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## Angel

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Angel

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

Cole Connelly

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## Chapter 1 – New in Town

Amy spent the night under an overpass on the outskirts of the downtown area. The sun had barely begun to rise when she set out for the ruins of the city. In the early morning, the streets were empty, but in the distance she could hear what sounded like people. Noises just quiet enough that they might be voices, but she wasn't interested in figuring out if they were or not. She had no reason to seek them out. She didn't need any help, and as far as she could tell, no one needed hers either.

Barely a block into the ruins, Amy found a five-story building worth checking out. If the building had a name, it was lost to nature. Only the engraved word 'Technologies' stood out on the cracked concrete slab of a sign in front of the building. Her father had taught her to read at a young age, and 'technology' was one of the words he'd trained her to look for. It almost always

meant good salvage, and good salvage could be traded for food, supplies. Amy looked up at the building to see if more words were present elsewhere. However, thick green mosses, molds, and vines covered much of the lower part of this building, and many of the other buildings around it. Amy liked that about this new city. She wasn't used to green and found it pleasing, much more so than the browns and tans of sand and dirt.

The building's façade was crumbling in places, but mostly held together. Amy figured the thick vegetation had something to do with it. The vines and mosses clung to the side of the building and crept into the cracked and shattered windows like spider webs holding leaves and twigs together. The doors to the building were long gone, leaving a gaping square of an entrance looming over the street. She was no fool; the front door was the mouth of a beast. The sound of shambling from within fell from the maw into the street, but no zombies crossed the entryway to betray their numbers inside. She wouldn't be eaten.

She looked down an alley to the side of the building for a fire escape, or some other means of getting to the higher levels of the building without going through the front. There wasn't a fire escape, but there was an open window on the third floor. It would serve. The vegetation clinging to the building reached past the second story and neared the open window on the third. She approached the wall and felt the growth. The vines were thin, and pulled away easily, but the molds and lichens gripped tight. She dug her fingernail into a dark mold and scratched at it, picking the growth away. It was nearly an inch thick in places. She was sure she could get enough traction from it to climb. It wasn't like the rocky outcroppings of the desert she'd grown up in, but she knew she could deal with it.

She backed up to the building that served as the other side of the alley and looked up to survey her goal. There were windows on each floor, about ten, maybe twelve, feet separating

them with the ground floor window being about five feet off the ground. She took off her backpack and got her rope out of it. She tied one end of the rope to her belt, and the other end to her pack so she could hoist it up when she got inside. She tied her auburn hair into a ponytail to keep it out of her eyes.

With the rope tightly secured, she sprinted toward the wall, and took three long strides against it before pushing up and off. She grabbed at the window sill on the second floor and just managed to keep a grip on the cracked brick. Bracing against the overgrown wall, she pulled herself up as best she could to sit on the window sill. It was only a few inches deep, but it was enough to let her get a second's rest and plan her further ascent. She couldn't take a running jump like she had done to get onto this ledge, but the lichen continued up the wall for another few feet, and it would only need to hold to the wall for a few seconds. No sweat. That certainly wouldn't help her keep a tight grip.

Slowly, she stood up in the window space, gripping the walls on her sides tightly. She dug her fingers into the growth just above the window and barely felt the grouting of the brick beneath it. She held as tight as she could and pulled herself up. Hand over hand, she quickly seized at the wall and hoisted herself a few inches higher, then again. As soon as the third floor window was close enough, she made a grab for the windowsill. Her scrambling feet scraped vegetation away from the wall below her, but each push moved her a little more up, a little more through the open window.

With one last heave, she pulled herself up and rolled into the building. The smell floored her instantly, and she had to pinch her nose closed and breathe through her mouth. The building had to be heavily infested on lower levels for it to smell so strongly of fetid meat and milk left for weeks in the sun. She pressed her back to the wall below the open window and breathed

slowly through her mouth. The light of the morning sun illuminated enough of the room to look around.

From her position, she could see the back of a desk and a tipped over chair, broken file cabinets lining one wall, and a set of shelves occupying another. Across from the window she sat under, a closed door stared back at her. She listened there below the window. No sounds of scraping, clawing, or groaning came from the office or the door beyond it. So, carefully, she hauled her backpack up behind her. She recoiled her length of rope and hooked it back onto the side of her pack. Amy fished a bandana out of it, one of her father's old red and black ones, and tied it around her nose and mouth. It wasn't perfect, but it helped with the smell.

The room held little of interest. However, after a few minutes of searching the desk drawers and filing cabinets, the building's smell, while still aggressive, had faded toward the background. With the room searched, she turned her attention to the door. She put her ear to the wood and listened intently. She knew she should have done this first, what if someone was out there and heard her searching? Maybe she'd gotten lucky and the building was as empty as she hoped. The door was solid wood, not hollow particle board, so the sound coming through was muffled, both ways. Someone would need to be listening very closely to hear her. Movement of some kind came from the other side of the door, but from a distance, maybe even down a hall. She hoped it was just a lone zombie. One ghoul she could deal with, no problem. One person? That was a different question. She stepped back from the door and unsheathed her knife, holding it at the ready. The door wasn't locked, but it creaked as she pushed it open. She stopped at the first noise it made, waited, listened. The movement she'd barely heard stopped. It hadn't gotten louder, or closer. It likely wasn't a zombie making the noise, which meant it was probably something worse.



She squeezed through the now cracked door and looked around. Darkness filled this space much more completely than the office she'd climbed into, but she could make out shapes. Desks littered the area, and no walls stood out immediately, a bull pen. Plenty of places for someone to hide, but she wouldn't. She pressed herself up against the wall beside the door and let her eyes adjust to the lower light. Tipped over and broken chairs joined the scattering of deserted desks with an assortment of office supplies dotting the ground as well, pens, papers, broken desk phones, picture frames.

There was an open space of floor about forty feet in front of her beside a tipped over desk, unmarred by scattered supplies or broken furniture. A small, disheveled pile of paper and broken plastic rested at the edge of the cleared space near the flipped desk. Something had pushed the debris away recently, cleared the space. Something was still close by. Amy passed her knife from her right to left hand, and pulled a throwing knife from her bandoleer. What, or whoever, was here, she was ready for it.

Amy stared at the desk, ready with her knife. She took a deliberate step onto a crumpled paper, and a man sprang out from behind the desk, landing on his side. He pointed a hand crossbow at her. Amy's throwing hand twitched just behind her head. The man's hesitance to shoot stopped her mid-throw. Had their weapons been switched, she'd be looking at a dead man. Instead, they locked eyes and stared at each other for a moment.

"Friendly?" the man asked.

"Yeah," Amy said, but she held her knife at the ready, prepared to throw. She wouldn't be the first to disarm. But that wouldn't be a problem.

"Whew, good to know." The man practically bounced up off the ground to his feet. His dusty brown hair sat unkempt on his head, and he sported matching scruff in the form of a short

beard. He slipped his crossbow into a holster on his hip and dusted his front off. He wore a thick white work shirt underneath a leather harness, loaded with bulging pockets, and a pair of heavy tan pants, also incredibly pocketed. He picked up a messenger bag from behind the desk and slung it over his shoulder. He went from a potential threat to a quite possible hallucination in less than a second. What was his deal?

"What're you doing here?" Amy asked. She lowered her throwing arm, but didn't put her knives away. She wouldn't be caught with her guard down.

"You know," he said, straightening his harness, "I was planning to ask you the same thing. Not too often I run into anyone in buildings like this. Less often they come out of rooms I thought I'd already checked out."

"That's not an answer."

"Yeah—" the man closed one eye and looked up with his other, "—I guess it's not. I'm here salvaging, looking for a piece of tech. What about—"

"We're still talking about you," Amy said.

He chuckled. "Okay, sure. Something specific you want to know?" the man asked. Amy watched his right hand. It didn't go for his crossbow, but he hooked his thumb into his harness right above it.

"Who are you? Are you alone? What, exactly, are you looking for?" Amy asked. He didn't seem like a threat. She could ask him the question. She took a breath. "And, do you need any help?"

The man smiled. "I'm Cord, and I didn't bring anyone with me, but I wouldn't say I'm alone per se. People back at the Homestead know I came out here to search. And while I wouldn't say I 'need' any help, I never turn down an offer."

"Well, Cord," Amy said, "my name's Amy, and if you tell me what it is you're looking for, I might be able to lend a hand."

"This—" Cord plucked a folded sheet of blue paper from one of the pockets of his harness. "—is what I'm looking for." He walked over to an empty desk between them and spread it out. Amy sheathed her throwing knife and joined Cord, standing on his right side, close enough to make drawing his crossbow a difficulty. She could help him without fully trusting him.

The paper was clearly a schematic or blueprint of some kind. The margins were filled with faded words in what Amy assumed was English, but she could only make out a handful of them. The item on the paper was a chip, or maybe a processor. Amy knew of computers and higher technology, but very little about them. She was guessing. Mechanics she understood; she could disassemble a handgun and put it back together, but the moment wires and electricity got involved, she was at a loss. All she knew was that pieces of tech like that could sell for good money to the right people.

"And this...whatever it is, is here?" Amy asked.

"It's a short-range radio imaging chip," Cord said, "and yeah, based on old records, it was being prototyped here."

"What's it, uh, what's it do?"

Cord closed an eye and bit his bottom lip. "It...lets us look inside people, but without opening them up first. Kind of like a window made for looking inside of people."

Amy took a step back. "What? Are you in a cannibal cult or something?"

"What?" Cord said, taken aback. "No, I'm a Harvester. Haven't you heard of us?"

"I'm not from around here," Amy said. She waited. This would be the moment to turn on her, if he was going to.

"Oh, well, we're one of the tribes here in the city, and we do surgeries, organ transplants and what not."

"A tribe of doctors?" Amy could work with that. Doctors were usually good people. "Ha, okay then. Lead the way. Let's see if we can't find your people window."

Cord folded the schematic back up and stored it in his pocket. He drew his small crossbow again, and began to sweep through the room of broken furniture and fallen papers. Amy gave him a few feet of space. If his story was true, he was just the kind of person she'd been hoping to meet in this new city, someone who could lead her to good work where she could prove herself useful. For now though, she'd help him, and help herself to what he wasn't interested in. She let Cord head into the side offices surrounding the bullpen, like the one she'd come in through, and turn them over for his technology. He was focused, and left a lot of good salvage behind: duct tape, batteries, string, wire. She scooped these things up into her backpack once Cord had finished with a room.

Eventually, they had turned the bullpen and its offices upside down, and while Amy's pack was a good bit heavier now, she was sure she couldn't live here. Cord had explained the first floors were as infested as she'd feared, and most of the stairwell doors had been ripped off. He'd come in through a window on the second floor and had to barricade the stairwell and hole up overnight to give the zombies below time to forget about him. With the bullpen searched, they turned down a short hallway with two doors on each side and a single door at its end.

Just as before, she let Cord check the rooms first, and followed behind him. She'd like to help, but wasn't going to risk her own life for this new stranger. Cord swept the rooms quickly,

leaving them empty-handed for Amy to check out herself. Though these offices held little of practical use, she found treasure of great value, to her at least. Two of the four offices yielded still sealed liquor bottles. A pint of whiskey and a travel bottle of high proof vodka. She pocketed them both and decided they'd be her celebration once she found a safe place to live. As they neared the final door though, a sound caught Amy's attention and she stopped.

"Hold on," Amy said.

She put her hand up and Cord stopped. She cupped her ear and listened. A scratching sound came from behind the last door. She pointed to it and Cord nodded. He crept up to the side of the door and put his hand lightly on the handle. Amy stood in front of the door with her knife ready. She nodded and Cord threw the door open. Across the threshold stumbled a wreck of a body, a zombie.

Its pallid skin hung in ribbons off its gray and shriveled muscles. Yet still, the deep black blood webs on its skin were clearly visible, the true marker of the Infection. Its hair was matted and stuck to its head with dried blood, but had an odd shine in places. Because Cord had removed the door it had been scratching against, it fell forward into the hallway. Amy brought her foot up and then swiftly planted her heel through the zombie's skull. The crack of its bone snapping and splintering filled the hall for a moment before silence swept back in. A rank, rotten water smell began to seep from the corpse.

"That one was fresh," Cord said. He pinched his nose between his fingers.

"I thought so," Amy said. She tucked the end of her bandana into her shirt. "Her skull was still hard, hadn't started decomposing yet." She wiped her heel against the carpet and cleared her throat to keep from hearing the brain matter smear from her boot.

Cord knelt beside the body and drew a thin metal rod from one of the pouches of his harness. He lifted a few strands of hair that weren't stuck to the head, then turned the body slightly to look at its arms.

"This happened in the last two weeks or so," Cord said. "Her hair was washed somewhat recently, basically no dirt in it, but that's not what worries me. See how her skin's hanging in strips?"

"Yeah, I saw that too. She lost a bad fight."

"No, it's more than that," Cord said. "She was cut up, and left here. Now I don't want to be proven right, but...can you close that door again?"

"Why?"

"Just do it, please."

Amy walked back to the door and slowly closed it, pushing the corpse's feet out of the way so it would shut. While hard to make out in the low light, Amy saw something had been dug or carved into the door. She ran her hand over the wood. The carving was simple. It was like a triangle missing one leg, or an upside down number 7.

"Shit," Cord said.

"This mark?"

"We need to leave. Like now."

"What's it mean?"

"Amy, I'll answer any questions you've got, once we're back outside. I don't want to be here anymore." Cord stood up and walked back towards the main office.

"So you're leaving your window behind?"

Cord stopped. "No," he said, "You're right. I've still got a job to do." He turned around and headed into the room with the marked door.

Amy looked into the room then immediately turned away. A simple, red-stained table occupied the middle of the room, and a pegboard hung on one of the walls, supporting an array of tools and things that were not at all tools, all stained a reddish brown. It wasn't the first torture chamber Amy had seen, but that didn't mean she liked looking at them. File cabinets and desks had been pushed to one side of the room, and that's where Cord searched. Amy stood at the door and watched the hallway for any sign of movement. She tried to ignore the smell of iron flitting from the room up and under her bandana. After a moment, Cord reappeared holding a small metal tin with "001" stamped into the lid. He opened it and showed her what was undoubtedly, even to her, the device pictured on his schematic.

Amy led the way this time, back down the hallway to the office she'd entered, and to the window she'd come in through. She unhooked her rope and held tight to one end so Cord could reel down. Once he was on the ground she waited for him to leave, his prize in hand. But he didn't. He waited for her. He even sat down against the other building in the alley. So she put her rope back on her pack and climbed out the window. The next window was about seven feet below her, so she dropped and dragged her hands through the mossy growth, slowing her enough to land on the window sill below, and from there she was low enough to just jump down to the ground. She made sure Cord was watching before she jumped though. She couldn't resist showing off a little bit. When she dropped from the window, she stuck a three point landing.

"So," Amy said standing up, "that mark? What's it mean?"

"It's the calling card of one of our local monsters," Cord said. "Angel."

"I take it no one around here has done anything about it."

"Like stand up to her?" Cord said. He chuckled. "Sure, people have tried. But she's dangerous, and slippery too. She's got like a dozen hideouts throughout the city and her own tribe to back her up, the Reapers."

"Huh, ain't that something." An idea was forming.

"Yep," Cord said. They sat in silence against the wall for a moment.

"Well," Amy said, "I should get moving, lot on my plate."

"Can I do anything to help?" Cord asked as he stood up from the wall. "After all, it's only fair."

"Don't know about that," Amy said. "You would have done fine had I not shown up."

"Still, I'd like to help."

There he was turning into a hallucination again. "You know what? Sure," Amy said. "Can you point me towards people in need? I want to be useful."

"We can always use another set of hands back on the Homestead."

"Your organ people? Look Cord, no offense, but I work better alone." Amy thought for a moment, then added, "I'm a Ranger, just looking for new hunting grounds."

"Oh, I see." Cord laughed, then quickly looked around as though he may have been too loud. "I see. Here to dispense some justice? Fair enough, fair enough. You could still do plenty of that with the Harvesters. We always need a do-gooder. We've got some nice perks too, running water, medicine, beds - real beds too with pillows and everything."

The words 'running water' made Amy instinctively rub at the dirt caked on her arm. "As nice as that sounds," she said, "I'm not sure a group is what I'm looking for right now."

"If you're intent on being a lone wolf," Cord said, "I won't stand in your way." He pointed farther down the alley, into the heart of the city. "There's a marketplace not too far away. We call



it the Crossroads Bazaar. Anyway, there's a bounty board there where people can post their problems."

"Thanks." Amy rocked back and forth on her feet for a moment. "Well, I'll see you 'round, Cord." She turned to head off down the alley.

