to their terms. Have two extra squads waiting. When we have the body, grab her men. We’ll bring them to the new complex and run some tests. She’s been with them for months. If a trade of power was possible, maybe they’d know.”

‘Cause you won’t get Safe Haven’s location from them, Paul thought. He’d heard that tone of complete hatred before. The fighter who had called was pissed. Corbin wasn’t the only one planning a betrayal, but Paul didn’t reveal his suspicions. It was all up to fate now.

Corbin moved back toward his small tent. There was more than a storm coming for her fighters. He wasn’t fooled by their sudden selfishness. They were probably setting their own trap, but it wouldn’t account for everything. There’s no way they could cover it all with her dead. She was the light. They were only the energy.

5

“They’ve agreed.”

Alexa's men didn't exchange grins at how easy it had gone. There would be time for celebrating when it was over.

Edward needed the details. "How many men?"

"Two dozen." Mark snorted. "Which means more like five."

They'd had to go topside to place the call. Only Daniel and David had heard it all as they escorted Mark. The Convict was perfect for dealing with the soldiers. His bad attitude made it hard to know if he was bluffing.

"Any conditions?"

"They want us unarmed, but they already know it won't happen. We're supposed to bring her up last. They want to see all of us."

Billy held up what he'd been working on for the last hour as he stayed beside Alexa's barely breathing body. "Think it'll work?"

The other men gave nods of approval, but no praise. There would be time for that later, as well.

Jacob was satisfied with their plan. "They'll take us to the complex. From there, we'll help her free the other kids they have."

"That's not *her* plan." Edward stopped them, studying her weathered face. "We go on, to find Safe Haven. Without Adrian, we'll

spend our lives destroying bunkers and still never get them all.”

Jacob scowled. “Why’s he so special? What can he do that she can’t?”

“I don’t know, but it’s what she wants to do and I trust her.” Edward took a minute to change a few things on Billy’s drawing.

When he was finished, he passed it to the others for their approval. No one protested after seeing the second blast he’d added. The soldiers wouldn’t know what was coming. It would be rough and ugly, but it would get Alexa’s unconscious body clear of the damage path.

She still hadn’t woken. The worry over that was becoming tangible.

6

Corbin anxiously watched the men climb from the manhole. He was still holding onto a small hope that they were wrong and a trip to the lab would set her to rights. That hope vanished as the fifth man came out of the hole with her limp body slung over his shoulder. Her knuckles scraped the ground. Those stunning eyes were open, but sightless. It was true.

Jacob gave Edward a hand up as Mark moved toward the heavily guarded jeep in the

center. No less than twenty vehicles waited, with more than four dozen soldiers with rifles aimed at them.

“Lot of hardware for letting us go.”

Corbin stared at her hardasses with open dislike, changing his plans. These men were not going along for the ride. He looked around. “Only five. Where’s the other one?”

“Ran.” Mark snorted his anger. “The rookie split when she died.”

It clearly wasn’t the response of a close group, and it threw Corbin off. “Six or none!”

Mark slid a hand to his gun. “We’ve returned your property. Stand aside and honor your deal.” His face became ugly in an instant. “Unless you never planned to let us go?”

Corbin understood the unspoken threat and felt a first measure of fear for his life. Loyal to her or not, the men she’d gathered were dangerous.

Corbin suddenly turned reasonable. He motioned toward his vehicle. “I always honor my word. Drop her in the backseat and your group may go. She’s all I came for.”

Mark grunted at the obvious lie and shadowed Edward as he headed for the green jeep.

Edward slung her body down, but made sure her head landed on the soft seat. He

walked away without showing any of the instant desolation he felt at turning her over to this one-eyed murderer for even a minute.

The second the fighters were back with the others, Corbin began to slide toward the driver door. “Open fire!”

“Now!”

Perched atop the first water tower, Billy hit the button at Edward’s shout and scrambled for cover.

Kaablllamm!

Wooden and metal shrapnel flew through the air as the base of the water tower evaporated. The heavy water crashed to the ground and pounded over the arid dirt under it.

Every head turned toward the billowing sound, faces widened in horror as the water thundered relentlessly their way.

Kaabllamm!

The next tower drew Corbin’s stunned attention. He watched the water roar toward him in a shocked daze. *I’ve been ambushed!*

Mark’s tattooed knuckles smashed into Corbin’s cheek, driving him to the ground. Around them, the soldiers fled the coming waves with little thought of their leader.

