

SERAPHINA WILDEROSE



**FATED
SOULMATES**

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS PARANORMAL ROMANCE

== FATED LOVE SERIES - 1 ==

FATED SOULMATES

Enemies to Lovers

Fated Soulmates

Paranormal Romance

Fated Love Series

Book #1

Seraphina Wilderose

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Chapter 1: Ordinary Origins

Waking up to your mom screaming at your brother is one of the worst ways to start the day. Don't get me wrong, like every child, I immensely enjoy my brother *being* scolded by our parents, especially seeing as he's sometimes a pain in my butt. But I don't want to be woken up by it, especially after a restless night.

Mom wasn't exactly screaming in his face—she would never scream at any of us. I think I've only ever heard her screaming once. It was afternoon, and she and Dad both thought all the kids were at school. I was fourteen, but the memory still haunts me to this day.

I got out of bed and headed downstairs for some cereal before I got ready for work, but just as soon as my bare feet touched the ground, I was hit with a vision.

A house in flames, and the cry of a baby in the distance. I couldn't see it, but I could feel that several people were, for some reason, after the baby.

I sat on the floor, catching my breath, while tingles spread all over my face and arms. There was a time when these visions came with a bad headache, but thankfully, that has since gotten better. Great, because I cannot deal with a headache this morning. These days, it just felt as if my breath was taken away all at once, and I got these funny tingles that made the bridge of my nose feel odd.

A house in flames and a crying baby? What the hell could that mean, anyway? Usually, I got useful visions. Like if something was going to happen to one of my family

members or friends. But on occasion, I got these much more cryptic ones. They made no sense, and I think whoever is in charge of sending Amari visions just likes to mess with her once in a while. Ha, ha, not funny, dude.

I got to my feet, my face still scrunched up and a light sweat sheening my face as I descended the staircase to the sitting room where my dad and little brothers were getting ready for their road trip.

“So, that’s what Mom was yelling about,” I remarked by way of greeting as I gave everything and everyone in the sitting room a cursory once-over while I kept heading toward the kitchen.

“Good morning, Amari, and no, I was not yelling,” my mother responded. She looked like the cartoon figure of a wise tribal woman who liked to be silly. Her hair had turned white prematurely, but she had that playful look about her. Mom only wore flowery dresses and blouses—she wore more dresses than skirts—and she seldom wore pants.

“I could hear you from up there.”

“That’s because you have great hearing, dear,” my father said as he stopped what he was doing to come give me a good morning kiss and hug. I quickened my pace to the kitchen. I felt yucky because of the sweat and didn’t want anyone touching me right now. But it was futile. I couldn’t escape him for long, even though he was six inches shorter than I was and I easily outpaced him.

Milky white skin, olive green eyes, and a head of blonde hair that he regularly shaved bald. The only facial hair on my father is his rather elaborate mustache. His wife says it looked distinguished. I think it looks like a cartoon drawing on his face, but he isn't married to me, so I have no say in it. It is odd though, when his wife's stark white hair reaches her waist, and his curling mustache nearly touches his cheekbones.

Dad cornered me in the kitchen, and I didn't bother protesting as he hugged me, his head only coming up to my chest. He rose on his toes, and I bent my head for his kiss.

"Good morning, honey. Ugh, sweat. Vision?"

"Yeah," I replied as my heart filled with warmth, and I filled my bowl with sugary cereal. For all my internal protesting, I loved the hugs and kisses.

All of my family appeared in the kitchen at the mention of the word, "vision."

My brothers rushed in. JT, my youngest brother, leaped chairs to be the first to get to me. Paris came after, the image of cool, collected calm. His blonde hair was tussled, and he was crisply dressed. Paris never showed himself to the public without being well presented. The public included us, and his family. A gentleman through and through, Dad boasted of him often.

On the other hand, I regularly walked around the house in the smallest tops and shortest shorts, sometimes even in panties. All of my family has seen me wholly or partly in the nude on several occasions, even Paris, as much as

he tried to avoid such “ignoble occurrences.” That’s what he called them.

My parents were my biggest victims, seeing as they regularly visited our rooms to check on us.

“You know you’re an adult now, and we have windows. Someone could see you,” Mom would say gently whenever I allowed her into my room while unclad.

“What’s there to see?” I would ask in return, not bothering to put clothes on. Then I would touch my chest. “It’s quite flat anyway,” I would then point out to her. “Now if it were you parading around naked, that’s a sight the neighbors would be delighted to see.”

“Don’t be profane. I am your mother.” But it is the truth. My mother’s back pains were not because she gardened or did a lot of strenuous work, it was because each of her honkers was bigger than her head. At 5’8”, her breasts were a very prominent feature.

“What did you see?” JT asked tactlessly.

But that was JT—he had few social graces and was just overall different. A quiet, shy boy, he was unbearably cute with his round eyes and round cheeks, and overall chubbiness. Ten years my younger, he was, however, very intelligent and was a repository of knowledge, both recent and ancient. He walked around with a posse of girls, not because he noticed them the way any normal fifteen-year-old would, but because they just liked how he looked and his quirky behavior. Also, during the few times he had social energy to expend, my baby brother was a rib cracker.

This, of course, pissed off some other boys, and they took every opportunity they had to bully him, which led to me teaching him how to brawl and Paris teaching him “the more refined and distinguished forms of combat.” The plan had a flaw, however, and it was not that JT couldn’t be taught to fight. No, the problem was that JT never thought of what he’d learned when he needed to. Just as he was to most everything else in the world, he was oblivious to the danger that bullies presented.

I told them the vision and JT immediately began walking back to the sitting room. A burning house and a baby meant nothing to him, and his interest had quickly waned.