"Wait, I've got something for you." Cord reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a scrap of paper and a stub of pencil. Amy stopped and looked back to Cord. He knelt down to use his knee as a writing surface and scribbled quickly. "Here," Cord said, "basic map of the city, could be useful."

Amy looked it over. In the center of the page, Cord drew a few small tents and printed in such impeccable handwriting that Amy would have sworn was printed had she not seen him write it, "Crossroads Bazaar." There was also a skull in the bottom left of the map marked with "The Hive" and a large plus sign below the Bazaar marked "Homestead." The rest of the map was a collection of major streets in the form of intersecting lines and a pair of wavy lines on the left marked "Mississippi River."

"Thanks, this is nice." Amy nodded to Cord and turned to set off. "You've got great handwriting," she added before leaving. She could hear him laughing as she left the alley behind for the Bazaar.

## Chapter 2 – Hunter

The city was more alive than when she'd woken that morning. The sun was near the top of the sky by this point. While she made her way toward the Bazaar as Cord had suggested, she wandered a good bit up and down the streets, learning the city. She took off her bandana and tied it around one of her belt loops. The fresh air was practically delicious after the rotten air of the technologies building. On the street, she passed a fair few people, most of whom paid her either no mind, or nodded to her with slight smiles. Some wore clothes of the old world, faded T-shirts and blue jeans, jackets and khakis. Much of Amy's own wardrobe was from the old world too, though most of it had been her mother's once, saved and handed down. Others' clothing was

more what she was used to seeing, clearly handmade, pants made from stitched together deer hides or woven plant fibers, armor made from bent and riveted scrap metal with shoulder guards made from street signs. One person even wore what she would later learn was an alligator's jaw bone around his neck, though at the time she believed it to be some monster's toothy jaw wrapped in a greenish scaly leather. She wasn't exactly wrong in that thought though.

As Amy rounded a corner, a new scent hit her nose and she immediately turned toward it. Something on the wind smelled *good*. She looked at Cord's map as she walked. She was headed right for the Bazaar. The sound of voices became louder as she made her way, excited, happy voices. She couldn't help but smile as the Bazaar came into view. On what had once been a wide boulevard street, a clearing in the forest of metal and concrete, the Crossroads Bazaar had spawned over the years. Uneven rows of stands and stalls spread across the cracked blacktops and the grassy median between them, a pop-up market in an extra wide space between two city blocks.

Amy's mouth hung just open as she walked the rows. Some stalls were ramshackle in construction; one was made from nothing more than a large sheet hanging over a broom driven into the dirt to provide shade for the people literally selling the shirts off their backs. Another right beside the broom tent was more impressive, boasting a pop-up tent of the old world over a metal and plastic folding table that bore carefully curated pieces of salvage like can openers and multi-tools. She even had to stop and consider purchasing a grappling hook. However, she quickly learned that the dollars she'd used for years weren't currency here, that they used bullets as a means of trade. They called them cases, short for bullet casings. She had a few, but not enough that she'd feel okay buying anything other than essentials for quite some time.

She walked up and down the rows of stalls for half an hour, taking it all in. Some stalls seemed specialized with only a single kind of product for sale: scrap metal, fresh produce, clothing, fish caught from the nearby Mississippi River, lumber, tools, meats, even a canvas tent with a table covered in guns and ammunition. Other stands simply sold whatever their owners could find, with food alongside tools and clothing next to scrap wood. Each row of stalls sported its own collection of barkers and salesmen. Some called to her as she passed to browse their goods. Others just brought their wares out and tried to make a deal as she walked. She turned them down, her refusals immediately turning their attentions to other passersby. This was the kind of place she was hoping to find. It reminded her of home, a community.

Eventually she stopped at one of the all-purpose stalls to trade some of her salvage from the morning, a bundle of wires for a handful of bullets. She knew what she was talking about, but figured she probably got shorted on the exchange somehow, not knowing the local currency. She was a quick study though and would have it learned in no time. Still, at least she had currency now. So, she doubled back to a stall that she'd seen cooking meat. Whatever meat it was (Amy chose not to ask), it tasted better than anything she had eaten in months. The skin was crisp and spicy; the meat was tender and juicy. She prayed that the skewer salesman would always be at the Bazaar.

After walking the rows of stalls for over an hour, taking in all the sights and scents of the Bazaar and its wares, she made for the north edge of the Bazaar, where a large plywood board had been mounted to a pair of four by four posts driven into the dirt. At the top of the plywood in chipped red paint were two words 'Bounty Board.' A thick band of duct tape separated the top and bottom halves of the board.

Papers covered the entirety of the top half of the board, with many bounties covering others. Some were tacked, others were taped, and one even had a stick rammed through it and the board to hold it up. It took her a moment, but she came to understand the chaos of the upper board. Most of the papers had simple requests written on them, with newer requests written on top of older ones, and yet newer papers posted on top of those requests. None of these bounties caught Amy's attention. They bored her. "I need four half-inch bolts," "Looking for an old book with a cross on the cover," "Quit stealing my bread Neil! –Glenn."

As she scanned the board, a pair of men approached as well. One looked to be about her age, somewhere in his mid-twenties, and had bright blond hair specked through with bits of dirt. His smile would have been out of place where Amy had spent the morning, but here, Amy understood. The Bazaar had her smiling for no reason as well, and she was happy for it. The other man with him, though, made her smile slip. He was older than the blond, and had rough, dark brown hair and clutched a piece of paper in his fist. Though he faced the board like the blond, his beady eyes darted all over, and came to rest on Amy more than once.

"Working hard?" the blond asked.

"Hoping to," Amy said. She looked to him and he was smiling at her. "But none of these—" Amy gestured to the top half of the board. "—are all that exciting."

"You gotta look lower." The blond pointed to the lower half of the board. "Though, none of these are all that new."

"Come here a lot?"

"Enough." The blond shrugged. "I run a mercenary house and can find some jobs here. Occasionally even post some." He extended his hand to Amy. "T."

Amy eyed him briefly before shaking his hand. "Amy."

"Well, Amy," T said, "take care." He turned to the other man, who had been glancing at Amy again. "Let's go, Victor."

Victor nodded, his hands now empty, and followed T back into the Bazaar. In no time, Amy had lost them to the crowd. She turned her attention to the bottom half of the board, and saw a chance at some real excitement. These were actual bounties and they weren't messy like the ones above them. Each page had space around it and legible writing. The people of the city wanted bandit chiefs who were stealing from them and taking hostages. The Harvesters wanted a Reaper named Necris for murdering and eating several of their own. A tribe called the Greys even wanted some of the Harvesters for destroying their property, and a kid named Chase Daniels for killing a number of their officers. Then, Amy saw a bounty posted for Angel. Her eyes widened as she read, and she couldn't help but begin to grin with anticipation.

#### KNOW HER BY HER MARK

##### ANGEL

A known leader of the Reapers Tribe, Angel is sadistic and violent even by Reaper standards. Unlike her ilk, she prefers to capture, torture, and release her victims. These victims bear her mark usually carved into the backs of their hands. She has also been known to leave this mark on locations she has left behind. Know what it means. Know her mark:  $\angle$

WANTED: for the Torture of no less than 53, Abduction of no less than 60, and murder of no less than 9.

Angel stands around 5' 4" with black hair and brown eyes. Like most Reapers, Angel tends to wear black and carry edged weapons. She

is considered armed and extremely dangerous. However, it has been noted that her combat skills are not as honed as other Reapers. If alone, engage with caution. She is known to use traps, deception, and other means to avoid capture.

She has been frequently sighted in the company of the Silver-Masked Reaper, Than, and is believed to be his protégé.

DO NOT ENGAGE IF THE TWO ARE TOGETHER UNLESS POSSESSING OVERWHELMING NUMBERS OR FIREARMS.

Reward: 10,000 cases DEAD, Larger sum to be negotiated ALIVE

This was the woman whose hideout she and Cord had found that morning. She understood now why seeing that upside down seven had scared him as it had. He wasn't wrong. Angel was a monster. Amy didn't falter though; she had experience killing monsters. This one would be no different. But she was disorganized here in the new city. She needed somewhere to live, and funds for new equipment. She didn't even have a crossbow anymore. So she scanned for other jobs, ones that she could take to earn some money.

She avoided the bounties posted by tribes. She didn't want to get embroiled in any politics, especially not before she knew the city better. That left bandits. While the bounty board provided quite a few options, she picked a newer looking posting for a bandit going by the name "Skullclamp." She learned early on from her father that the ones who named themselves were easy to deal with, easy to provoke. The bounty claimed he operated by the river and had been seen stashing bodies in washed up shipping containers, using the zombies they turned into to terrorize people.

Amy took out Cord's map and plotted with her finger a route from the Bazaar at the center of the page toward the river on the left side. There was just one street to follow, the one the Bazaar itself had been built on. She swore she'd be back to the Bazaar soon, though, if it continued to smell as pleasant as it had and the food kept tasting so satisfying. As she left the Bazaar, the smell of sizzling meat and fresh bread gradually disappeared. The food on the wind was replaced by a general dank odor from decades of humidity seeping into the city and working its way into everything. It all smelled just a bit rotten compared to where she'd spent her afternoon.

The road from the Bazaar ended at a levee that bordered the river, grassy on the city side, and it overlooked the massive brown river. It flowed gently, and carried its own damp smell with it. Though, it was less like the rot of the city and more, Amy wasn't quite sure why, lively. The riverside of the levee was encased in concrete, set into massive steps like bleachers made of rock. Driftwood and debris stood out on the riverbank, which was mostly just mud and river grasses. It didn't take long from her spot on the high ground of the levee to see the shipping containers mentioned in the bounty. She climbed down the big steps until she reached the banks. She'd missed this while traveling, the hunt. The build up to the moment of being smart enough, fast enough, strong enough, to put an end to something.

The sun hung low over the other side of the river, but Amy was undaunted. Monsters moved more in the dark anyway. Three containers rested in the mud, their doors broken open long ago. Two of the three were empty of all but loose scraps of trash, and pooled water in their back corners. The final container was as sparse as the first two, but was mostly dry, with no standing water. None of them stank though, not like she'd been anticipating. If "Skullclamp"



stashed bodies here, he didn't keep them for long. He almost certainly wouldn't expect a body to be in one, and not a live body at that, Amy figured.

She collected dry scraps of cardboard from the other two containers and piled the pieces into the back of the last container. There was no guarantee that he'd come to the containers, but after the issues with the technologies building, she didn't have a better place to stay the night. She sat down on the piled up cardboard, resting her back against the container. From her half-seated/half-reclined position she could see out of the container.

She debated whether to close the container doors. She'd have an extra moment to get ready if someone or something tried to get to her. However, others knew the area better than she did. Maybe the containers had been open for years and closing them would be akin to lighting a signal fire. Amy decided to leave them open and sleep lightly.

Over the next few hours, Amy slept in controlled bursts. She rested her chin on her thumb and forehead against her fingers. The elbow of that arm, she kept on her other arm. Any time she'd really fall asleep her arm would slip and she'd jolt awake. Her father had taught her this method. Just after the Infection, he'd met up with some of his old Army friends and together they became Rangers, like the lawmen of the old west. Amy was inseparable from her father. He taught her how to fight and survive like a Ranger, to do good for the sake of goodness. She tried to do her best now that he wasn't around. She wanted to do good for the sake of it.

When her head slipped from her hand the fourth time, it was pitch black inside the container. She could hear the river moving behind her. Crickets and frogs made themselves known. In the distance bloody throated zombies screamed into the night. Amy felt somewhat rested, though still tired. She took one of her last pieces of jerky out of her backpack and tore a small piece off. The meat was salty and she chewed it for a while. She wasn't hungry, not really.

But it was something to do, something to pass the night. For what felt like an hour, Amy ripped pieces from and chewed the same strip of jerky.

As her eyelids began to droop again, a squelch of mud came from outside the container. Amy snapped to attention. She silently swallowed the bit of jerky she'd been chewing and drew her knife. Another squelch. Whatever moved outside did so very slowly. Amy got up, very cautiously preparing to dash, lunge, react however she'd need to. She stood crouched in the back of the container, waiting and listening. Squelch, squelch, whatever was moving around was moving two steps at a time now and getting closer.

Outside the container, some moonlight illuminated the area. A single square of silver light in the darkness. Amy held her breath and watched the opening as a silhouette appeared at the left side of the opening. Whether it could see in the pitch blackness of the container, Amy didn't know. She held her knife steady, with one foot braced against the back of the container, ready to pounce. For a moment, the silhouette didn't move. Then it stepped into the entrance, standing at least six foot, its head just narrowly below the top of the container.

"Was hoping you'd fall for it," the figure said. She didn't recognize the voice, but it could only be one person.

"T said you wouldn't," Victor said, "but I figure, 'Hey, what's the harm in checking?' Right?" He stepped into the container.

Amy didn't speak; she just tensed her muscles, ready to spring the moment he was close enough. He was a bigger guy, a few jabs to the gut wouldn't be enough. She could hope for him to give her an opening, but more than likely, she'd have to break something, some of his floating ribs maybe, to get the upper hand she'd need to take him out completely. She hoped she could just stab him in the neck and save herself the hassle of a fight.

"If you come along easy, it'll be better for both of us," Victor said. "Boss doesn't like getting scuffed up toys." Victor cracked his knuckles.

That was her break. He underestimated her. That was worth one free hit. With both his hands occupied, Amy launched forward. His arms were up; she couldn't go for his neck. His stomach would have to do. She rammed her knife into his midsection and felt the blade grind against something solid, one of his ribs. So she pulled hard to the side, dragging her knife through him.

Victor howled with pain, slamming his fists down onto her back. He grasped in the darkness for her hands, trying to pull the knife out. She just put more pressure on her knife, opening his side even more as he ripped at her and hammered against her with his fists. She kept one hand gripped tight on her knife, using her other to pry at his fingers when they closed around her hand, or to strike at his stomach or groin when he tried to push her off.

For a moment his strikes stopped, but he wasn't dead; he was still thrashing. So Amy focused on her knife and gripped it in both hands, ready to finish him off. Just before she could throw her weight into one last pull against her knife, a single point on her side flared with pain. It felt like a knife wound, an injury she was used to, but not as big. She twisted with all her might, tearing her knife free in the process.

With that final tug, Amy ripped her knife out of Victor's side, taking part of him with it. In an instant, all his weight came down on top of her, dead weight. She tried to hold him up, but couldn't support a grown man's corpse in her stance. The blood pouring out of him didn't make it any easier. Her legs buckled underneath her as his body dropped to the ground with her beneath it. Once on the floor of the container, she rolled Victor's body off of her, which proved much easier than trying to hold it up. Her side still ached though. A syringe stuck out of her, half full.

She pulled it out and sniffed the needle. It reeked of death and rot, just like the technologies building that morning had.

She pulled her father's old brass flip lighter from her pocket and lit it. The liquid in the syringe was a yellowish brown. The wound in her side bled slightly, and leaked a bit of the foul liquid as well. She had to act fast if the syringe was full of what she feared. She dug through her pack until she found the bottle of vodka she'd found that morning. She unscrewed the top and took a small swig from it; what she had to do would not be pleasant. Next, she wiped her knife 'clean' against her leg and touched the tip to the injection site. In a quick motion she pushed the blade about an inch in before pulling it out. As soon as she opened the wound, she pushed the mouth of the vodka bottle into the cut and emptied it in her side. She prayed she was quick enough to flush at least some of the liquid out. At the very least, the alcohol would help to disinfect the area, and burn like sin in the meantime. Finally, she tore strips from scrap cloth in her pack and tied a band around her midsection as tightly as she could. She knew though that she'd likely need something a lot stronger if the syringe was loaded with zombie blood or bile. She'd need real medicine.

Amy had to get help, but she had business to take care of first. Using her lighter to see, she quickly gave Victor's body a once over for anything of value. She found a serrated knife in a sheath on his belt, a leather pouch with a handful of 9mm bullets in it, and another two syringes, both loaded with the same rank substance. She took the needles off the syringes and wrapped them in a scrap of cloth before putting them into her pack. Finally, she rolled the body over to check it for identifying marks. Victor might be dead, but he worked for someone, and Amy was going to find whoever that was. She was about to give up and leave when she turned his head and his scraggy hair fell away from his neck. There, just behind his ear, was an upside down

seven. Amy shook her head, but couldn't help grinning. Angel would be a real challenge, she thought, someone worth her time.