Edward swung Alexa’s body back over his shoulder, but he didn’t wait to enjoy the relief of holding her life in his hands again. He spun

for the roof they'd agreed on, not looking to see if the others needed help. Right now, Alexa was all he cared about.

The water pounded the last half mile toward them, sweeping away the vehicles as men fled in panic. Alexa's fighters darted among the dazed soldiers with little fear of being shot, but when Edward hit the ladder on the building, he was alone and he felt it. He lunged up the rungs two at a time, swinging his feet over the top as the first wave of water collided with the brick building.

Edward staggered at the impact, grip tightening.

Coming from a different side, David was there to steady Edward. Instead of watching the destruction, the two men laid Alexa's limp body down and secured their new perimeter.

The roof was wide and cluttered with years of filth. The two men stayed at her side, scanning alertly. They listened to the roar of the waves and the screams below with hard hearts. This building was meant to withstand about anything. That was why they'd chosen it, but there was no need to watch the soldiers drown. Thoughts of their own men were near the surface however, and they kept a steady watch on the top of the ladder for anyone else that might have made it.

Bang!

The sound of Jacob's gun crashing made Edward wave David to the side for a look.

His report came with grim words. "The rookie's on top of the transport truck they brought. It washed up against the hillside." David frowned harshly. "He missed! Corbin got away."

Edward nodded, bending down to examine Alexa's breathing. It was one of the downsides of using a tool like water. There was no controlling it and Corbin was a master of escapes. How else had he avoided the rage of so many angry descendants for so long? "What about the others?"

"They went underground."

The unexpected voice made both men spin around to see a short, blond man wearing a white lab coat huddling behind a stack of crates. He was shivering, soaked, and bleeding from a variety of scrapes.

"I came up the b-b-back." Teeth chattering, Paul looked behind him quickly. "Think your m-men are, too."

There was relief to see the others come from behind the drenched scientist.

Daniel's grin was wide as he took up a post on the ladder they'd just used. It had been a horrifying, amazing rush to dash through the

tunnels, staying steps ahead of the water as they hurried for the manhole cover on the other side of the building. Then, there had been the heart stopping sight of the water smashing through the hillside to race them for the ladder. This thrill ride was beyond any he'd experienced before the war.

Edward gave Billy a nod of recognition as the Driver stopped next to the cold scientist he assumed was now their prisoner. "Good plan."

Billy shrugged, longing to hear those words from their leader. Her continued absence was bothering all of them. "What about him?"

Paul dropped his head, as he automatically had when it was Corbin deciding his fate.

"My mercy...is given." Alexa opened her eyes to find freedom, incredibly sweet, waiting in the happy faces of her men. She inhaled deeply of the dank air. Now they understood that she truly needed them for more than their energy.

Alexa slowly pushed up to sit against the filthy chimney; her skull throbbed in pain. She closed her eyes, controlling the effects as best she could while six very anxious males waited for her reaction to the choices they'd made in her absence. "Are they dead?"

"Not Corbin."

Behind them, Paul shivered harder. "A d-

dozen soldiers m-made it, too. They followed him.”

Taking pity on the man’s misery, Billy slid a hand into his pack and came up with a shirt. He tossed it to the captive, seeing the marks of repeated beatings. The scars decorated his alabaster skin. “Anyone have rags to donate?”

Paul quickly changed into the dry clothes that were tossed his way at Billy’s call, exposing his malformed body with no self-consciousness. That had been stripped from him, along with so many other vital parts of his humanity.

The fighters knew he wouldn’t survive out in this world for long, alone or not. Instead of questioning his future, each of her men kept quiet and tried to guess how she might handle it. After Jendon and the baby, they were sure she would think of something other than bringing him along. She’d said they were already a full crew.

“Come over here, Paul.”

The Rabbit hurried to her side, heart thumping at her use of his given name. Around them, her men took up posts and listened eagerly to the sound of her voice. It was a raspy noise they didn’t want to be without now. They’d already risked too much, accomplished too much, to ever forsake the quest or her.

Paul slid to his knees at Alexa's feet, almost falling.

Her men frowned at his unbalanced movements. The rabbit-like behavior said if he was left here he would go straight back to the compound and report everything that had happened just to be allowed back in. That made him the enemy, didn't it?

Paul ignored them. The time of judgment was finally here for him as he faced the Alpha. "I had no choice!"