She got out Cord's map and stepped into the night. The city was very dark as she made her way to the Homestead, and the moonlight barely helped. She stuck to main roads, avoiding back streets and alleys where the sounds of groans and bloody gurgling spilled from. Her route took her back up the road to the Bazaar, deserted in the night. From there she was able to take a street almost all the way to the Homestead. When she made her turn onto the Homestead's street, a weak grey light was dripping into the city. Down the street, she could see what had to be where she was headed. A compound surrounded by jagged fencing of some kind was just a couple blocks away, and about a block in front of her was a hunched shape, shambling forward. Amy drew her knife and advanced.

As she neared the shape, she realized it was a young woman, dressed in rags. The woman clutched her round, protruding stomach. She was pregnant. Amy called to her softly and the woman turned quickly around, her eyes shining in the just-there morning light. For a moment she looked terrified. Amy looked down at herself. She was soaked in Victor's blood. The woman closed her eyes and fell to one knee, clearly in pain. She looked back up at Amy with need in her eyes.

"Please, miss," the woman said, "please, my water just broke. I- I don't think I can make it on my own."

"Where are you going?" Amy asked.

The woman gave her a pained, confused look. "The Harvesters, please, just, oh God!" the woman dropped to both knees, clutching the rags around her stomach.

"Yeah, yeah let's go. On three." Amy knelt beside the woman and quickly looked her over. She didn't see any odd bulging under the rags. As far as she could tell, the woman wasn't armed, likely wasn't another trap. So, she hooked her arm around the woman's back and under her armpit. Together they stood and began a slow walk towards the Homestead.

As they neared the compound, Amy took it all in. A fence made from salvaged metal, interstate signs, roofs of cars, garage doors, all bolted and welded together surrounding the whole area, an old office park with a building in the back, a larger building on the right, and a wide courtyard between them. In the front of the fence was a large, thankfully open, rolling gate. Two men stood at the sides of the gate, both wearing white hoodies and holding what looked to be homemade crossbows. As soon as they saw the woman they rushed to her and Amy.

The two men asked her basic questions about her state and lifted her between themselves to help her move. One called for help and a few other similarly dressed people arrived to replace them at the gate. Amy stood watching these people rush the woman into the large building on the right side of the office park. One of the people who replaced the gate guards must have noticed her bloody attire and approached her.

"What about you? Do you need help?" The Harvester, a young woman in a white hoodie, asked.

"I got stabbed with a syringe of something," Amy said.

"Come with me," the Harvester said. "We'll get you checked out in the infirmary."

She followed the Harvester through the gates and into the same large building the woman had been brought into. Down a few hallways and through a set of double doors, she found herself in a long room that had been renovated with curtained beds lining the walls and bright white lights all across the ceiling. Cord had mentioned water and beds, but he hadn't mentioned

electricity. At the end of the room, several people in scrubs were around one of the beds. It looked and sounded like the woman was already in labor there.

The Harvester who brought her in nodded to her, then left the room. Another young woman quickly replaced her. This one wore white scrubs and had olive skin and jet black hair. She introduced herself as Jenny. Amy explained what had happened, and took the syringes out of her pack to show Jenny, who listened intently. She had Amy sit on one of the beds, closed the curtain around it, and asked Amy to show her the wound.

Jenny unwrapped Amy's hasty bandage. She took swabs of the interior and exterior of the wound. She peeked out of the curtain and handed them off, along with the syringes, to another scrubs-wearing Harvester who took them out of the room.

"Well, you did the right thing," Jenny said. "Those syringes are full of zombie bile, highly infectious. Luckily he didn't get the whole dose in, and hopefully you flushed most of it out, but..."

"No promises?" Amy said.

"No promises," Jenny said, nodding. "Look, there're options if the Infection does set in."

Amy didn't say anything. Her concerns had been right. Jenny explained that it wasn't uncommon for bandits or mercenaries to carry a syringe of bile to use as a threat in negotiations, or as a last ditch weapon. Amy nodded, and let Jenny leave her to go assist the woman giving birth. Amy just waited. It was over an hour before the infirmary was quiet again, another half hour before Amy's results came back, in Cord's hands.

"I saw the name 'Amy' on the test," Cord said, "hoped it would be a coincidence."

"Didn't take you for one of the doctors," Amy said. "You seem like more of a field work kind of guy."

"Usually, but I was checking to see if the part we picked up yesterday had been installed. They were using it to read your samples."

"So it's not good?"

"It's not the worst," Cord said, "The Infection didn't spread past the injection site, but it's in one of your kidneys. That's a... 'better' place to get hit, honestly. If it got a lung, or your heart, that's basically an instant death sentence. A kidney can go on for a few months without turning."

"What's your definition of 'a few'?"

Cord looked down. He'd delivered news like this before, Amy could tell. "Three? Four tops. But we can do a transplant before then."

"Y'all still need a do-gooder?" Amy asked. "That's probably worth a kidney, right?"



### Chapter 3 – Angel

Two months had passed since Amy had joined the Harvesters and received her uniform of a white hoodie and scalpel. While she wore the uniform, she had to modify it a bit to suit her. The hood was a little more claustrophobic than she liked, so she kept wearing the Stetson hat that her father had given her. Her cowboy style leather boots she kept wearing without issue, but her long duster coat was too hot to wear with a hoodie underneath. So she cut the sleeves off her hoodie and cinched up the back to wear it a little closer, more like a shirt. White and brown wasn't a look she'd been expecting to take on, but she liked it.

She also had to admit, she liked having a place to come home to as well. The Harvesters were kind to her, treated her like one of their own. The only thing she didn't enjoy about her new

situation was one of her kidneys, an organ she'd never given a second thought previously. Now though, it was turning, slowly succumbing to the Infection. It had been two weeks since small, dark, blood webs had begun to spider out from the scar on her side. The wound itself was insignificant and had healed on the surface level, but when it had sealed up, the pain moved inside her. She was grateful that it was only a dull ache, easy enough to ignore if she was busy. So she stayed busy. The Harvesters had some kidneys in stock, but none were a match for her. She decided to find one that was. No use waiting for another Harvester to luck into acquiring one. She learned the harvesting process quick, made regular trips to the bounty board for bandits to go after, and trips back to the Homestead with a cooler full of kidney.

She hadn't found a match yet though. Plenty of healthy kidneys for others, but she still needed one for herself. Through it all, she'd been doing what she could to learn more about Angel, the woman who had put her into her predicament in the first place. Angel had a small network of people like Victor who would procure captives for her from around the city. She had told Cord that she was going after Angel, asking bandits about her. He didn't think it was a good idea to go after her alone, likened it to throwing rocks at a hornet's nest. So she kept some of her discoveries to herself. She could handle her own business. She hadn't been able to find any more of Angel's procurement specialists directly, but she'd found a more roundabout way.

She'd gained a reputation at the Bazaar in the brief time she'd been bounty hunting. Bringing three bandits in at once had caught the people of the city's attention. The fact that they were the sixth, seventh, and eighth bandits she'd brought in in three weeks caught their affections. They gave her a new name, the Red Ranger.

A few of the bandits she'd gone after knew about Angel, but being willing to talk about her was an entirely different situation. Once she'd become the Red Ranger, though, she found

that more bandits had looser lips than they had before, were more open to sharing what they knew about Angel. The rumors were always interesting, but they rarely turned up credible information. The solid details were invaluable, and she put them to good work.

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Amy stopped in front of an old shop front that had been a restaurant or a café once. She could still see the word "menu" topping a yellowed paper in the window. But she couldn't see inside. Bits of broken furniture and splintered boards blocked much of the front windows. She pushed on the doors to the old shop and found them locked. She had tools though: a jeweler's screwdriver and dentist's pick for the tumblers, and a metal file for torque. The lock clicked open in no time. It opened smoothly. It had to have been opened recently for that to be the case.

She slipped inside and closed the door softly behind her. She stayed low to the ground and let her eyes adjust to the low light. Inside, the air had the smell of stale sweat, with a hint of what Amy would swear was onion. The front room she found herself in was mostly empty. Shredded bits of checkered cloth littered the ground, with broken tables and chairs wedged up against the windows. Aside from a smattering of rat droppings across the floor, it looked like nothing had been added to the room in a long time. The dust on the ground had been disturbed.

In addition to tiny footprints from the rats, a path was clear, leading to a doorway in the back of the room. Something had been dragged through.

In case her quarry wasn't home, she walked through the path already made in the dust. She left no footprints as she crossed the room and made no noise when she pressed up against the wall to peer into the back. It had been a kitchen once. A lot of the equipment was still set up, though in clear disuse. The path through the dust continued into the kitchen, but was quickly lost, the dust being scattered all over the place. She crouched behind the wall for minutes just listening, trying to hear any little noise that could tell her if she was alone.

When after over five minutes passed of nothing, she crept into the kitchen. She looked everywhere, letting her eyes dart around for anything that seemed out of place. It wasn't until she neared the door to the walk-in freezer that she heard anything. The door stood just ajar, just enough for a light rumble to slip out every few seconds. Snoring. She peered through the cracked door, but found the freezer in complete darkness. Not enough light made it through the shop front windows, around the broken furniture, across the dining room, into the kitchen, and around the door to make it into the freezer. Things were going a little too smoothly anyway. Amy wanted a little excitement.

Gently, Amy pulled on the freezer door to let more light in. Wire frame shelves came into view first, with empty cardboard boxes and bundles of cloth scattered across them. The slight onion smell she'd noticed in the dining room was stronger here, mustier. Whoever was sleeping inside worked up a sweat before passing out. Finally, as she inched the door open, a body came into view, curled up in the back corner of the freezer, facing away from the door. Amy shook her head. It was like they were asking for someone to get the drop on them. She looked quickly over

her shoulder and listened to the dining room behind her. The front door hadn't opened, and she'd made a full sweep of both rooms, but she hadn't survived this long by not staying alert.

The sleeper was lanky, with thin arms and legs. Their black hair was wiry and stuck out at odd angles. Rough bits of dirt stuck to it in clumps. Amy couldn't tell whether the sleeper had a weapon, curled up as they were. The shelves were devoid of anything dangerous, unless the bundles of cloth were wrapped around blades.

Amy couldn't stay put now. She had every advantage. Drawing her knife, she swept into the freezer. In one motion, she grabbed the sleeper's shoulder and whipped the body toward her, slamming the back against the ground and dropping her knee onto the chest. With her knife to the throat of the man who had been asleep, and was now awake, Amy lowered her head so she could whisper into his ear.

"Tell me about Angel, or you die here."

The man's eyes darted about, flared completely open. His breath was quick and stuttering. He moved his hands and feet, and everything in between, but couldn't seem to coordinate them in any manner that would get him out of his predicament. Finally, his eyes locked onto Amy, and a spark of recognition filled his eyes.

"Huh heh, you think you can scare me, Ranger?" the man asked. "More than she does? Heh, no, nope. Not gonna happen. She-she-she's something else. No, you can't scare me."

"Want me to try?" Amy put more pressure on the handle of her knife and watched the blade sink just a bit, the man's flesh bulging around the blade, not quite cut yet.

"Need a lot more than just a knife, heh ha. She's something else, I promise you." The man freed one of his hands from beneath himself and reached for his chest. Amy grabbed him around the wrist and pinned it to the tile floor. "No! Let me show you!" he said.

"Show me what?"

"The woman you're looking for. Lift my shirt, you'll see her, what she really is."

Amy moved her knife so now it stood straight up, the tip resting against the man's jugular. She let go of his wrist and waited for him to try and attack. He didn't, placing his hand very deliberately palm down against the tile floor. She moved her knee slightly up the man's chest, closer to his neck. Then she lifted his shirt and saw it, the upside down seven. Over his stomach stood a scar the size of a dinner plate. Surrounding the raised scar tissue of Angel's mark were dozens of other smaller scars. Parallel lines, more intricate curves, even random jagged messes, scars covered the man's chest and stomach.

"Why?" Amy asked. She stood up off the man's chest, but kept the grip on her knife tight.

"Why help the woman who did this to you?"

"She'll do it again, has done it again." He nodded several times. "I said no the first time. She came back. Woke me up in the middle of the night and stared. She just stared at me all night with that grin while I huddled in the corner. Then the morning came. She was still there. She asked me if I'd find her new playthings. I said no. It was the only word I had. I'd been saying it all night. She took me, made me say yes."

"And you don't want me to kill her?" The longer Amy talked, the less 'together' the man seemed. She had to fight her own grin. Angel was going to be quite the challenge.

He looked around the room, jerking and whipping his head about as though Angel sat in the corner of the freezer. "She can't die. She's not human. She won't die. She's not a zombie. She won't die again. She can't die."

Amy knelt back down, but beside the man this time. "What if I could make her?"

"A big if, too big."

"If."

The man spoke so quickly, like everything he'd had to say had been wrapped around a coiled spring, "Then I'd look for infested buildings, ones left alone for a long, long time, like culturally long, like poppa told me when I was a kid not to go in there, so now I tell my kids not to go in, those are the ones she does her work in, away from the eyes, she won't have that." He clapped his hands to his mouth. His eyes darted so quickly it looked like they were spinning in their sockets.

"Thank you," Amy said.

"And now you'll do something for me, yeah?" the man asked. "Yeah? Heh ha, yeah?"

"That depends. I'm already going to kill Angel."

"Right, yes, right, you are," the man said. Then his demeanor changed. He stopped shaking and stuttering. He spoke with clarity, "But you've gotta kill me first. If you promise to kill me before you leave, I'll tell you exactly where to look."

"A trade then," Amy said. She hadn't expected it to go quite like this, again. "A life now for a life later." But it had worked last time. It could again. Even if the trade would take a bit longer than it had back then.

"Yes," the man was speaking calmly still. "I don't care how you do it. Just make it quick."

"Does she know about this place?"

"She does, so if you don't want her to catch on, make it look like a robbery."

"It will be."

The man laughed, genuinely. "Probably for the best." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Two blocks north of the Bazaar, fourth floor of the red building, you'll find one of her hideouts. She...she's expecting me sometime soon." He closed his eyes again and smiled just so.

Amy stood behind him and brought her knife back to his throat. She was quick, and he fell the moment her knife left his neck. She had skilled hands. Quickly, she knelt beside his body and rolled him onto his back. She'd have to be fast if she wanted his kidney. It was just like the other harvests she'd made so far, but the situation was oddly familiar this time. Her hands worked on autopilot, opening the man to get to his inner machinations.

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The raid on Lillian Moreno's compound was the first Amy went on. Though it was also the last for quite some time. In addition to the usual bandit activities of robbery, murder, and general property destruction, Moreno and her gang were kidnappers, rapists. Amy had lost two friends to Moreno's gang, and she wouldn't let her overprotective father stop her from doing all she could to make the one responsible pay.

Her father was still cautious though and swathed her in all the protection he could. She wore a Kevlar vest and a heavy canvas duster for physical defense, and a face wrap and skullcap for identity defense. Moreno had abducted almost exclusively young girls, and despite Amy being a young woman, her father wasn't interested in her taking any unnecessary risks beyond going on the raid in the first place. Lastly, he gave her a rifle instead of shotgun, to keep her farther from the front line.



The day of the raid, they met up with the other Rangers and set out from Nuevo Antonio. Moreno's compound was an old ranch several miles outside of town. When they neared the ranch, they split into two groups to take the compound from both sides. For the most part, their plan worked. She and her father waited for the others to create a distraction behind the ranch, and when the sounds of a fire fight reached them, they stormed the front of the ranch to go straight for Moreno herself.

They were lucky to find that the ranch was emptied, with most of Moreno's men busy with the other Rangers. Moreno was ready for them though, holding a girl of six by the neck and a revolver pressed to her head. She had more than just the one hostage. Other children were tied up in the room should Moreno need to negotiate. Amy wanted to shoot Moreno, but her father wouldn't risk the hostage. Moreno escaped through a window and to the stables. By the time Amy made it to the window with her rifle, Moreno was on a horse, the little girl seated behind her. But Amy didn't quit. She had her rifle in the window and her eye to the sight.

Moreno fell from the horse, dead on the ground. The little girl hit the sand not long after her. Neither moved. Amy's shot had been perfectly aimed, and she didn't hesitate to take it. However, she couldn't predict how the girl would bounce on the back of the horse. She'd killed Moreno and her hostage with a single shot.

"Not one more' is no reason to take an innocent life yourself," her father said. He didn't yell, he didn't point. "No matter what good you think you're doing, there is always a cost beyond the life you think you're paying for it with."

It was nearly a year before her father let her join another bandit raid. A year she spent weighing her father's disappointment against the lack of abductions. She hated that the little girl

had to die, but never felt she would take her shot back if given the chance. She told her father different when he asked though - that she wouldn't have taken that shot at all.