Alexa drew in a deep breath, not sure if she was ready for the newest burden yet. Finding the scientist here upon waking was the only dark spot. "Who is your father, Paul?"

His face melted into a mask of rage that none of them had expected. "You already know!"

His snarl made two of her fighters come back to hover over his shoulder.

Alexa let them stay, but she wasn't in danger from Paul. "And when he finally recognized the genius that his experiments had caused?"

Paul swayed, no longer angry, but hurt beyond any describable measure. "He put me with the others to be experimented on!"

The fighters muttered at such evil.

Alexa gave them a sharp look before

turning back. “Tell me.”

The Rabbit’s mouth opened; revulsion spilled out. “They’re mating with us, trying to get stronger babies that can survive out here, but he...Corbin...*he* wants to be stronger. When a successful breeding gives a healthy baby, he kills it or deforms it. They never get what they need, but he has endless time to figure out how to be like us.” Paul looked at her with devoted, terrified eyes. “It’s Safe Haven that Corbin’s after. He thinks Adrian will make him like us, especially if he holds you hostage.”

“I see.” Alexa’s tone was sheets of ice laid with hair-trigger mines. “Where will they stop for the night?”

7

The small camp of soldiers was easy to follow in the darkness. The desolate Commander had set camp out in the open, not worried about Alexa’s fighters. Let them come. What did he have to live for now?

His shoulder throbbed mercilessly from the bullet that had slammed through the back window as he fled. Corbin swallowed the last of his drink with a bitter grimace. The fighters had gotten away with any knowledge they might have had and Alexa was dead.

Tomorrow, he would go back and try to collect the body, but Corbin was only going through the motions now. Any chance he'd had of finding Safe Haven, of controlling Adrian, had died with his daughter. That man would never gift him with immortality now. His future looked bleak.

The soldiers around him were aware of it. They were protecting him and following orders, but each of them knew his execution would be ordered as punishment for this failure.

Corbin fingered the gun on his hip as he considered ending it all. Without Safe Haven's magic, he would wither and die out here the same as the other refugees. At the bunker, he would be shot for gross negligence of duty. What was left? "I should have died too!"

"I agree."

Alexa's voice from the darkness was fiery...*alive!* Corbin stumbled to his feet. He froze at the sight of her standing just behind his chair.

Death swarmed closer.

Alexa whistled.

Around them, gunfire rang out as her loyal men took their revenge on Corbin's guards, who were in no shape to fight. The dozen soldiers were no match for the fury of Alexa's Eagles.

“Stay back.” Corbin fumbled for the dart gun on his belt, still refusing to kill her even though instinct said she was here to end him.

“Uh-uh!” Alexa’s rage rose as memories assaulted her. That voice had forced her to do unspeakable things for the discovery of information that she never possessed. This weakling had broken her down into a begging mass of emotion, repeatedly...and she’d let him, because of her humanity. Her conscience had kept her behind their walls, but now, thanks to him, she was more corrupt than he was.

Being careful not to trim their leader, the six fighters moved her way as they picked off the few remaining soldiers dumb enough to pop their heads out from behind doors and bumpers. They moved in that efficient V she’d taught them, mowing down anything that moved.

Alexa snarled when Corbin pointed the dart gun at her.

He knew she didn’t hold him in the same tender regard that he did her, but what mattered was that she followed the ways of her father. *Maybe this isn’t over yet.*

Around them, the soldiers lay dead and her fighters stood in a tight circle, ready to defend her if it was needed.

Corbin lowered the gun. “I let you go.”

Alexa finally got the answer for the ease of her escape. Her face changed into an unreadable mask.

Corbin continued, not trying to save his life, but still desperate to follow her to Adrian. “I watched out for you. I tried to keep the guards away from you.” Corbin’s pitch softened. “If not for Regan finding your hole up in the desert, they still wouldn’t know where you are. You *owe* me mercy.”

Alexa wanted to kill him anyway. Her soul certainly needed it, but he had gifted her with the most awful thing he could have—freedom. He was right. She did owe him.

In return, she motioned to the man still lurking in the shadows. “Show him my mercy, Paul. Remove that debt.”

The Rabbit stepped from the darkness with a nightmarish grin and a familiar gun that Corbin stumbled back from. It was Alexa’s missing Colt. There was only one on her hip. Corbin had lost track of them in the chaos. “What? No—”

“Hello, Father!”

“Wait, Rab—”

“My name is Paul! I’m your son!”

“No! Don’t!”

Bang!