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Amy loaded the man's kidney into a small cooler and told herself she hadn't paid for Angel's location with the dead man's life. He was sure to take it himself before long, Amy figured. The only payment she'd made was the effort it had taken to find the man in the first place, and technically the bandits' lives she'd taken to learn where he hid. Him though, she hadn't paid with him. It was only once she was stepping back onto the street to head for the Homestead that she realized she never even asked the man for his name.

Getting back to the Homestead didn't take long. She dropped off the kidney in the infirmary, where she spoke to Jenny as well. The two had grown close in Amy's two months of turning in kidneys and waiting for matching test results. She told Jenny the new kidney had come from one of her bandit bounties. Jenny was more emotional when it came to things like that, so Amy was fine letting Jenny believe another murderer had died for the kidney. She wasn't even too off base if the man had been delivering people to Angel.

After their chat, Amy left the infirmary. She paused in the courtyard. There were still plenty of daylight hours left. She could go check out Angel's hideout, see if the tip was legit or not. Her side ached as she stood idle, and her hand instinctively migrated up her side to cradle her turning organ beneath her hoodie. Rest certainly wouldn't kill her. Angel might take, break, someone else though, Amy figured. She made her way toward the gate. As she neared it, Cord came through.

"Going out for a kidney?" Cord asked.

"Just dropped one off actually," Amy said.

"That's what? Your sixth?"

"Fifth." Amy stepped passed Cord to head into the city.

"What are you heading out for then? It'll be dark in a few hours."

"Yeah, well," Amy said. "I've got a lead to follow."

"Amy, you aren't still hunting Angel are you?" Cord asked. She didn't have to answer.

"At least let us know when you've got something to go on. She's not the only hornet in her nest and they've all got venom."

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The building was easy to find. Two blocks north of the Bazaar was a ruddy red building that reeked of death, even from the street. Amy tied her bandana around her mouth and nose, then tucked the end down her shirt. A set of short, but deep, stone steps led up to the large double doors on the ground floor, which were partially destroyed. The bottom halves of the wooden doors were broken off, and the top halves hung on questionably strong hinges. The concrete floor around the doors was stained nearly black, with a horrible texture to it. That stain was just one reason Amy ignored the front doors and instead began a careful lap around the building.

Aside from the front of the building, there were no windows on the ground floor. The windows on higher floors didn't look like they were meant to open, with the only 'open' ones being broken. A few even had bits of corpse still hanging over the sills from when they crashed through the glass. She wasn't looking to just get into the building though; she could have done that any number of ways. Amy wanted Angel's entrance. She found a few options.

Two metal maintenance doors on the ground floor were both locked, and seemed unused. There wasn't any path or cleared space around the doors to indicate common use. She couldn't find any prints around the doors either, footprints on the ground or handprints on the walls or door. Then there was the fire escape. The metal was rusted in more than a few places, and the paint had faded and chipped from most of it. It led to other doors though. Finally, there was a manhole in an alley on the building's side that looked to have been moved and replaced somewhat frequently, with scuffs marring the concrete around it.

Once she had completed her first lap around the building, the light had shifted down into the orange tones. Amy knew she had about three hours of visibility left. Not enough time for a full sweep, but enough time to try and get an idea of the landscape. First, she checked the manhole for anything obvious. She lifted the heavy metal lid with the crowbar from her

backpack. When nothing immediately jumped out as a clue, like stashed supplies or cloth fibers from torn clothes, she replaced the lid just as she'd found it. She wasn't about to leave clues of her investigation behind. She listened at the maintenance doors and tested their locks with her tools. The locks were rough, and the sounds from beyond the doors were hungry to say the very least. She left them closed. The fire escape seemed to be the winner.

Amy put on a pair of leather gloves before climbing on top of a flipped over dumpster to reach the hanging fire escape ladder. Once she was sure the frame of a staircase wouldn't fall from the side of the building, she began slowly ascending the staircase. This had to be Angel's way in. It couldn't be seen from the streets, it skipped right past the infested lower floors, and as flakes of paint fell from the bottoms of her boots, Amy realized it had an imperfect, but still present, detection system of sorts. Missing paint? Someone's been snooping. At the fourth floor, Amy tried the door. Goosebumps ran from her neck to her tailbone when the handle turned smoothly and the door pushed silently in, unlocked.

Aside from the dust on the walls and the floor, though not all of the floor, the hallway she found herself in seemed untouched since the Infection. Down the middle of the carpet ran a clearly plodded path of scattered footprints. She let the door to the fire escape close behind her slowly. Now she was in the dark. Some light found its way to the hallways through the open offices with west facing windows, but not much. It was enough, though, to make out the mark on the door halfway down the hall, an upside down seven.

"Liam dear? Is that you?" a voice like dripping honey asked from behind the marked door.

Amy didn't speak, but she did stand up from her crouched position and draw her knife.

"Or...do I have guests?" the sickeningly sweet voice asked. "New playthings, coming to me? I had no idea I could be so lucky."

Amy stepped slowly into one of the open offices. Her grin was too much to hold back. If Angel thought she was lucky, she had no idea how lucky Amy felt. Her first tip led her straight to Angel. She could kill her now, put the monster down. She listened to the hallway intently for Angel to come out and investigate. After a minute though, Angel had said nothing more, and hadn't left her room. Amy was not quite so patient.

She re-entered the hallway and crept up to the marked door. A faint light escaped underneath it, but only just so. For a moment, Amy stood outside the door, considering her best way to get in. It wasn't like the technologies building she'd met Cord in, with solid wooden doors. The ones in this building were hollow. She could go straight through it with enough effort. So that's what she did. Her heel broke the cheap aluminum handle into the room, and the door swung in, its hinges screaming.

The room was lit by a scattered few candles. It had been a windowless office once. A desk occupied the middle of the room and a set of wooden book shelves that contained no books, but rather a grim assortment of 'tools,' stood against one wall. Angel sat cross-legged on the desk, and swept a few splinters of broken door from her knees. Her clothes were black, and her sleek hair, obsidian. She would be almost invisible in the dim light of the room if not for her face. While mostly veiled by her long hair, Angel's smile, vibrantly white, shone in the darkness. She laughed once with the sound of tinkling glass before pushing the hair from her porcelain face.

"You," Angel said, "have to be the one they're all talking about, the 'Red Ranger,' the one who killed Victor." She smiled wider at Amy.

"Liam too, and you're all alone. No Than to protect you," Amy said, smiling right back at her.

"He doesn't really have the stomach for all this." Angel gestured to the shelf of pliers and blades. "He's more of the kill and be done with it type."

"But you," Amy said, "you're not a murderer like that are you?"

"Of course not," Angel said, "The dead can't cower or fight back. The dead can't tell you that you're alive. Most of all, the dead can't do what you say. There's no fun in that."

"I don't know. I can see the appeal."

Angel's eyes narrowed. "Is that why you're here? To kill me?"

"Or you could come along quietly," Amy said. "There's a bigger bounty if you're alive."

"Oh," Angel said, her smile slipping. "Money. God, that's boring. I thought with what you did to Victor, and what I assume you did to Liam, you were after vengeance, or maybe trying to take my place."

"And you want that?"

"I'd certainly prefer it to another case-chasing bounty hunter trying to look tough," Angel said. Her smile took on a cruel bent, curving up and in. "You should see what happened to the last one."

"Sure, I bet it's just—" Amy began.

"Oh wait, you did meet Liam," Angel said.

"That mess was a bounty hunter?" Amy asked.

"In another life," Angel said. "You'll make a great replacement though."

"Ok, enough fucking around," Amy pointed her knife at Angel. "We're leav—"

Angel took advantage of Amy's taunt, lunging off the desk with a knife in her hand. Amy dodged as best she could, caught by surprise, but Angel's blade still managed to open her upper arm. If a knife wound could stop her though, she wouldn't have made it past eleven.

Amy kicked low, sweeping Angel's legs out from under her. As Angel hit the ground, Amy reared her leg up to stomp down on Angel's face. Angel was quick though and rolled out of the way, letting Amy's heel crash against the floor. Amy kicked again, this time connecting with Angel, the toe of her boot slamming into Angel's stomach. Angel wrapped her arms around Amy's leg and tugged her to the ground. As Amy hit the floor, her hoodie rode up enough that even in the dim light, her blood webs were visible.

"That can't feel good," Angel said, standing up.

Amy didn't say anything. Instead she kicked again, striking Angel's ankle with her heel and bringing her back to the ground. She threw herself on top of Angel, pinning her, and brought her knife down hard. The blade sunk all the way through Angel's shoulder, and Amy felt the tip come to a stop against the carpeted floor. Angel stopped squirming and stared straight up into Amy's eyes. Her breath came in sharp bursts through her gritted teeth.

"You..." Angel said, her smile creeping back.

"No. Now you shut up," Amy said. "You're coming with me."

"Really?" Angel asked. "I don't think s-aaargh!" Amy twisted her knife in Angel's shoulder.

"Sorry, what was that?" Amy asked, grinning down at Angel.

Angel didn't speak, just exhaled in ragged breaths, her eyes locked with Amy's.

"That's what I thought," Amy said. "Stand up easy and I'll let you keep your arm."



Amy moved her knee off of Angel's unstabbed arm. Her hand curled into a fist and swung up into Amy's side before she could react. Angel's knuckles smashed directly into Amy's blood webs. Amy was a furnace now, her insides a roaring fire. Acid welled up in Amy's throat, and it took all she had to keep it down. Angel pushed Amy off and her knife out, rolling out from under her. She clutched her bleeding shoulder and smiled down at Amy, who held her side with both hands now, having dropped her knife to the ground. Angel loomed down over Amy, smiling at her, gripping her shoulder tightly.

"You could have killed me," Angel said. "You know you could've."

"Fucking bitch." Amy spat, still cradling her side. "You'd be dead if—"

"If. And you let it be an if," Angel said. "Remember, I'm not a murderer. I'm going to let you live. I'm going to let you live, knowing you could have easily killed me, but failed."

"When I see you I'm going to—"

"You're strange," Angel said. "On top of everything, you're an infected Harvester. You'd think they'd have helped you?" Angel tapped the tip of her black boot against Amy's hands, holding tight to her side. While barely making contact, the pain made Amy recoil, rolling away toward the desk. Angel stared down at Amy and spoke with real anger in her voice. "Don't you dare underestimate me next time. Bring better."

With that, Angel left. Amy writhed on the floor for minutes until the coals were no longer blazing in her side. When she could stand, she picked up her knife and made for the door. Each step felt like a hammer on the nail in her side. By the time she made it to the fire escape, she could barely stand. Even still, she noted the fresh blood on the carpet leading up to the door, on the rusted metal stairs down the building, on the ground near the flipped over dumpster, and all over the manhole cover in the alley.

## Chapter 4 – Ranger

After how Angel had disabled her, Amy was prepared to start asking Harvesters if they had matching kidneys as she hauled herself through the dusk back to the Homestead from Angel's hideout. Liam's kidney was a match though, and the surgery began almost immediately. Jenny told her that recovery would take about ten days. Cord recommended taking two weeks to be safe. She left the infirmary after eight days and returned to her search the next day.

She went back to the ruddy red building in the early morning on the first day of her renewed search. The manhole cover wasn't quite as it had been when she'd been forced to hobble home. Someone had moved it since then. She climbed the fire escape slowly to the fourth floor,

where the door was still unlocked. It was too easy, and she didn't trust it. She sat crouched at the fire escape door for five minutes listening to the silence of the building. On the floors below, the zombies loosed their groans and gurgling screams, but on the fourth floor not even a mouse seemed to move.

So she entered the building again. The blue speckled carpet bore the stains of Angel's blood, now dried to the old fibers. Amy checked each office as she passed them, finding each as empty as she'd left it over a week prior. She stopped in front of the closed marked door, as closed as it could be with the handle broken in. She hadn't bothered to close it behind her when she left. Again, she listened intently, and heard nothing. No dim lights spilled underneath the door or through the handle's hole. Cautiously, she pushed the door in.

The room was dark, but her eyes had been adjusting since she stepped inside from the fire escape. The shelves were empty now, their terrible implements gone. The desk still stood in the center of the room, unmoved. The stains on the carpet were larger than she'd remembered. Maybe, Amy considered, she'd nicked one of Angel's veins or arteries when she'd put her knife through Angel's shoulder. As she crept into the room, she heard it, a slight exchange of air, breathing. She pulled her knife and moved silently around the desk, ready to strike.

Only, she didn't find Angel coiled like a snake ready to spring waiting behind the desk. A woman with hair redder than Amy's own lay splayed out on the ground. Her body was somewhere between Liam's and the zombie she and Cord had dealt with months before, pale as death and covered in dozens of tiny cuts up and down her arms. She was still bleeding. On the back of her hand though, apart from any other wounds by a good six inches, was Angel's mark, carved deep.

Amy knelt beside the woman, unsure exactly how to proceed. She had bandages and medical supplies, but nowhere near enough to help the woman. She touched the woman's cheek, one of the only uninjured parts of her body, to see if she would rouse. The woman's breath stumbled a moment, and she moved her head just so.

"Hey," Amy spoke softly. She touched the woman's cheek again and the woman twitched.

Her eyes shot open and she stared directly into Amy's. Her breathing sped up, becoming very deliberate. Never breaking her gaze, the woman tried to swallow, but began to cough. Amy pulled her canteen from her belt and opened it. When she offered it to the woman though, her eyes were filled with fear and she continued to cough and gag, refusing the water.

"It's fine, see?" Amy asked, drinking from her canteen and swallowing quickly before offering it to the woman again.

"Her eyes," the woman said between dry coughs. She tried to raise her arm, but couldn't. However, her finger, she could twitch just enough to point up at Amy's face.

"Please, drink a little." Amy lowered her canteen to the woman's mouth. Though she stared hatred into Amy's eyes, the woman put her lips to it and let Amy feed her a little water. After that small splash, Amy had to pull her canteen away to keep the woman from practically drowning herself with it. Over the next few minutes, Amy slowly helped the woman drink to a point where she could speak easily.

"What's your name?" Amy asked.

"Why do you care?" the woman asked.

"Maybe I don't," Amy said. "Humor me." She unloaded what medical supplies she had in her pack. She figured she might have enough to get the woman to the Homestead.

The woman stared into Amy's eyes, her own filled with distrust. "Emily."

"Can you tell me what happened, Emily?" Amy asked. "What Angel did? Said?"

Emily laughed once, a harsh, grating thing that put her back to coughing for a moment.

"What does it look like?" her eyes twitched, but no tears came to her bloodshot eyes.

"I'm trying to find her," Amy said. "Anything you can tell me—"

"You must be Amy," Emily said, "the Ranger." Her last word dripped with hatred.

"What makes you say that?"

"She was looking for you." Emily looked away from Amy's eyes. "When she saw I wasn't..."

"I'm sorry," Amy said. "I'm trying to find her, trying to help—"

"You aren't helping anyone." Emily looked back at her.

This time, Amy broke eye contact with Emily. Her stare made her uncomfortable.

"Would you prefer I left?" Amy asked. "I can send others to come back and help you. Or I can do my best to get you to the Homestead myself. Up to you." Amy started to pack away her supplies.

"No, please," Emily quickly said. "Please. I don't want to die alone."

"And I don't want you to die at all," Amy said. "I want to help."

Amy did her best to tend to Emily's many wounds. She focused on Emily's legs. If she couldn't walk, she wouldn't make it to the Homestead. But like Liam, most of Emily's injuries were on her chest, back, and stomach. These, Amy had to simply bind as best she could under a tight gauze wrap. She knew the pain a dry bandage against fresh wounds caused, especially wound as tight as she was wrapping it. But she only had so much gauze, and Emily only had so much blood. They couldn't waste either. Finally, Amy retrieved what remained of Emily's clothes from the corner, discarded by Angel as a pile of shredded rags. As clothed and wrapped

as she could be, Emily slowly stood from the floor and leaned on Amy. She held Emily up and walked the two of them down the hall to the fire escape and back into the light.

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"Jesus," Jenny said, stepping out from behind the curtain around Emily's bed in the infirmary.

"She's lucky you got there when you did."

"Yeah," Amy said, "lucky." It wasn't the word she'd have used to describe Emily.

"She lost over three quarts of blood. I don't know how you walked her here."

"It wasn't easy," Amy said. "She uh, didn't want to at first."

"Really? The others were really grateful for help." Jenny peeled off her gloves and tossed them into a bucket of water near the doors where dozens more gloves were swimming in less than clear water.

"Others?"

"Yeah, while you were recovering we got two more of Angel's victims. They—" Jenny stopped for a moment. "They didn't make it."

"That's two more reasons then." Amy pushed open the doors, ready to leave the infirmary.

"Amy..."

"What is it?"

"There's other ways to help these people and well..." Jenny trailed off.

"Well what? Jenny, I want to do these people justice."

Jenny took a deep breath. "We usually see one of Angel's victims in here maybe once a season. Emily makes three in two weeks."

"Then," Amy said, looking straight into Jenny's eyes, "I've really got my work cut out for me, don't I?"

The next few weeks had Amy in and out of both the ruins and the infirmary. By days she searched the upper floors of infested buildings for more of Angel's hideouts. Most buildings seemed full of salvage, but Amy wanted to travel lightly, quietly. She took only liquor bottles when she could find them. Nights had her in the infirmary, making sure she wasn't overworking herself, that her transplant had properly taken, that her stitches were holding. When she'd leave the infirmary, she had to pass Angel's victims, all arranged so none could see the marks on the others. There were more each week. Once she was alone, she'd go to her room in the barracks and drink from whatever liquor she'd been able to find. It helped wash out the night, keep her fresh for the mornings. She stored the empty bottles under her bed. She had a quite the collection built up.

Even though she had her new kidney, Amy still went after bounties. People were always grateful when she turned in a thug or bandit who'd killed someone they loved. Even those with no personal ties to the bounty were excited to see her. It was rare for her not to be greeted with cries of "Red Ranger!" Walking a killer into the Bazaar on a chain to turn in a bounty made her feel like a hero. Plus, some knew a thing or two about Angel. Most had learned to just share that information with Amy when she asked, not make her ask twice. The name Red Ranger had a

different meaning to bandits than Bazaar goers. She hoped that the bandit she tracked outside of the downtown area into one of the old rundown neighborhoods would have something to share with her.

Amy found that bounty hunting away from all the concrete and steel and poly-blend carpets was more relaxing. She figured the fresh air and sunlight probably had something to do with it. It was a lot more like her old home, reminded her of going on bandit raids with her dad. Plus, there was less of a need to be completely 'turned on' as well. She didn't need to creep silently with one step every ten seconds, or be cautious of everything large enough to hide a prone body behind it. On top of all that, there wasn't so much the concept of 'territory' out in the neighborhoods compared to the ruins. Getting caught on a gang boss' floor could be a death sentence. Walking down one's block had a built in excuse, "I'm just heading over there," with a point down the road.

When she got to the blue house with the red shutters though, the last known location of the bandit called 'Staker,' she turned on. Nonchalantly, she stepped onto the next door lawn. As she passed behind a tree she crouched low below the hedge that separated the yards. There was noise coming from the blue house, muffled noise. She pushed through the lower branches of the hedge and slipped into the backyard, crouched just below a cracked window. The sounds from inside drifted out to her: humming, happy humming, a tune.

She listened for other sounds, another hummer, maybe a whistler. The only other noise was a slight shifting, and an occasional slight thump. After a few minutes sitting under the window, she moved slowly toward the back door of the house. It sounded like only one person inside the house. One she could deal with, especially with the element of surprise. She loaded a bolt into her new crossbow, purchased from the Bazaar with part of her bounty profits. Weapon



at the ready, she tested the door handle. It turned, but roughly, so she did so slowly enough to keep it from making noise. With the door open, the sounds were much clearer. A man was humming a pleasant tune, moving papers around, and occasionally hitting a wall. Amy couldn't help but wonder whether Staker was hanging pictures.

Amy had come into the old kitchen of the house. The wallpaper was a peeling yellow pattern with what had been some kind of white border near the top and bottom. A rickety wooden table occupied the space under the window she'd been listening through. On top of it, a duck was half plucked. A small pile of feathers sat beside the half-naked bird. There wasn't a smell of decay to it. Someone was intending to finish the job at some point. There was only one other door in the simple kitchen, and it stood open to the main hallway of the house. Looking down it, she could see the front door, with a wooden beam in brackets across it to keep it closed. On the left, the hallway opened onto a front room that Amy assumed was a living room. The humming came from there. That was where she had to go. She could see the floorboards in the hallway, though. They were warped and the edges were frayed. They would make noise and she'd lose her element of surprise.

Amy grinned. She could also exploit her element of surprise. She pointed her crossbow down the hallway towards the opening. With the heel of one foot, she tapped at the kitchen door behind her, loud enough to make it sound like the door closed. The humming stopped. Amy lowered her eye to the crossbow and took steady aim. A man leaned into the hallway, just enough for his shoulder and face to be visible. Or his face would have been visible if he wasn't wearing a silver mask. Than, Angel's mentor. Amy fired. The bolt whizzed straight for Than's face. He was quick though, and ducked out of the hallway long enough for the bolt to strike the wall behind him and embed itself a good three inches.

"I was wondering if you'd come by," Than said. "Come into the living room. We'll talk."

Amy loaded another bolt before stepping into the hallway. His voice was oddly familiar, but she wasn't going to not be ready to kill him. As expected, the floorboards creaked as she walked across them. When she turned into the living room, she couldn't help but gasp. A man sat in an armchair in the corner, a knife handle protruding from his forehead. Behind the corpse, papers covered the wall, hand-written sheets topped with names in bold: John Carpenter, Kelly Neiland, Brent Boudreaux, and more. Amy had to pull her eyes away from the wall to focus on Than, who stood next to a small stack of pages and nails. Like Angel, he wore black, for the most part, black pants and black boots. His back was turned to her, and it was covered in tiny tattooed words, too small for her to read at a distance. He turned around and looked right at her, and his mask came into view. Polished silver in the shape of a demon with an open mouth, sporting curved fangs and double irises, unlike anything else Amy had seen. Vibrant blond hair stuck up a bit behind the mask in little tufts.

"I told Victor it was a bad idea to go after you that day," Than said.

Amy snapped her fingers. "The merc captain. I remember you."

"But you're not here for me." Then gestured to the dead man in the chair. "Staker. I assume he's why you're here. Another corpse to bring back to the cheers of the Bazaar, Red Ranger?"

Amy grinned. "Original reason, sure," she said, keeping her crossbow pointed at Than.

Than chuckled. It wasn't like Angel's laugh, sharp and twisted, but rather soft, genuine. "I suppose I'm a pretty good reason too. I'm hoping you'll hear me out though."

"I haven't shot you yet."

"Because you're intrigued," Than said, flourishing his hand. "I digress though. I'm here for an important reason and Staker there—" he gestured to the dead man again, "—isn't it."

"Really?" Amy asked. "Seems like a lot of work for something unimportant."

"I should have been more clear. This—" he held up the paper in his hand titled 'Annabelle Evans,' "—is important, but it isn't *the* important reason I'm here. You are." He pointed at Amy before sitting down on an ottoman.

"Angel want you to kill me?" Amy asked. She braced her crossbow against her shoulder, ready to fire.

"If that was what I came here for, do you really think I'd tell you?" Than asked. "Especially with a bolt pointing at my neck?"

"Probably not," Amy said.

"Now that being said," Than said, "She does want me to capture you. Gave the same order to her other little minions too, her broken."

"Others like Victor?" Amy asked.

"Some," Than said. "More of them are like Liam actually. I heard you killed him...probably for the best actually. He wasn't living anymore."

"You're saying there's others like Liam?" Amy lowered her crossbow. "People she's hurt, turned to her side?"

"Most of her underlings are like Liam and the broken," Than said. "Victor is the rare exception of someone who came to Angel, not the other way around. He became a Reaper for her. The broken? They aren't Reapers. They're Angel's."

"How many of Angel's victims, how many broken are there?"

"She tells each of her 'playthings' to find her a replacement or she'll be back for them,"  
Than said. "Now whether they do or not? That's another question."

"And it's not an answer to mine."

"Well I don't know how many broken actually help her. Enough do, and that's too many."  
Than shook his head. "I can't blame them. I want to though. They don't want to hurt anymore, so they give her someone else instead. One link catches another, and in no time, a chain is formed. A chain that Angel uses to lynch anyone in her way."

"Why?"

"Why?" Than practically laughed, "It's what she does, how she's seized as much power as she has. People want to protect her victims, help them; they just become easier prey for doing the right thing. I'm sick of it."

"Really? Sick of it? I'd have thought a killer like you woul—" Amy began.

Than snapped his fingers, pointing at Amy. "There are no killers like me," Than said. "And I don't enjoy it. I don't enjoy killing. I don't enjoy hurting. I don't enjoy the talents I possess. Angel though. She loves it, loves the power it brings her. It's appalling."

"So why don't you kill her?"

"Which reason do you want to hear?" Than asked.

"The one that's true."

"They all are."

"Then the one I'll believe."

"I don't feel like dying yet." Than shrugged. "Angel's followers include some truly zealous lunatics, none of whom trust me, and some of whom would love a reason to slit my

throat in the night. Necris wouldn't even bother with a knife. He'd rip out my throat with his teeth."

"Is this the part where I come in?" Amy asked. "You want me to kill Angel, so you can take her place."

"Ugh, no. God no," Than said. "No, I don't want her broken, and I sure as shit don't want the power she has in the Reapers."

"Then what do you want from me?" Amy asked.

"You aren't completely wrong," Than said. "I do want you to kill Angel. I just want you to be aware of how dangerous this situation has become so you can actually succeed."

"I've seen what she does to people," Amy said. "I know the danger."

"Really?" Than asked. "You know that every time in the last month you've left the Homestead at least two of her broken have followed you? If that's true, then it's probably old news that she has ambushes waiting in half her hideouts in case you drop by. 'I know the danger.'" Than laughed.

"I thought that guy looked familiar," Amy said under her breath. She looked back to Than. "So I've got her attention?"

"Worse. You've gotten her excited," Than said. "The ones who stand up to her are her favorites to break. Amy, the 'Red Ranger'? She sees you as a challenge."

Amy smirked. "Funny, I was thinking the same thing about her."

She didn't see Than move, but he was suddenly a foot in front of her face, her crossbow pushed down to her side, his hand holding the bolt in place. He stared down at her, straight into her eyes through his mask.

"With that attitude, you're as good as hers, as good as broken. She's onto you, your habits and style. She has her underlings searching for you, watching the Homestead. She *will* take you," Than said. "You need to be ready for that. For every shadow to be hiding someone looking to cut you, hurt you, rape you, break you."

Amy's mouth hung open for a moment before she could respond. "I can handle whatever, whoever, she throws at me."

"If you insist," Than said. "I think you can kill her, but I don't think you'll survive, as you are now." Than turned around and went back to the ottoman. "What's more, you're almost as good as you think you are. So she's getting impatient. It's why she's been making the rounds of her broken. Reminding them of what she wants and why not to ignore her."

"Wait, so all those people in the infirmary—"

"She told each and every one of them she'll be back for them if they don't bring you to her," Than said. "Whether they will, that's another question."

"I don't need to worry about them trying anything," Amy said. "They're hurt, they're weak. I'm not afraid of them."

Than hung his head. "Tell me something," Than said, "You've seen her victims, her hideouts. I don't stomach it well, the senselessness of it. How are you handling it?" Than asked. "Or does it not bother you? Can you ignore it?"

"I..." Amy figured honesty couldn't hurt. "I'm collecting interesting bottles." Amy looked up at Than. "Helps keep my mind off it all. Why?"

"Doesn't matter, your answer's good enough. Keep your eyes open."

With that, Than picked up a nail and his hammer from an end table and put up the last page, Annabelle's page, on the wall over Staker's head. Then he turned to Amy and nodded

before grabbing a black shirt off the end table and walking past her into the hallway. It took her a moment for it all to sink in before she stepped into the hall to see him leaving through the kitchen door, half-plucked duck in his hand.

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Amy kept her crossbow out as she made her way back to the Homestead. She'd considered taking Staker's body with her too to turn in, but couldn't bring herself to disturb it given how Than had set it up. He wanted people to see what Staker had done, and who he'd killed. There was something weirdly respectable about it. Though, she didn't pretend to understand Than at all. She knew she wouldn't be surprised if he wound up as her next target once she'd dealt with Angel. There was no reason to discount his advice though. Being even more aware of her surroundings couldn't hurt.

She went straight to the infirmary when she got back to the Homestead, and found Jenny leaving as she arrived.

"There's been a development," Amy said. "I need to see Angel's victims, all of them."

"What's going on, Amy?"

"I said I need to see them, Jenny. That's what's going on."

"Gi-Give me a minute, okay?" Jenny said, "Some of them are really jumpy. You...you're being really intense right now. You'll scare them."

"That might be a good thing," Amy said, "but go ahead. Get them 'ready' for me."

Jenny nodded. She went back into the infirmary and quickly returned. "They're together," Jenny said, "please, please, please, just...be gentle."

Jenny didn't follow Amy in. Four patients wearing simple cloth bathrobes waited for her in the infirmary. They stood in front of a pair of beds. Three of them wore bandages around their left hands, and one sat in a wheelchair: a young man with long shaggy hair, a young woman with a shaved head sat in the wheelchair, a boy no older than thirteen, and Emily. Emily was much healthier now than when Amy had found her. None of them, though, looked at Amy when she came in. She looked them over, tried to make eye contact with each of them, but none would meet her gaze.

"I know," Amy said. She looked to each of them again. "Who can tell me what I know?"

No one spoke. Further into the infirmary doctors were helping other patients, amplifying the silence around Amy and the four.

"I know that all of you know what I know," Amy said.

Emily's eyes met Amy's for a brief moment, but she broke away quickly, and didn't speak up, curling her lips into her mouth.

Amy sighed. "Please, one of you just tell me," Amy said. "I want to help you, even with what I know. So please, someone just tell me what I know."

"You—" Emily began. The shaggy-haired young man to her side grabbed her arm.

"Don't," he said. "It's not worth it."

"What's not worth it?" Amy asked.



"You know she told us to take you!" Emily blurted.

"You idiot!" the man said. He backed between the two beds and picked something up from one of the bedside tables.

"Make room," Amy said. Emily and the other two patients moved aside. Amy stopped between the ends of the beds. The young man gripped a small pair of scissors in his hands. His hand wasn't bandaged. "What's your name?"

"You don't care," he said. Two Harvesters in scrubs approached the group, stopping behind Amy.

"Maybe I don't," Amy said. She pointed behind herself. "Her name is Emily though, and we met...how long ago did we meet, Emily?"

"About two months," Emily said.

"And how did we meet?" Amy asked.

"Angel had left me to bleed out," Emily said. "You helped me get here."

"You're only here because of her though!" The man said. "We're all only here because of her! Who cares if she helps? It's all her fault!"

"Open your robe," Amy said.

"Wh-what?" the man asked.

"Open your robe. Show me what I'm responsible for," Amy said.

He gripped the scissors tighter in his hands. His knuckles turned white. He swallowed and pulled his robe open with one hand. His chest bore a few long, jagged scars.

"How long have you been here?" Amy asked. "A couple weeks?"

"Yeah," he said. "Angel left me alone for days. I managed to crawl here."

Amy looked to the Harvesters in scrubs. "That true?"

"The guards who brought him in said he was crawling," one of the Harvesters said.

"Not much blood though," the other harvester added.

Amy turned back to the young man. "Lift your hair."

"What?" he asked, backing into the wall.

"If you don't have a tattoo of Angel's mark," Amy said, "then you're completely right, this is all my fault. I think it's someone else's though."

The man's jaw was trembling, and his teeth knocked together every few seconds. He lowered the scissors and raised his other hand to his hair. He looked at Amy. Bringing the scissors back up like a dagger, he lunged. She was ready though, swiftly kicking straight up, connecting with his chest and knocking him to the ground. The scissors skidded across the floor and the two Harvesters made to seize him.

"Wait," Amy said, stopping them with her arm. She knelt down in front of the young man, looked into his eyes again.

"Just do it," he said between short breaths. He raised his chin, showing his neck.

"What's your name?"

"What?"

"Your name. I want to know."

"...It's Simon, happy? Please, just get it over with." Simon showed his neck again.

"Simon, I—" Amy began when the double doors burst open and Cord came in.

"Amy? What's going on in here?" Cord asked. Jenny came in behind him, wringing her hands.

The two Harvesters explained the situation to Cord and Jenny. In that moment, Amy looked down at Simon, his chin trembling. She looked over her shoulder at Emily and the two

others. The girl in the wheelchair was hugging the little boy tight. They were both shaking and the boy was quietly sobbing into her shoulder. As the two Harvesters finished bringing Cord and Jenny up to speed, Amy turned to them.

"Simon here," Amy said, "used to work for Angel. I think he's seen the error of his ways though." She looked back at Simon. "Is that right?"