“Burn it all.” Alexa turned away in guilty

satisfaction. Now that they had Paul, they didn't need Corbin for the locations of the other bunkers. Paul knew where many of them were. He also knew how to hack into the government's remaining technology to find the others and he was loyal to her quest. All she had to do was stash him somewhere while she and her fighters brought Adrian back. This leg of their quest had worked out even better than she'd hoped when Corbin had let her go right after she'd saved Daniel. She'd always intended to repay him for that kindness. *A Mitchel never let debts add up. It's bad for the family reputation.*

Chapter Thirteen

Close

1

Twelve days later, the dusty fighters stared at the message carved into the stone of the Black Hills.

Finding Safe Haven's old campsite had been harder here, where nature seemed almost normal, but the message in the cliffs would have been impossible to miss. Jendon had gotten it word for word as it was carved, but Alexa's sharp eyes picked out an added line along the ground, like something hurriedly placed there when no one else was around.

"I'll wait as long as I can."

Despite being sure that it would take a month or more for the big government bunker to learn of Corbin's defeat, they had stayed on the move and made decent time. Alexa could still be tracked for weeks, according to Paul, but thanks to his smashing the control screen, those who picked through the wreckage wouldn't be able to follow easily. Still, one woman traveling with seven men drew

attention. Word would get back to those in charge. Eventually, the soldiers would come again.

“This is amazing!”

Edward looked at their companion, shaking his head at the scientist’s excited examination of the black mold on the spruce trees. Paul was clearly happy that Alexa had allowed him along for a while, but his sudden movements and unexpected noises were annoyances for her very serious fighters. If he’d been along as anything but a guest, they might have protested. As it was, the pale man had a knack for finding supplies and had already aided them with that.

Content that Alexa planned to drop the Rabbit somewhere along the way, Edward watched her pause and turn toward the mountains, where Paul had told them a complex was hidden. She was tortured over it. Her stiff shoulders said she wanted to go back the way they’d come, and it was her choice. If Alexa decided they were going to the big bunker to take on the new government, they would all follow.

Alexa let out a sigh, shuddering as she fought for control of her ghosts and her guilt. These people, this country, needed Adrian’s light. He was the only one who could bring them all together and force Nature to close the

gates. They had to find Safe Haven.

The wind howled around them, blowing their cloaks back as if in defiance of her thoughts.

Alexa spun a finger. “Set us up. We head for Nebraska at first light.”

2

In an isolated corner of the apocalyptic wastelands, animal sentries were reaching their destination. These small warriors had traveled nonstop to warn Nature that man was once again gathering. They came with firsthand information for the war that lie ahead. There was little doubt that this new group of humans was strong enough to start the rebuilding, to begin killing the fantasy world with their harsh disbelief. They were lethal enough to battle the new environment and maybe win. Over the seasons, these would multiply until the old world was returned. That could not be allowed to happen.

“It won’t!” Nature breathed her promise, calming rapidly beating hearts. She did not intend to let man send her new warriors back through the gates.

“The only one who could have done so is gone from these shores. Without that green and

gold light, man will never return to his former glory.”

But the sentries were worried. The animals tried to express their concerns with images of the ruthless female leading the fighters, of how she'd bound a troll. That was supposed to be something only the undead could do.

Despite losing one of her oldest birds on the golden stairs, Nature wasn't overly concerned. There were many strong humans left, but without a true Alpha, there was no way humanity could heal the rift caused by their awful war. All the horror had snapped so many minds that it had been easy to push the gates open and allow the real terrors to roam free. Every human the monsters took was one less to be destroyed later. “Return to your homes, then your duties. This group will fail like the others have.”

“But if they make it across the waters...”

Nature's harsh laughter rang out, sending animals darting for cover under bushes and the ground.

“The waters are under my command now. They will not allow a human to leave any shore.”

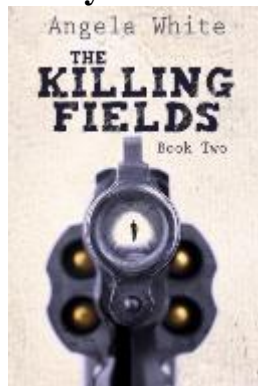
“But if they do make it south, you'll be hurt.”

Understanding how deeply the human fighters had worried her sentries, Nature felt the first tremor of unease. She'd reacted lightly before the war, and almost been destroyed. *Perhaps I should eliminate them now.*

Nature began to wake early, drawing power from the land and air. *It's time to strengthen my friends in the corn. When the humans get to those endless fields, they'll stay forever.*

The End

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scene

“Attention!”