"If it is," Simon said, "Then I'm not leaving here until Angel's dead. She can't know. I've seen what she does to p—"

"You were pretending to be one of us!" Emily shouted. Her eyes were shining. "We shared with you, cried with you! You coward!"

"I- I didn't—" Simon sputtered.

"You aren't just going to let him get away with this?" Emily asked, turning to Amy.

"Of course not," Amy said. She looked to Simon. "He's going to tell us everything he knows. He's also just volunteered to guard the infirmary with his life every day until I've dealt with Angel." She stood up and offered her hand to Simon. "C'mon, we've got a lot to talk about."

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For the next two hours, Amy and Cord questioned Simon in one of the private rooms of the infirmary. He sat on the bed and they sat in threadbare arm chairs. After an hour of evasive

answers and vague threats, he started to understand that his life wasn't going to immediately end, and opened up more.

He didn't know much, but had several key pieces of information they didn't. He marked three hideouts Amy didn't know about, reported a break in the Harvester's fence where he'd been slipping information on Amy's movements to other Reapers, and warned of places where ambushes were usually set up. Finally, he told them about Angel's zealots, the ones who didn't need to be broken. Simon told them about the most devoted of them, Necris the cannibal, who lusted for Angel's attention and had taken to staking out the Bazaar, knowing that Amy went there often. When Simon had told them all he knew, Amy and Cord left him to make their own plans.

"If we follow Necris when he gives up his stakeout, we have a real shot at finding Angel," Cord said.

"Or," Amy said, "I can let him 'ambush' me. When he fails, Angel might come at us sloppy. We can take advantage of that."

"That's a really stupid risk," Cord said.

"Well how do you propose we find him to follow him anyway?" Amy asked. "He's planning an ambush at the Bazaar, not opening a salvage stall."

"I'm not saying it's something we'll get done in a day," Cord said. "But at least this way, we're not jabbing at a hornet's nest hoping only the queen comes out to make us stop."

"No, we're just letting her send drones out to sting as they please," Amy said.

"How about a compromise?" Cord asked. "Best of both worlds. We set up a counter ambush. You let him 'get the drop on you,' and we force him to retreat. Then we follow in secret."

"And if he doesn't retreat?" Amy asked, "If he prefers to go down fighting?"

"Then you get your wish," Cord said. "And we pray Angel comes at us as dumb as you hope she will."

## Chapter 5 – Hunted

Amy met with Cord and the other Harvesters early in the morning on the day of the strike. The plan was simple. Cord's group would go to the Bazaar first, out of uniform. Once there, they would split up and stay alert. Another Harvester had captured a bandit the day prior and brought him to the Homestead for questioning. Amy would bring him to the Bazaar a little later in the morning, and make a big show of turning him in for the bounty. If that didn't get Necris to make a move, Amy wasn't sure what would.

"Won't be much longer now," Amy said. She walked a few paces behind the bandit. His hands were bound behind his back, and tied to a rope which Amy held. A thick rag also gagged him, preventing him from talking. "Don't worry, I'll make them promise not to kill you."

"Mmphm! Mmfmmmmrmm!" the bandit tried to speak.

"God, I know right?" Amy said. She stopped walking and the bandit stumbled when the rope pulled taut behind him. The Bazaar was right around the corner. "If he doesn't show up, or has allies of his own?"

"Mrrrrmm!"

"You're not wrong," Amy said. "I have to try."

She snapped the rope like a whip and started moving again. As soon as the Bazaar came into view, Amy put her hand on her knife. She wouldn't be caught off guard. Crowds in the aisles parted for the Red Ranger and her bandit prisoner. People cheered her name, patted her back, offered her bits of choice food. When she showed up at the Bazaar, it meant a bandit's days were numbered, or even better, over. She smiled back at the people, nodded, shook a hand or two. She made her way to the bounty board, made eye contact with a few of the Harvesters in disguise along the way. They looked like they were doing their best to appear nonchalant, but they were tense, she could tell.

Screams erupted in the Bazaar behind her. On the other end of the market place, a few hundred feet away, a fire raged. People were already panicking, running out from the rows of stalls toward the city, away from her and toward the fire, and some just running to nowhere in particular. She spun the rope around her hands, choking up on it and shortening the space between her and her bandit prisoner to just a couple feet. She pulled on the rope and turned toward the fire.

"C'mon," Amy said to her bandit, "we've got to he—"

"Ranger!" A rough voice called from behind her, near the bounty board. "I'll string your fingers round my neck!"

Amy turned back around and saw the man that had to be Necris. Standing easily over a foot taller than her, his muscled stature was immediately imposing. She could see all of his sharp, jagged teeth as his lips and cheeks were missing, torn away long ago. Without them, his speech was marred, slurred in ways. A skull tattoo covered the rest of his face and similar tattoos adorned his body: rib cage on his bare chest, bones along his arms. He pointed a serrated machete at her. Of all the plans she'd expected Necris to have, this wasn't one of them.

"Not the best place for an ambush!" Amy shouted. She couldn't fight him here, not with a fire, not with so many innocents around. She could bluff though. "These are my people. You're outnumbered!"

Necris just shook his head. Amy looked swiftly left and right. There were about a dozen people still around her. They weren't panicking, most were wearing black, all were taking out clubs or knives, Reapers. For the first time in months, Amy was afraid. She felt a tug on the rope in her hands. Her bandit's eyes were wide. He was holding up his bound hands and shaking them at her. He wanted freedom. A roar, the Reaper crowd was closing in, Necris was charging her. She drew her knife just fast enough to strike Necris' machete away from her face.

She stomped down hard on Necris' foot and threw her shoulder into his chest, forcing him back a few feet. In that split second, she made a decision. A chance at turning the fight into a two on twelve was worth the risk of it becoming a one on thirteen. She cut the bindings around her bandit's wrists, freeing him. He was gone in an instant, bolting straight for the closest Reaper and throwing all his weight into a punch to the face.

Necris recovered quickly, and swung at her again. He had a lot of power on his side, and Amy had little experience blocking a blade so much larger than her own. More of his strikes than not still found a little purchase, drew some blood. She figured she might have been able to fight



back more effectively if she wasn't having to turn and kick or swipe at a Reaper lunging out of the crowd at her every few seconds. She couldn't give Necris her full attention, and she couldn't give it to the Reaper crowd either.

Fewer Reapers were charging her now though, and Necris was panting. He put a lot of power behind each of his strikes, only a few of which were able to deliver their full weight to Amy. Her bandit had thinned the Reaper crowd enough to draw their ire off her. While Necris was showing some wear, Amy could barely stand. Blood flowed freely from the back of her right knee, she was sure at least one of her ribs was broken, and she could barely lift her left arm. She stumbled a bit as she circled around Necris, trying to get an eye on a Harvester, a merchant, anyone who could help her. But the fire was larger now. Her allies had to be dealing with it. She had to admit, Necris' plan was a lot better than she'd expected. Angel had to have come up with it.

"Just grab her!" one of the Reapers shouted.

Necris threw his machete to the side and bull rushed Amy. He threw himself at her, tackling her to the ground, pinning her with his weight. He didn't even seem to react to her knife slipping between his ribs. She tried to hold tight to the handle, to try and rip his insides out as she had done to Victor. A pain unlike any she'd known before forced her to let go, forced her to flail at Necris. He was eating her. His teeth tore into her shoulder and ripped away a terrible hunk of flesh. The sound of him chewing and gnashing at what had once been a part of her, as bits fell back down onto her made acid well up in her throat, her eyes roll back in her head.

She was praying to just die when she was suddenly able to draw a full breath, Necris' weight no longer holding her to the pavement. She looked to her right. Her bandit dropped to the ground next to her, having tackled Necris off her. His skin was pale, but covered with red. His

breaths were slow and ragged. She looked to her left. Necris had landed on the handle of her knife. He wasn't moving.

"What...what's your name?" Amy asked. She closed her eyes. She couldn't keep them open anymore.

Her bandit breathed slowly. "...Tucker..."

"Thank you," Amy said, her own breaths coming farther and farther apart. "Tucker."

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"...weren't followed?" Angel asked.

Amy could feel soft carpet against her cheek. Every other bit of her ached or burned. She dared not move though, even to open her eyes. With no idea where she was or how long she'd been passed out, she couldn't risk revealing that she was awake.

"No, I shook the two Harvesters that saw me grab her," Than said.

"What about the others?" Angel asked. "You weren't even supposed to need to get involved."

"Necris is gonna be out of commission for a while," Than said. "She got him real good. He might need a new liver." Amy had to fight herself not to smile. Smiling hurt anyway.

"Shit. I had plans for him."

"Should've sent more Reapers to help him then. Your broken got mostly handled by her bandit prisoner, and he wasn't even armed. Well, he got armed pretty quick. Kicked the shit out of Harris."

"Who?"

"Christ," Than sighed, "one of the actual Reapers you sent. Her bandit broke his spine and took his hatchet."

"How long until she's awake?" Angel asked.

"Well, I got her bandaged up, gave her a little something for the pain too—"

"What? Why?"

"She could've died from shock," Than said. "Necris took more than a pound of flesh off her. I thought you wanted to break her, not bury her."

"I—"

"Look," Than said. "She's stirring."

Amy twitched her arm. She wasn't sure what she'd done for Than to notice she was awake and didn't want Angel to see whatever it had been either. She tried to open her eyes, but found her lids to be much heavier than she remembered, but she slowly regained her sight. She was in what looked like a hotel room. She'd seen a few over the last months searching for Angel, but this one seemed like it had been emptied out. Than was standing near the open door of the room, and Angel was crossing over to where she lay.

"I guess I was wrong," Angel said. She knelt down in front of Amy. "You did bring better this time, but you really should have brought your best."

Amy wanted to say something, some quip, but she couldn't find the strength. She just stared back into Angel's eyes.

"Okay, well I'll be going," Than said as he stepped into the hallway.

"Make sure I'm not disturbed," Angel said.

"The *only* people who even know about this hideout are here now."

"What happened to Daven?" Angel asked.

Than looked back to Angel, then down to Amy. "Some Harvester staked him right in the forehead. It's why I had to bring her here myself." Again, Amy had to will herself not to smile. As beat as she was, she had a chance.

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Amy wasn't sure how much time had passed. She just knew it had all been painful. The sun had risen and set a few times, but she'd lost consciousness more than once as well. She just had to hold out. Cord's original plan had been to follow Necris back to Angel. He'd find the cannibal, who'd lead him to Angel, even if he didn't know where the hideout was. Necris would lead the Harvesters to Than then. He'd have to. Then they'd bust through the door and Amy could finally rest.

The only thing that really kept her fighting was Angel's mounting frustration. Jenny could handle the victims, get them back on their feet. Cord would deal with whatever follow-up the Reapers planned. She just had to keep Angel busy, off the streets, away from her victims. She lay

face down on the floor of the hotel room, bleeding slowly from over a dozen cuts on her back and breathing slower, just on the verge of consciousness when someone knocked on the door. She didn't move, but got ready to.

"What?" Angel asked through gritted teeth. As far as Amy knew, she hadn't left the hotel room since she'd gotten there.

"Checking in," Than said. The hinges creaked a little. He must have come into the room. What was he even doing here? She had thought there had to have been something in the room, a hidden weapon or escape route after what he'd said dropping her off. She was a fool to have believed him in the first place.

"I'm fine," Angel said.

"You haven't eaten or slept in four days," Than said.

"Neither has she! And she was almost fucking dead then!" Angel spat.

"She," Than said, "is unconscious."

"Regardless."

"Seriously, you're going to wear yourself out," Than said. "Come home, have a meal and a real night of sleep. She'll hold for a few hours."

Amy had to risk it. She opened an eye, just enough to see the room. Angel was sitting against one of the walls, looking to the door where Than stood. He, however, was looking right into Amy's eyes. Though, he didn't react to her opening her eye.

"That's just the problem!" Angel said. "She held through beatings, breaking fingers, starvation, cuts, everything. Shit! I'd have started by ripping out her goddamn molars with pliers if I knew she'd handle so much after losing a chunk out of her fucking shoulder."

"You're tired. You'll think of something better after some food and rest."

"...Fine. Just...give me an hour. I need to wake her up. Give her something to think about while I'm gone."

"Alright," Than said, turning to leave. "Oh, which entrance did you use?"

"Roadside." Angel asked, "Why?"

"Riverside's totally flooded out." He pointed over Amy to the windows. "No idea what's in that water, deep as it is."

That was it. Amy knew exactly where they were. She'd explored the city enough looking for Angel. Only one building was that flooded. The hotel's ground floor was half submerged in the river. She wasn't sure the exact depth, but the water under the windows had to be least ten feet deep. It would be quite a drop though.

"Great. Thanks," Angel said. "Anything else?"

"Oh, yeah," Than said in an exaggerated tone. "Necris wanted to make sure I got this to you. He thought it was something you'd want, Amy's knife."

"Really?" Angel sounded revived. "Yeah, that's definitely something I want. Give it here."

Angel stood up from the wall, and Amy closed her eye. The door closed and Angel walked over to Amy. Angel touched Amy's back, ran her fingers through the blood and over the cuts. She found one cut, slightly longer than the rest, and worked her finger into it.

"C'mon now, rise and shine," Angel said.

Amy could only grunt through her teeth in response. She had to save her energy. She'd screamed the first day, tried to get someone in the city's attention. No one came. She wouldn't waste what little strength she still had.

"Now, I know you think I've probably got big plans for you," Angel said. She had deep, dark bags under her bloodshot eyes. She held Amy's knife in her hands, but they were jittering. The last four days had taken their toll on her as well. "But you're not special. I'm gonna mark you, and I'm gonna leave you here, just like anybody else."

Amy decided to play the part. "...Thank you."

"What was that?" Angel asked, a smile spreading across her face.

"Thank you... finally over."

"Well, it's never really over, but this?" Angel gestured to the room, "There's just one last thing to handle."

Angel stood up, lifting Amy by the arm. Her knees wobbled underneath her, but with Angel's grip, she stood too. Angel pushed her up against the wall between the two windows and held her there with one arm. With the other, she brought Amy's knife to her face. Amy closed her eyes, but Angel wasn't interested in them. The blade cut in just beside her left eye, then down and across her nose. Amy gritted her teeth as Angel cut the second line of her mark across her upper lip. Blood trickled down into her mouth. She was surprised; she still had blood to bleed with.

"To be continued," Angel said. She smiled, breathing slowly.

Amy knew she could wait, escape once Angel left her alone.

But she didn't. She let her head tip back and rest against the wall, as though fading. As soon as Angel moved her arm to let her fall, Amy sprang into action. She rocked her head forward, throwing her forehead into Angel's nose. She swung her leg up and her foot connected with Angel's stomach. The kick forced her back a step. Angel smiled a crazy kind of grin and wiped the blood flowing from her nose. It was exactly what Amy hoped for, space. She prayed

the windows were weak as she threw herself backwards through one of them. As she tumbled through the air, her prayers turned to the water below, and that the depth was enough. The last thing she heard was Angel's furious scream.

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"Hey, eyes open, you'll have to walk a bit yourself," Than said. Amy thought she had to be dead. There was no way Than was talking to her.

"...I'm an idiot," Amy said, "a dead idiot."

"Part true," Than said. "You would be a dead idiot had I pulled you out of that water. You're just a lucky idiot."

Amy opened her eyes. She was propped against a dumpster in an alley she knew well. It was only a few hundred feet from the Homestead's main gate. She was wrapped in damp gauze.

"Lucky?" Amy asked.

"Yeah," Than said, "for one, Angel's sure you're dead. Watched you float for a few minutes before practically passing out in the corner. She'll sleep for a day."

"Mmm, I do sound lucky..." Amy closed her eyes and rested her head against the dumpster. Than slapped her hard across the face, and her eyes shot open.



"Hey, none of that. Stay conscious," Than said. "You've gotta walk, crawl, drag yourself a hundred feet. That's it. Your people will keep you from dying once you pass out, probably something to do with all that blood you've lost. Go."

Than handed her a piece of broken fence from the dumpster and helped her to her feet. Using the broken fence like a crutch, she hobbled out of the alley. She looked back, and the alley was empty. The guards at the gate saw her, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. All she knew was that they picked her up and she didn't need to use her legs anymore. For what felt like the hundredth time in only a few days, she slipped out of consciousness.

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Amy slept for nearly three days, waking for only brief moments to sip water or eat a little food. Though, she operated in those moments almost entirely on autopilot. When she finally woke up, aware of where she was, she asked for two things: to talk to Cord and to be given a mirror. She got both together. Jenny let Cord into Amy's private room in the infirmary. She sat in the room's one chair, while Cord stood over Amy's bedside.

"The fire, Amy, we—" Cord began, but Amy put up her hand.

"You had to," Amy said. "People were in danger."

"He didn't come back to the Homestead for two days," Jenny said, "and he only stayed here long enough to rest."

"You would have done the same," Cord said.

"Still though," Amy said, "thank you." Then she remembered Than's words. "Who knows I'm here? That I'm alive?"

"Don't worry, Amy," Cord said.

"No, you don't understand, she—" Amy started.

"She thinks you're dead," Jenny said. "You kept saying that in your sleep."

Amy sunk backwards into her pillows with a sigh of relief. "Thank God," she said. "I don't think I can get back out there yet."

Cord laughed, a deep, stomach-rumbling laugh. "You really are the real deal, Amy. Four days with Angel, three days unconscious, and your first thoughts are the job."

"Second thoughts," Amy said, "... The mirror was my first thought."

"Oh yeah," Cord said, "I thought you might have forgotten about that. You still want it?"

"I do. I need to see it," Amy said.

Cord nodded and took the small hand mirror from his chest pocket. Amy accepted it. She looked into the mirror and saw the mark. The cuts themselves had begun to scar over, but it was obvious. The mark would always be there, clearly visible in the center of her face. It was still her face though.

"It's not as bad as I thought," Amy said. She set the mirror down on the bedside table. There was silence for a moment. "Have there been any issues while I was asleep?"

"Well," Jenny said, looking away from Amy, "There haven't been any more victims, as far as we know, but..."

"Some of her underlings," Cord picked up, "made a pretty big show of announcing your death to the Bazaar. They said anyone who was looking to follow your example would meet a worse fate."

"Then we've got some time to plan our rebuttal," Amy said.

"We can talk about that later," Cord said.

"Yeah," Jenny said. "You need a while to recover. Three of your left fingers are broken, so are two of your ribs, and that's not even mentioning all the bruises and cuts. Your transplant's still holding though, so that's good."

"Actually," Cord said, "that raises a good question. How the hell did you escape in the first place? And how does Angel think you're dead?"

"This can't leave the room," Amy said, "because I'm still not sure if I can trust him, but... Than saved me." She went on to explain the things he'd said, the escape route he'd prepared, and his last act of bringing her to the Homestead.

"You know," Cord said, "I'm not totally surprised. He used to be one of us... a long time ago. Must still be some good in him."

"Enough to save me."

"Speaking of saving," Jenny said, "Tucker's actually joined us. He's been asking about you. He's come by every day to see how you're doing."

"He's the trooper," Amy said, "plenty bloody himself, if I'm remembering right. I need to thank him. He kept..." That was a thought Amy couldn't bring herself to revisit. She could recall with ease any of the moments she spent with Angel, but that one with Necris; it was too much. She touched her shoulder, or rather tried. There was a difference of a few inches of where her

shoulder used to be and where it was now. She felt the bandage and its rough concavity, shuddered.

"That one," Jenny said, biting her bottom lip a little bit, "will take a while to heal."

"Once Angel's dealt with, he's next," Amy said.

"He may already be dead," Cord said, "No one's seen him since the fire."

"No he's alive," Amy said, "Than brought my knife to Angel as a gift from him. I wanted to take it back when I escaped."

"All in good time," Cord said. "For now, just get better. We'll keep you apprised and as soon as you're healthy, we'll be behind you."

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After a few days, Amy was walking around and doing light work. The mark on her face had also scarred over. Just as she'd thought, it was still clearly visible. For the first several days, people she spoke to tried to avoid looking at the mark, either holding un-breaking eye contact or not looking at her at all.

So Amy tried to avoid most of the infirmary. If the Harvesters couldn't look at it, she didn't want Angel's victims to have to see her. She didn't want her mark to serve as a reminder of

how she failed them. Amy was walking in the courtyard in the early morning, before most of the other Harvesters would even wake up, when Emily stopped her.

"Is there something you need?" Amy asked, turning her face from Emily.

"Kind of," Emily said. "I...I wanted to apologize."

"Okay," Amy said, still not looking at Emily "but I can't think of—"

"I was going to turn you into Angel when I first got here!" Emily blurted out.

"You what?"

"She first...took me...three years ago," Emily said. "Every few months, there'd be a little request. 'Leave a note here,' 'take this thing from him,' 'tell me where she goes,' but that was it. Then I woke up in that office with her. I didn't understand, I'd always done whatever she asked me to. When she told me what she was doing to me was because she didn't have you, how could I do anything but hate you?"

"What changed your mind?" Amy asked. "Why didn't you follow through?"

"Look at me," Emily said.

"But—"

"Please."

Amy turned and looked at Emily. Her eyes widened and she took a deep breath, but she didn't look away.

"I chose to help you," Emily said, "because I could tell you'd go through anything, even that—" she pointed to Amy's face, "—to stop her. You didn't have a real, a personal, reason, not like me or the others, but you still put yourself right in her sights. I couldn't let you stand there alone."

"I...thank you," Amy said. "We'll beat her."

Over the next hour, as the sun continued to rise and Harvesters started getting to work, Amy and Emily discussed what they knew of Angel. They didn't speak of their captivities, but rather about how she acted, reacted, the things she seemed to want, and the methods she employed to get them. Emily had a lot more time and experience with Angel, and Amy was more than happy to hear what she had to share. She had to know more. Their next plan couldn't turn out like the last. They were about to head back to the infirmary to eat when a man wearing a tattered sackcloth cloak shambled through the gates, supported by a slightly bent and rusted crutch. He made his way directly toward Amy.

"Tucker?" Amy asked. She could barely recognize him. A red handkerchief was tied around his head to serve as an eyepatch, the bend in the crutch forced him to hunch, and his left arm was tied in a rope sling. "God, I thought we were helping you?"

"I'm okay, mostly," Tucker said. He lifted the eyepatch to reveal his eye was undamaged. "Jenny's been like a dream. Seriously, she's amazing. My arm and leg are broken though, that's real." He slightly wiggled his left arm. "But the shit props are just props."

"But why?" Amy asked.

"Easy," Tucker said. He sat down on the bench next to Amy and Emily's, wincing as he bent his leg. "No one gives a fuck about the cripple beggars. I did though." Tucker tapped his temple with his pointer finger. "Sorta. They always know everything going on. I used to give them food for information. Figured I'd try it out myself. Good news and bad news."

"Bad news first," Amy said.

"Doesn't work like that this time." Tucker shook his head. "Good news is, no one notices the cripple in the Bazaar, even two of the fuckers who did the crippling. Bad news is the real shit though. Angel made her first ever public appearance in the Bazaar yesterday."

"No," Emily said. "She doesn't. She always went in secret, or sent someone else."

"Times have changed," Tucker said. He turned to Amy. "She was wearing your knife on a chain around her neck."

"Did she hurt anyone?" Amy asked.

Tucker shook his head. "No, she was basically just announcing her personal responsibility for your death, in case people had forgot. Said she beat you to death with her own two hands and...that she'd be accepting tribute if the Bazaar didn't want another incident like the fire."

"No one's in charge of the Bazaar," Amy said. "Who does she think is going to pay her?"

"Not pay," Tucker said, "She wants—"

"I know what she wants," Amy said.

"Right," Tucker looked down. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop them from taking you. I saw them, but—"

"You stopped..." Amy couldn't even complete the thought. "You saved me."

"If you say so," Tucker said.

"Now," Amy said, "what's she think is going to happen? There's no leadership to make a decision like she's asking for."

"That's the point," Emily said. "She'll be expecting a lot of different cowards to betray a lot of different people. She could double her broken in one day."

"And a show of dominance like that," Amy said, "could be all the motivation people like Victor need to step up and just offer themselves, save their own asses."

"She'll be at the Bazaar again in a week," Tucker said.

"Dead not long after," Amy said.

## Chapter 6 – Last One Out

Half bound with bandages and gauze, Amy addressed her allies, her friends. Cord, Jenny, Emily, Tucker, and a handful of other Harvesters gathered with her. With Tucker's news, they all knew what needed to happen. They just had to figure out how to get it done.

"We've got six days to prepare," Amy said. "We may never get a better chance."

"What're we preparing though?" Tucker asked. "I've seen y'all's ambush plans, and... they're not the best."

"Angel's after power, control," Amy said. "So I'm thinking we shake things up a bit. Give her less to seize and a harder time of getting it."



"I could send some teams to the hideouts we know of," Cord said. "We could set up outposts, make it harder for her to make plans herself. Granted we still don't know where the Reaper's base is."

"Still worth doing if we've got the people for it," Amy said. "But I had another idea in mind." She turned to Emily. "Are you much of a fighter?"

"Not exactly," Emily said. "I'm more of a salvager. So searching, climbing, running, those things."

"Well, that still fits the bill for my idea," Amy said. "If you'd be up for it."

"Why does this sound really dangerous?" Jenny asked.

"Because I want her to pretend to be me," Amy said. She lifted a duffle bag onto the table in the room and opened it. From inside, she removed her brown duster coat, Stetson hat, and leather boots.

Emily touched her own hair, a deeper red than Amy's. "The Red Ranger... what would you want me to do?"

"Not much, and nothing you wouldn't be comfortable with," Amy said. "Just go to the Bazaar, take some bounties from the board, and put a knife through Angel's poster."

"Assuming it's still there," Tucker said. "She may have had it taken down."

"That'd be even better," Emily said. "I'll put up a new one. Let her know she's not in charge."

"While that could certainly psyche her out," Cord said, "what are we planning to do about her appearance next week?"

"Post snipers all over," Tucker said nodding, "keeps bandit forts safe."

"That involves getting there first," Cord said. "She has her team do one sweep of the area and we're found out. She'll go underground again."

"I want Emily to show up to Angel's rally, dressed like me," Amy said. "I want Angel to run. The hideout I escaped from, only she and Than know about it. I bet that's where she'd go, where I'll be waiting."

"She wouldn't go there if she thinks you're back from the dead," Jenny said.

"Then Emily doesn't need to be Amy," Cord said. "She just needs to be the Red Ranger. She needs to be the memory of Amy."

"Let Angel know that the people don't forget their heroes," Emily said. Amy's heart swelled in her chest. No one had ever called her a hero before, not even the people in the Bazaar who gave her the name Red Ranger. Hero. She wanted to earn that title, that feeling.

"This plan can work," Amy said. "I'll do everything I can to make it work. That being said, we shouldn't totally commit to any plan just yet."

"She's right," Cord said. "We need a plan that's going to succeed, not just one that makes us all feel good."

"We'll meet again every day," Amy said. "Share what we've learned. Jenny will listen for rumors in the infirmary, Tucker will gather news at the Bazaar, and Emily will be the new Red Ranger."

"And me?" Cord asked.

"We've got a trap to set," Amy said.

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"No," Jenny said, "I think a little bandaging, something like that, would be exactly what she needs."

Amy, Jenny, and Emily met in the infirmary on the morning of the second day. Emily fit perfectly into Amy's leather boots, Stetson, and her long brown duster. She looked the part of a Ranger.

"How do you figure?" Amy asked.

"Well, you don't expect Angel to see Emily until the rally right?" Jenny asked.

"Yeah, so?"

"So," Jenny said, exaggerated, "that means any word of the new Red Ranger is going to reach Angel through word of mouth. If someone at the Bazaar tells someone, who tells a Reaper, who tells Angel, then a few bandages from us could make it back to Angel as a zombie ranger or something."

"I'm sold," Emily said. "Plus some loose facial bandages would help hide my face."

"Okay, I'm on board too," Amy said. She stood up, wincing slightly. "Alright, Cord'll be waiting for me in the courtyard soon. I'll see y'all tonight."

"Oh wait, hold on," Emily said. She reached into one of the duster's interior pockets and fished out a piece of paper. "Cord made it. Gave it to me last night."

KNOW HER FAILURES BY HER MARKED

ANGEL

A known coward of the Reapers Tribe, Angel is pathetic and pitiful even by Reaper standards. Unlike her ilk, she prefers to hide behind those stronger than herself and torture those who she captures for her. These survivors bear her mark, usually carved into the backs of their hands. She has also been known to leave this mark on hiding places she plans to cower in. Know her mark. Know it means she failed, that she only created a new enemy for herself.

WANTED: for the Torture of no less than 65, Abduction of no less than 90, murder of no less than 12, and the Assassination of the Red Ranger through the tactics of a coward.

Angel stands around 5' 4" with black hair and brown eyes. Like most Reapers, Angel tends to hide in the darkness by wearing black. She is considered protected by true terrors, and they are extremely dangerous. However, it has been noted that her combat skills are not particularly impressive. If alone, engage with caution. She is known to use traps, deception, and other cowardly means to avoid capture. She has been recently and frequently sighted in the company of the Reaper, Necris, and is believed to be the wild beast's handler.

Reward: Money, and more for a dead body. Why else would anyone pay the coward any mind?

"I'm not sure it's quite rude enough yet," Amy said. "She's only called a coward directly here four times."

"I could probably squeeze one more in," Emily said. "But my handwriting's not as neat as Cord's and he did the rest of it." They both laughed. They needed to. Something had to be light if they were to make it out of the darkness.

Jenny wrapped gauze around Emily's mouth like a face wrap, then saw her and Amy both out of the infirmary. Emily would go to the Bazaar and put on her show, then disappear into the city, speaking to no one. Tucker was already there and would gather as much as he could from the reactions of the people. Amy and Emily parted in the Courtyard for Amy to wait for Cord. She smiled and shook her head as she watched Emily leave. It was weird watching what looked like herself walk away.

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When Cord got to the Courtyard, Amy wrapped herself in a heavy traveler's cloak. She didn't need someone to recognize her. To that end, they chose to ignore the city itself, and followed the riverbank to Angel's hideout instead. Along the way, she pointed out the shipping containers where she'd killed Victor. They found what she assumed were his bones not far from the containers, picked mostly bare and broken open with the marrow totally cleaned out.

The hotel was on the very edge of the downtown area, and hadn't been completed prior to the Infection. Since then, the river had jumped its banks a bit and completely flooded the majority of the first floor, which once had simply overlooked the river bend.

"There, fifth window from the right," Amy said, pointing up the side of the building.

Cord whistled. "That's a hell of a drop."

"C'mon," Amy said, "let's double back a bit. If she's up there I don't want her to look out and see us walking in."

They put the river to their backs and took a slow route into the city and around the hotel to approach the street side entrance. Amy tried to walk to the side of Cord to hide her limp. She led him to an alley across the street from the entrance to the hotel. They waited for some time to see if anyone paid the building any mind. Passersby were rare though, as the hotel was on the edge of the downtown area in the first place, and the river flooding didn't make it any more popular. Amy could understand why Angel used it as a hideout.

When the street was clear and the area was quiet, they slipped out of the alley and into the lobby of the hotel. Shaped like an elongated donut, the room was divided in the center by a wall that reached all the way to the high ceiling. A desk wrapped around the wall, and as soon as they got inside, Amy pulled them down behind it. It was quiet on the street, but in the lobby, a steady groaning filled the air all around them. They peeked over the counter. The back half of the lobby had been built lower, with steps leading down to a sitting area. However, the river now came all the way up to the steps in the middle of the room. Bits of couch and lamp poked out of the brown water of the river. No less than two dozen zombies sloshed through the murky pool, occasionally tripping over completely submerged furniture and sending the surrounding zombies into a brief frenzy as they whipped around looking for their non-existent assailant.

"Your wounds...?" Cord whispered.

"New bandages," Amy said, "hopefully they won't smell me."

"Here's hoping," Cord whispered. "I don't see the stairwell."

"What about the elevators?" Amy asked.

Cord raised an eyebrow at her. "Neither them."

Amy nodded and crouched slowly around the wall, staying behind the desk to stay out of view of the zombies in the water, and anyone else that could be looking in from the streets. Rounding the wall, the desk stopped, and the room opened into another large sitting space, though not underwater. Cord tapped her shoulder and pointed to the center of the wall: two elevators, then across the room, a stairwell. She nodded and crossed the open space as quickly as she could. Once they had climbed two flights, she sat down against the wall, practically winded, and holding her side.

"Doing okay?" Cord asked.

"Just a little less than a hundred percent is all," Amy said. She wished that were true. She was beat from just the stairs. With each breath, she could feel the stitches in her back strain.

"I'll find a window and recon the street," Cord said. "Once you're back to a hundred, just let me know." He smiled and started quietly testing doors along the hallway.

She knew he was giving her an out, and she was grateful for it. Once he found an unlocked door and went into the room, she lifted the side of her shirt. She had half-expected the nearly black blood webs to recede once she'd gotten the transplant, but they were still as spread out as they'd ever been. The skin at the center of the web was a little inflamed, but Jenny had said that was to be expected, especially under stress. She allowed herself five minutes to rest before heading to Cord's room.