The static-filled radio blared through the truck of soldiers scouring the edges of the mountain for signs of Alexa.

“There has been a level 5 breach of compound K! All troops are required to report to the nearest base immediately!”

Corbin froze. K was *his* compound, the one he’d denied Paul the safety of. Level 5 meant no survivors. *That’s her. Alexa did it!*

The radio crunched again. “Report all sightings of escaped captives directly to base!”

Corbin’s hand wasn’t quite steady as he turned the radio off. *All the work I’ve done there! All my vials!*

Driving, Shane opened his mouth to question.

Protecting his new friend from Corbin’s wild rage, Paul shook his head. It was a result of the experiments to a degree, but mostly, Corbin was ill. He had been all along. How else could he be such a monster to children?

Struggling to accept it, Corbin refused the order to go to the nearest base. Alexa wouldn’t stay with the kids. She’d done it to send him a message, to tell him that he wouldn’t stand in the way of the quest...but she’d also made a mistake,

hadn't she? All those kids would be easy to find and they would have new information.

Corbin's sudden, harsh laughter spilled out, surprising the listening men. When the commander laughed, it meant death was coming. They instinctively began to prepare for it, checking weapons and gear.

"Take me to compound K, but don't use main roads. We'll see how many of her children we can round up. We know how to make them sing. It never fails."

Author Note

Hi! It's Angie, waving at you. I hope you enjoyed a glimpse of how this quest began and the two constant enemies that they'll face. What the government can't handle, Mother Nature might be capable of. Only time will tell.

When I started this story, it was supposed to be a short episode of a continuing saga that I'd hoped to release monthly. I understood that wasn't likely as soon as I finished the first chapter, but I've never really known how big it should be or where it was supposed to start. I like to think I now have both of those covered.

I expect this series to have roughly half the number of books as my first series, *Life After War*. As you may have guessed, they will meet in the future. After the journey that both groups have made through the apocalyptic wilderness, they certainly deserve to meet and swap survival tales.

Next, we'll be heading to the Killin' Fields of Nebraska. Marc and Angie came through there right after the war and it was ugly then. I wonder what horrors lurk there now?

This series is almost the opposite of the limits that I face while writing *LAW*. This one

allows me a creative freedom that always seems to have a slightly western flavor with guns and Magic—two of my favorite things... (Sorry. I was singing. It's better that you couldn't hear it.)

Thanks for reading my work! I hope we meet again in that distantly close realm where just about anything can happen. I call it Angie's World.

Character Bios

The Horseman

Edward was taken in the Draft and held in a bunker for months after the war. While gone, his wife was murdered. When the food began running out, Edward helped breach the compound to free everyone. Those freed men then destroyed the nearest towns. The Horseman, so called because of his touch with animals, has never forgiven himself. Until Alexa saved him, he only wanted to die.

The Biker

Daniel liked to risk his life for thrills before the end of the world forced him to see that there were more important things to die for. He lost his mother in the aftermath of the war and tried to take his life because of it. Alexa healed his injuries and his heart.

The Preacher

In his mid-twenties, Jacob has jagged scars that crisscross his cheek and forehead. Before the war, he worked for the government. After,

he was a Preacher in River City. He believes in peace and will go out of his way to achieve it, but when the battles come, he is just as dangerous as the rest of Alexa's companions. The other men assume his wounds caused this deadly reaction, but their leader knows better. Jacob is a born killer.

The Convict

Mark was a criminal when she came for him, being held in an underground slam with the other killers. That didn't stand in her way. When Alexa left Boulder, he was at her side and happy to be there.

The Blacksmith

David is the normally silent member of her group. Taller than her other men, he wears the same dark coloring and intelligent blue eyes. His future role in her crew is their magician, but he doesn't know it.

The Driver

Billy was a limo driver before the war. He can scale a tree like a monkey and drive anything with wheels. He's the only one of her

men to have hair long enough to keep in a ponytail. Little else is known yet.

The Leader

Alexa is a leader of men. She culled her companions from the dwindling herd of humanity because she sensed that they alone might have the strength to make the journey. Each battle fought at her side tightens that bond. For her, their quest is about more than just finding a safe place. It's about the search for missing family. With her scarred fingers and fire-roughened voice, this stunning blonde warrior will lead these six badass men through hell and back to reclaim what she lost in the war—her place at her father's side.

Jendon

Jendon, they call him,
The Troll from the bog.
Banished to roam man's world,
In the storms and the fog.

His yellow eyes flicker,
Greed in their depths.
One he won't steal from,
There be few left.

Traveling merchant,
With a Gypsy cart and gray horse.
Powerful potions he makes,
Just don't ask the source.

Huge green fists,
Ready to strike.
He hides by the day,
And lurks through the night.

Peddling his wares,
Potions, spirits, charms.
Trading for bone dust,
While memories he farms.

Eat his food,
Drink his liqueur,
And in your life,
You've never been sicker.

Bewitched by magic,
Dreams unprotected.
Secrets revealed,
Weaknesses detected.

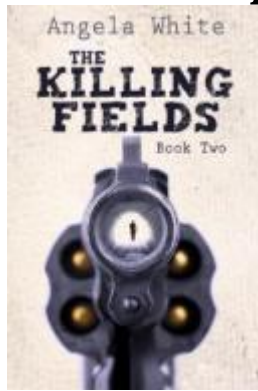
The sly salesman,
Clever merchant.
Nightmarish barker,
Kin of the serpent.

Steal you blind,
In more ways than one.
Ruining your fate,
Before all's said and done.

Nothing, but trouble,
To no one willingly loyal.
Yet if it can be earned,
The value is double.

Beware of Jendon,
Of playing Fate's card.
To cross this one,
You'd better be hard.

Book 2 Sample



[The Killing Fields](#)

“**Y**ou’re not going in there?”

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

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

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

“She is crazy!”

That earned him another scowl from the men who had already agreed that it would be better for everyone if the awkward scientist gave up and

returned to the government base. Out here, Paul was only a burden to be handled later.

“Can’t we talk about it?”

Alexa didn’t pause and neither did her fighters, but they did steal quick glimpses back as they followed. They weren’t able to ignore Paul like she could, but they had no doubts about their own choice, their own level of commitment. This would be a hard trip for anyone who didn’t have confidence in themselves.

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

“Wait! Wait for me!”

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

“Don’t leave me!”

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

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

Paul drew up at the hostile vibes. “What?”

Edward growled, pointing. “Get in your place!”

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

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

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

“I’d hear them later.” Alexa was aware of his tactics. Her crew didn’t want Paul here. They would try to get rid of him, while also trying not to piss her off. That was a thin rope to walk.

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

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

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

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

The males making a conscious effort to maintain her basic traveling formation had big muscles and dark hair that made them appear related, but each of them wore it differently. For David, it was loose and almost long. As a blacksmith, he'd kept his hair trimmed for safety, but that wasn't necessary now.

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

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

the cause yet. She assumed it was his mental weakness, but she wasn't sure. There were plenty of faults to pick through.

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

Alexa didn't confirm or deny that.

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

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

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

The wind sent a fresh round of moans through the tall corn, making the fighters peer harder through the jungle of stalks and tassels that now surrounded them. Ten-foot high plants rose haughtily in every direction and exuded a wet vegetable smell that hung heavily over the field,

while the spongy ground under their boots suggested they might sink at any moment despite a lack of rain. It made them all uneasy. Paul's loud clumping drew their emotions to an easy target.

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

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

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

"I agree." Mark also glared at Paul. "You'll get her killed!"

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

He'd been thinking about killing his father, not paying attention like they'd been telling him to do for the last ten days. He was trying to decide if he liked being an honest killer or if he wished he'd

done it while the man slept. This feeling of freedom, of weighing nothing, might have been even stronger.

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

Alexa stopped again, shoulders rigid.

Her fighters braced.

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

Paul rose, flustered. “Please!”

There was silence as they all waited for her choice.

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa stayed where she was, listening for trouble to find them as the others took up positions around their stopped group. It took time to learn new ways. Alexa understood that. The small issues, like Jacob occasionally fighting with his

faulty foot and Edward's thickheaded pride, would settle themselves out in time, but not if she constantly harped on them. Even Mark and Daniel still made too much noise with their hearty male voices. It sometimes brought trouble, but overall, she was pleased with the progress of her fighters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

David winced. "Protecting myself, not hiding."

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

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

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

"Tell me who you want to be."