"Any news?" Amy asked.

"Little bit, actually," he said. "I can just see the edge of the Bazaar from here. With a higher vantage, we could likely see right to it."

"Then let's keep climbing."

Amy counted the floors as they climbed. She knew she'd jumped from the ninth row of windows from the ground, but that was from the outside and the first floor had high ceilings. She hadn't needed to worry though, as the door on the eighth floor landing bore Angel's mark. They drew their crossbows and listened intently at the door. When they were sure only silence waited for them, they pushed in.

"There," Amy said. She pointed to a spot on the wall nearby. The spot was beside a doorway. It was warped and the paper peeled. "Lantern was sitting there for a while."

"That the room?" Cord asked.

"Must be..." Amy said, looking down the hall, "and there's the elevators."

"Are those part of your trap too?"

"Clean up actually," Amy said. Cord looked at her quizzically. "I promise I'll tell you when it's over. This is...this is for me, okay?"

"Alright." Cord waited a moment then gestured to the door. "Shall we?"

Amy didn't know what she expected to find in the room. She knew what her time there had been, and could feel what it had done to her. When she pushed open the door and stepped inside though, she felt nothing more than she had before leaving the hallway. She smiled. Angel wasn't quite the monolithic terror she'd built herself up to be. Emily and Liam alike had both mentioned a deep sense of dread any time they were even near where Angel had broken them.



Though, now that she thought about it, Amy figured Emily might feel different now. At least, Amy hoped she would.

"I hear footsteps," Cord whispered. He closed the door slowly and drew his crossbow.

Amy drew hers as well, and they both put their sights on the door. Cord was right. Footsteps were echoing up the stairwell. She swore under her breath. They hadn't closed the door to the stairs. Whoever was coming didn't pause with the open door and even closed it. The footsteps continued into the hall and stopped right outside of the door. Then there was a knock on the door, four sharp raps, two then two. Amy knew who was on the other side.

"It's Than," Amy whispered. She tapped on the wall in the same pattern. The door opened and Than stepped inside, closing it behind him.

"You picked a good time for it," Than said. "She's meeting with a few other Reaper leaders now."

"Great," Cord said, "reinforcements."

"Down the road, maybe," Than said. "Unlikely actually, seeing as you're here. The other leaders think she's bitten off too much with her recent showing at the Bazaar."

"And a good show next week would be 'down the road,' yeah?" Amy asked.

"Bingo."

"Well, if the leaders are meeting," Cord asked, "what're you doing here?"

"I never go to the meetings." Than laughed. "And I'm rarely involved with their plans in the first place."

"Where are they meeting?" Amy asked.

"Headquarters, probably, in the sewers." Than shrugged. "It's where they met back when I actually went. But that was over two years ago."

"So she's normally here?" Amy asked.

"Yeah, she's pretty much turned this place into her exclusive residence," Than said. He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "She's taken up the suite at the end of the hall."

"And you?" Amy asked.

Than tilted his head back a bit. "I was coming to wait and tell her about the new Ranger who just rode into town." He chuckled. "It's a great plan by the way. I can't wait to see her reaction to the news. Who is it? Another Harvester? A merc?"

"A friend," Amy said.

"It's good you still don't trust me," Than said. "Eh, I'll figure it out."

"We should go," Cord said. "No idea when Angel could be back."

"Right," Amy agreed. "We got what we needed."

"When you leave, and when you come back," Than said, "use the maintenance entrance. It's on the riverside and connects to a smaller stairwell at the other end of the hall. She's never used it as far as I know."

She had to ask, had to get a real answer. "Why do you keep helping me? Really," Amy asked. "I don't buy that you don't want... her zealots turning on you. I doubt they'd even suspect you."

Than looked down. "You really want to know?" his voice was somber.

"I do," Amy said.

"Then kill her," Than said. He looked back up. "Maybe I'll tell you. Now get out of here. She could be back any time."

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Amy was happy to finally get back to the Homestead, and the infirmary, when they did. She wasn't sure how much longer she'd be able to feign like she wasn't in a pained exhaustion. The cold packs Jenny laid over her legs were what Amy was sure the rain in heaven felt like. She couldn't go out again the next day, she knew that. Not if she was going to be at her best to kill Angel. She didn't even resist like she normally would have when Jenny suggested changing her bandages. The gauze she unwound from Amy's back was a deep red. She'd pushed herself, but not enough for her stitches to give out, just enough for them to bleed.

"Guess you're still the 'Red Ranger,'" Tucker said with a laugh, hobbling into the infirmary on his crutch. "Emily's not too far behind."

Shortly after Emily arrived, they all discussed what they'd learned that day. Emily's debut at the Bazaar was taken as well as Amy had hoped. Tucker explained how her appearance in the morning was all anyone could talk about until the sun was going down, the way she'd driven a knife through Angel's old wanted poster and hung the new one, whether she was Amy risen from the dead, and how she didn't speak and just scanned the crowds with a 'smoky glare.' By the end of the day, the Red Ranger had been resurrected in the minds of the people.

Over the next few days, they continued their plan. Emily and Tucker gathered news from the Bazaar while Cord and other Harvesters set out to take over Angel's hideouts. Amy forced herself to stay at the Homestead. She could have gone with Cord, but would have slowed them

down. The Bazaar could have told her much, but she was a known entity, especially with Emily stirring everyone up and getting them talking. So she did what she could. She helped Jenny tend to patients in the Infirmary, and practiced with Emily what she would say to Angel at the rally.

The night before the rally, Amy, Cord, and Jenny sat up in the infirmary after Jenny changed Amy's bandages. They worked on polishing off the last bottle of Scotch Amy had found weeks prior. The crown it gave her was a little heavier than she'd expected, but she managed to keep her head relatively stable. Jenny, on the other hand, was quite a bit wobblier. Cord avoided all stability issues by sitting against the wall and resting his head.

"Do you remember," Amy asked Cord, "when we first met?"

"Yeah, we found that people window." He chuckled. "We used it to test your kidney months ago, and to find bits of shrapnel in your back when you came home from Angel."

"I didn't know about the shrapnel," Amy said.

"There was so much," Jenny slurred. "Like two dozen metal shards and flakes."

"You were gonna throw a knife at me," Cord said.

"Well you were pointing a crossbow at me," Amy said, pointing her splinted fingers at him. "Wait, do you still have that little thing?"

"Of course," he said. "Why?"

"Think we could hide it in a cast?" Amy held her splint-fingered hand up.

"I couldn't, but one of the doctors around here? Sure," Cord said.

It wasn't pretty, but a few hours later, one of the doctors had Cord's hand crossbow loaded and completely hidden away in a cast around Amy's left hand and arm. There was even a slot cut in so she could reload. As long as the very end of the cast was hidden, the fact it contained a weapon was impossible to see. With it complete, Amy and Cord separated for the

night as Jenny had fallen quite asleep. Amy said she'd be setting out early for the hotel, but didn't tell Cord that meant she was leaving that night. After a quick trip back into the infirmary for some supplies, she set out.

In the middle of the night, with no one around her, Amy could take her time. Cord could make it from the Homestead to the hotel in fifteen minutes if he ran, but the night walk took a little over an hour for Amy. The faintest light burned in one of the upper windows. Angel was home. Amy stayed low and crept around the hotel to the riverside. Behind a piece of broken patio table was the maintenance door Than had mentioned. It was unlocked. Amy slipped inside and stepped out into the lobby. She had something to take care of.

Just as they were days before, the zombies in the lobby kept mostly to the flooded portion of the room. She paid them no mind for the time being, but knew they'd be important soon. She crossed silently to the elevators and tested the doors. They opened with some effort and leverage, but opened. There was still a good bit of tension from somewhere trying to hold the doors closed. The elevator itself wasn't on the lobby floor, which was perfect for Amy's plan. Lighting a small candle inside the elevator shaft, she looked up to see the elevator appeared to be at the highest floor. All up the shaft were bits of rebar and scaffolding; the construction hadn't been finished.

She wedged the doors open with a simple metal rod scavenged from the wrecked furniture in the lobby, and tied her rope around the center of it. She uncoiled the rope all the way back to the maintenance door. Finally, she took out the supplies she'd gathered in the infirmary, all of her bloody bandages. She kept them in a tightly sealed bag, which she cut open and tossed into the open elevator shaft. The effect was nearly instantaneous as she retreated to the maintenance stairs. Zombies sloshed out of the flooded lower part of the lobby, pulling ragged breaths through their broken faces. They could smell a meal.

Amy let around a half dozen zombies spill into the shaft before she tugged the metal rod out of the door, sealing them inside. Then, she slowly climbed the stairwell up to the point she could see the eighth floor landing. There, watching the door, she waited, using the same head resting technique she'd used while waiting in Victor's shipping containers. With no clock or windows to see the sky, Amy relied on sounds and judgment to gauge the time. When she heard a door close, then another door close, she assumed Angel had left, gone down the main stairwell. Amy still waited what felt like another ten minutes before leaving the maintenance stairwell for the eighth floor.

First, she listened at the doors, and when she was sure she was alone, she wedged open the elevator doors. The sounds of zombies stumbling around and gnashing at each other barely made it up to her. Next, she found Angel's room. It was remarkably simple, a large bed, a dresser, and a desk covered with scattered papers under a window. Amy collected all of the papers into her bag without reading them. She'd have time for that later. Out the window, the Bazaar was visible. Even from this distance, she could see the gathered crowd. She took out a pair of binoculars and watched.

After some time, many black-clad figures, who had to be the Reapers, moved into the Bazaar, Angel at the front. They cleared a space and Angel stepped up. She addressed the crowd. Her movements were fluid and simple. If Amy hadn't known who she was, she'd have assumed a peaceful speech was being given. The people listening, though, were backing away ever so gradually. Angel made an expectant gesture and someone at the front of the gathered crowd stepped forward, leading another. As they moved toward Angel, the crowd behind them parted and Emily strode forward with what looked like dozens of Harvesters at her back. Emily pointed

right at Angel, and even though Amy couldn't hear what she was saying, she imagined it. They'd practiced so many times over the last week.

'Not one more,' Emily would say.

'Your Ranger is dead,' Angel would reply, 'by my own hands. Stand down, or join her...or you could join me.'

'Always the coward!' Emily turned to address the crowd as Amy watched. She pointed back at Angel. 'Fight your own battles! Your broken catch your prey! Your Zealots fight your enemies!'

'I fought your Ranger! She's dead!' Angel would yell. 'What hope do you have?'

'Heroes never die.'

The Reapers advanced on the crowd. The Harvesters moved in to engage with the Reapers. The rally became a battle in moments. People scattered into the city, giving Angel the perfect opportunity to slip away, but Amy saw her leave and head straight for the hotel. She was hurt, somehow, bleeding for sure. With Angel gone, she scanned the fray for her friends. Emily was fighting a Reaper off surprisingly well, Cord stepped in front of someone to block the downswing of a knife, and while she couldn't find him, she assumed Tucker was doing whatever he could, likely breaking a Reaper's skull with his crutch.

Amy put her binoculars away and went to the emptied room, where she'd spent four days, to wait a few minutes. It wasn't long before she heard Angel's footfalls in the stairwell. As Amy expected, she went to her own room.

"Than?" Angel called into the hallway. She'd discovered her missing papers.

Amy stepped out of the room and stared down the hall. Angel looked right at her with a look of sheer disbelief on her face. She was still wearing Amy's knife around her neck on a

chain. Angel cradled her right hand in her left, both drenched in still-flowing blood. Amy lowered her hood with her free hand to make sure Angel could see her, see her face.

"He's not here," Amy said.

"I saw you float. For minutes," Angel said. "You should be dead."

"You're right," Amy said, "and have been about a lot of things."

"Really?" Angel asked, a smile finding its way to her lips.

"Yeah, but it's not gonna matter," Amy said. "You're done."

"Oh." Angel's smile disappeared. "I thought you'd changed."

"I have. I brought my best. It's why I'm here now and not dead in the Bazaar," Amy said.

"But I'll find my way there soon enough."

"When you lead me in by a chain around my neck?" Angel asked. "So they can praise you as their hero? The Red Ranger who made everything all better by beating the mean, bad Angel? Bringing me in alive for the bounty and because it's 'the right thing to do?' Please."

"No." Amy shook her head. "I'm not taking you anywhere. No one needs to remember you ever again." She pointed her cast at Angel and fired. The bolt soared out and struck Angel's leg, stopping after passing halfway through her calf.

Angel crumpled to the ground with a wail of pain as Amy took her time loading a second shot into the small slot cut through the cast. Angel tried to move her leg, but instantly screamed again from the pain. Amy finished loading, then aimed and fired, twice more. She pinned one of Angel's hands to the floor, and speared her other calf as well. Angel screamed again at the hits, but pulled her last wail into what could barely be called a laugh.

"Can't just kill me can you?" Angel said.

"Do you seriously think you deserve it?" Amy asked.



"It doesn't matter what I think," Angel said between sharp breaths. "You're in control here, so you're the one who decides who deserves what."

"Like I said," Amy said, "you're right about a lot."

"Boast to me all you want," Angel said, "but we both know you're going to drag my body out of here, toss it to the raving crowd, and then...just feed on them, what they're giving you."

"I told you," Amy said, stepping past Angel and grabbing her by the ankle. She dragged Angel until the bolt in her hand kept her still, then pulled her until it couldn't anymore. She pulled Angel's bleeding body all the way to the elevators. "No one needs to remember you."

"You will!" Angel screamed, her face pale. "You'll always remember me, what I did, what I did to you. You'll never forget me."

"I know," Amy said. "That's why I'm doing this. Eye for an eye." Amy lugged Angel's lower body into the elevator shaft and watched her flounder with her injured hands, trying not to fall. Amy took her knife and the chain it was on from Angel's neck and stepped back a few feet, out of her reach. She didn't need to watch Angel fall to the bottom, striking bits of rebar on the way down. She just needed to hear the zombies begin to devour her.

Amy took her time heading down the maintenance stairs. She paused for a moment at the door to the lobby and listened. It seemed quiet, so she peeked out. Zombies surrounded the elevator doors, but moved little. The ones inside were done eating, quiet. She left through the maintenance exit and made her way to the Bazaar. By the time she made it at her slow pace, the battle was over. The dead in the streets wore black and white, but Harvesters were still moving around, Cord included. She made eye contact with him and simply nodded. The job was done.

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Over the next few days, the city was in flux. The Harvesters were working at full capacity treating the wounded from the battle and questioning the Reapers who had taken part. The Reapers themselves stayed busy as well. As much as they had apparently disagreed with Angel's attempted power grab, they didn't take the disappearance and the suspected murder of one of their own lightly. Many of them took to looming over the Bazaar on a daily basis, simply as a reminder that there were more of them than just Angel.

Emily took Angel's broken, or the interested ones at least, under her wing. With her experience with recovering from Angel's various wounds, she couldn't sit idly by now that the threat was gone. Many still needed help, and plenty still blamed Amy as Emily had before meeting her. Emily sought to help heal all their wounds.

Amy tried to stay out of the spotlight through it all. For a few days, she'd even still been believed dead by most people. Once she was spotted in the Bazaar though, her 'resurrection' became common knowledge, though the accuracy of most versions was far from the truth, many involving her having become a zombie to kill Angel. When most of her injuries had healed, she took up her Stetson and duster again. She was too restless without a job to do, and bounty hunting filled the days. In no time, the Red Ranger was back. She was returning to the Homestead from a hunt when she saw Cord sitting in the courtyard.

"Good to see the duster still fits," Cord said.

"Still need to get back in shape," Amy said. "Feels a little loose."

"Eh, all in good time." The two sat for a moment in silence watching the sun slip behind the river and throw shadows at the city.

"How're the hornets?" Amy asked. "The queen's dead. Are the drones still stinging?"

"They aren't pollinating flowers."

"Shit."

"It's not that bad," Cord said. "Definitely better than when you first kicked the nest."

"And...Necris?" Amy asked.

"We haven't seen him since the fire," Cord said. "Tucker's heard rumors though. Apparently he didn't take news of her death well."

"Right back to work then." Amy said.

"Amy, really, you just—" Cord began. He looked at Amy. She was just smiling at him.

"In good time then," he said, "in good time."

## VITA

Cole Connelly was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and completed his B.A. in English at Louisiana State University. He has worked as a pharmacy clerk, art gallery assistant, quality assurance tester and team lead for Electronic Arts, tech company chief blogger/content creator, and marriage officiant. He lives and works in Baton Rouge.