"An Eagle in Safe Haven's army."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa understood that feeling, but it didn't bother her that David had been with the enemy. So had Edward and Jacob. Mark had been a career criminal. None of that mattered. Alexa wasn't good at comforting her men, but she managed to find a tone that sounded gentle. "You'll tell them. They'll make the choice. Until then, store up credits."

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

"Hold still!"

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

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

Paul stumbled backward.

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

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

Edward snorted. "Sure. Come on. She wants to be moving. Can't you feel her impatience?"

When Alexa turned toward the path she'd chosen, David took the place on her right to cover

for Edward, who would have a miserable few hours of trying to reteach Paul the basics of their traveling formation. He should have learned it on his own by now just from doing it every day. It wasn't hard, but it took concentration that the scientist didn't seem to have. Paul often caused them to stop while he examined some specimen that he'd only read about in the lab or while he exclaimed over the hues of the sunset. It was as if he hadn't been outside in his entire life. For all they knew, he hadn't.

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

The others did the same, muttering.

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

Paul started to protest. "What did I—"

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

Ahead of them, Alexa was already running.

The other fighters flew by Edward and Paul.

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

2

"Get up!" Edward stopped and went back to the sweaty scientist, aware of his group getting

further ahead with every second. The last hour had felt much longer.

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

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

"Useless!" Edward slid his arm around Paul's waist as the sound of boots faded. He hefted the man over his shoulder and rushed to catch up. He ignored Paul's cry of discomfort.

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

3

3 Days Later

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

Not doubting him, Alexa signaled her men closer, but she didn't stop. They were deep into the

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

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

“Boss.”

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

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

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

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

The little girl hissed. “Never!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut up!” Edward stopped and spun around.
“Don’t ever do that again!”

“What?!” Paul braced to take the blows.

“Call her a liar.” Jacob glared. “Or any of us.
You’re the only liar here.”

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

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

The men hurried to catch up with Alexa.

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

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

Paul opened his mouth to spew his false narrative again.

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

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

Paul began to sob at her feet.

Alexa recoiled in disgust. “Don’t make me do that again or I’ll leave you behind. I have no time

to waste fixing your broken parts. Do that yourself.”

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

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

“How do you kill a guardian?” Billy wanted the information more than to fill the awkward silence. He couldn’t help Alexa fight these battles if he didn’t know how to handle her enemies.

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

“Disable?”

“Creators? Like vampires?”

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

“Normally?”

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

“How do we—”

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

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

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

4

“There’s something back this way.”

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

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

That was something she hadn’t allowed since picking him up. Edward tried to be perfect as he

took over the Point position. The sense of food being hidden here was clear; he found himself falling into the tracking zone. Alexa often used words to trigger their mood changes and actions, but it wasn't needed with him. He'd watched her closely every time. After months, it was almost natural. "There's some sort of wall here."

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

Edward stopped, considering, listening, feeling. "There."

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

"Keep leading." Alexa stayed in the bodyguard's place.

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

Edward used a light hand on the knob and pushed the narrow door open, wondering if this

storehouse had another entrance. It was hard to imagine people carrying boxes through that tight opening.

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

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

Alexa slapped Edward on the arm. "Nice."

Edward glowed at the praise.

Alexa called the others inside and shut the door.

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

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

"Bottled water."

"Jars of canned corn."

"Toilet paper rolls!"

“Some kind of juice. Can’t read the first word.”

“Five cases of canned items, no labels.”

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

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

Jacob paused.

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

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

“When the city is at the height of fire, release the valve on the chamber. Wear masks with respirators or death will occur within seconds. Once chemical is released, evacuate area of all

personnel and rendezvous at final coordinates within 21 days.”

Speculation and horror ran through the group.

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

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

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

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

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

“Can anyone remove it?”

No one answered her.

Alexa gestured Jacob back. “Leave it alone.”

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

Alexa stared at the medical crate and the cloth satchel thoughtfully. She didn’t want to give away their location to anyone, but it would bother her

too much to leave these things out here for anyone to find. They would have to handle whatever came from here. “We’ll take the explosives and burn the rest. Clear out everything that we can use.”

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

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

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

“I’ve watched a lot.”

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

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

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

Alexa held a pouch out. “Hold this.”

Paul not actually touching anything dangerous sent relief through the room. The group continued their chores as if it were a normal day. For them,

gathering supplies, traveling, learning, and occasionally fighting was now their way of life. Each of them enjoyed the quiet and the solitude. Only a bit of their daily time was spent bonding and talking. Alexa was guiding them back to nature, to peace, and they longed for it. Paul was a disruption of everything they'd come for.

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

Alexa met Billy's eye for a moment of shared sympathy for the Rabbit. No matter who his group was, he wouldn't survive. They would do all they could to keep him alive, but in the end, it would never be enough.

Billy stroked his goatee. "And there's no way to change that?"

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

Alexa grinned. "It's what keeps me walking. That, and the wonderful view."

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

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

Silence came. Then laughter.

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

Now the laughter was uneasy, fading into disapproval.

"You charged prisoners to rape them?" Mark's tone was icy.

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

Alexa signaled for the packed pouches to be loaded up. "They're not treated well, Paul. They're prisoners."

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

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

"You mean they crave physical contact when they're carrying?" David was unable to help himself. Unlike Jacob, David had been the opposite of an abstainer. He'd indulged in the

locals, the towns around, and any travelers who'd come through. The last two weeks without had been the hardest part of this quest for him so far.

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

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

"What type of scientist were you?" Jacob wasn't interested in the female knowledge as much as the others—he'd been with Alexa and no other woman would ever be enough for him—but there was still the sense of being lied to. How could this nerd, be a lover boy?

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

Billy paused. "Research about descendants?"

"Yes, and their offspring."

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

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

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

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

Jacob smirked. “And asked for you?”

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

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

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

Alexa cut him off with a sharp whistle.

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

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

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

Alexa mentally snickered at Paul's thoughts. "Is it something we need?"

Edward wasn't sure and didn't lie. "I don't know. It has a feeling..."

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

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

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

The house was large. Seven windows with bars over them lined the front of the ranch home and that same wall-covering ivy had grown overtop everything, including water stained birdbaths and garden gnomes. The landscaping implied the people who had called this home had preferred flying pets. All of them flashed to the vulture on the stairway. Edward and Jacob did a quick scan of their rear and then above them for an ambush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexa gestured to the next set of plastic curtains.

Edward and Mark rushed through with guns out.

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

Alexa quickly scanned the kitchen. It wasn’t very large, but it felt that way by how empty it was. No table and chairs, no cabinets on the walls. Only dusty squares proclaimed that life had once existed in this place. The floor did sport a rug—a shabby, circle carpet only a few feet in size. It had faded to glare dingily. Even the walls were hostile, carrying gouges and holes that had been filled with what smelled like toothpaste.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both males felt her warm regard and moved her way without waiting for the invitation. What she wanted was clear and they were willing. It was something each man had already decided he could tolerate or better.

Alexa tugged the plastic back over the doorway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

David and Jacob were tormented, especially David, who hadn't been used yet. Jacob hadn't been touched again since his joining ceremony, but at least he had the memory. It was rough on him and the woman loving blacksmith. For Paul, it was demoralizing. Alexa was showing him that she didn't want the future he could provide, that these wild men were what pleased her. The Rabbit's jealousy was loud.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Feeling her pleasure was a balm to the small jealousy that remained in her men. Mark and

Edward had pleased her. That was good. Too often, they all felt like she was disappointed in them. It was a relief to have a few moments free of that heavy weight.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul frowned. “You’re talking like they exist.”

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

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

“Honestly, my pets. Giants are the Bigfoots of old world legends. They’re no mystery, simply a race that prefers to be left alone. They don’t even usually stay with a mate for more than a few years. It’s rare to have an entire family down here. Very curious.”

Now there were plenty of questions.

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

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

Billy looked over. “Does the dust have power?”

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

It was a relief to hear.

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

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

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

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

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

Billy nodded. *My thought, exactly.*

Distracted by his disbelief, Paul started to argue and forgot to be careful. An old watering trough sticking up from a pile of moldy stalks caught his boot as he tried to step over it instead of

going around. He fell forward onto the pile of rotting wood, sending noise through the peace.

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

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

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

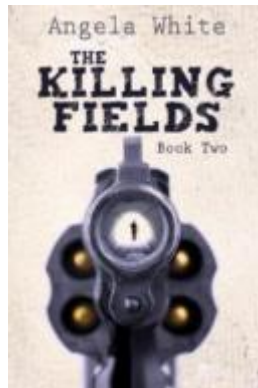
Paul did as he was shown without speaking, not even to say thanks. He was still stinging in places from his falls and from the blows that he'd taken. He was ready for Alexa to call it a night so that he could cry himself to sleep.

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

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

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

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



Book Two

[The Killing Fields](#)

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