“It’s one of those,” Paris said out loud. Even in his speech, he was refined. He speaks like a typewriter writes, in measured bits, evenly spaced out.

Over time, we realized we couldn’t decipher the more cryptic visions, so we stopped trying. Mom brought out the cinnamon and coffee as she set about making me her “Post Vision Breakfast.”

Milky coffee with a tinge of cinnamon, ham and chicken sandwiches with sprinkles of cinnamon, and a glass of freshly mixed pineapple juice. The visions started as a child, and Mom eventually figured out that cinnamon helped me calm down better.

Me? I like a high dose of sugar.

Mom took the bowl of cereal away, putting the coffee in my hands instead, while she was finishing with the sandwich and Dad was making the juice. He paused,

cocked his head, and added more concentrate and water into the jug.

“JT, come have this,” Mom called out in her tiny, thrillingly high voice.

Paris moved to the conjoined dining area, bringing out cups for the juice Dad was making for the whole family. His movements were conserved. He used the least number of movements possible to get things done. He would rather turn around on a spot and turn back like some parading toy soldier than take three steps to and fro.

“Take a seat, JT,” Paris said when Mom handed him my bowl of cereal.

“I was eating that, though,” I complained.

“Too much sugar is not good for you,” Mom responded.

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Drink your coffee,” Mom ordered.

I looked at my father for support, but he just shrugged.

“Drink your coffee,” he repeated.

“Of course, you’ll side with her.”

“The cinnamon works though, doesn’t it?” JT asked as he took a seat opposite Paris and set the bowl in front of him.

No sooner had he touched the spoon to his mouth than I gasped as another vision took me.

JT was lying on the ground, his cute face bloodied and battered while sneakers and boots kept stomping on him.

And then an angry roar, a snarl, and a midnight black beast pounced. Screams followed.

And I was back in the real world, panting and gasping for breath as my body started sweating.

I opened my eyes to see my family's concerned faces. Dad pushed a glass of water into my hand, and my mother came round and started rubbing my back so I could breathe better. JT sat there, the spoon hanging from his mouth, while Paris just watched everything coolly. It wasn't as though there was anything they could do anyway.

When I collected myself, I stared at JT in horror. Something bad was going to happen to my little brother. Mom and Dad followed my gaze.

"Oh no," Mom said, her voice shocked.

It would be better if the vision had been about anyone else. They could look out for themselves. Not JT.

"The trip's canceled, isn't it?" JT asked. He understood that he was the subject of this vision, but he didn't register the danger.

"Two in one day. Has that ever happened before, Mom?" Paris asked.

"No," Dad and I replied simultaneously. Mom was still in shock over JT being in the vision.

Chapter 2: Awakening Powers

What did you see?” JT asked.

“Let her catch her breath,” Mom scolded. “She’s in pain.”

If only she knew. For the last three months—ever since my last birthday—my visions had increased in daily frequency, and it got more intense as the days went by. Just last week, I had three visions consecutively. I had also been consuming sugar like crazy.

All three had been about my co-workers, and all of them had come to pass in the following days.

Jenna walked into my station after the second one, and I was hanging my head, trying to catch my breath. “Running a little ragged there, Amari?” she’d quipped.

“Why don’t you go run your mouth to someone else?” I replied. Jenna was one of the most annoying people I worked with. She was always sticking her nose where no one wanted it, especially at my station, where I mixed drinks for our patrons.

I worked at one of the fanciest bars in District Seventeen of Daruskov. It was mostly frequented by top earners and people who hung around them. So, on a regular day, I served the children, wives, girlfriends, boyfriends, and husbands of government agents, senators, movie stars, and popular musicians.

I worked as the cocktail waitress at night when the bar was full. I was given the shift because I was just that damned good at what I do. Several times, my bosses had

been forced to increase my pay, incentives, and benefits just so I wouldn't be tempted to take the offer to work privately for a star. So, I earned a lot. I also learned a lot of tips.

But every time Drea Mindara, a sensational sixth-generation soft jazz musician, or Madame Trace sighed after tasting their drink and asked, "Amari, my dear, what's it going to take for you to dump this place and come work for me? I have a house full of alcoholics who like to throw parties often, so you'll always have something to do. And you can keep coming from home." I thought of Jenna and seriously considered taking the job.

But my boss would swoop in and literally steer me back to my station with a, "Whatever you want, I'll give you, Amari. Just stay with me, darling."

"First, get your hands off me," I would reply. I don't like being touched like that.

Madame Trace would watch me leave and wink. I suspected she knew I was not going to come to work for her, but she was helping me get more money from my boss. Ms. Mindara would just laugh. When I brought her second cup—she never drank from a cup twice—she would whisper, "The drinks are overpriced, anyways. That fleece might as well pay you handsomely for helping him rob us."

Jenna knew I wouldn't take her crap, so I wondered why she tried. I think she was just jealous because I was more popular than she was with the boss and the customers,

and I made almost four times her pay. To top it off, I regularly got gifts from our patrons. I was just that good at what I did.

“Your little mind tricks don’t work on me, Amari. I don’t know how you do it, but I’m on to you. Nobody makes drinks that good, and one day, I’ll find out your secret,” she replied and stalked off.

“You won’t even be here in three days,” I whispered what I had seen in my vision.

Two days later, Jenna was fired and arrested for skimming off the profits. Her thefts had gone up into the hundreds of thousands over the years.

Yeah, I had mundane visions like that too. Most of my visions until recently were mundane.

Jenna’s words did make me wonder, though—are my drinks just that good, or was there something else going on? I had people eating out of my palms, and that was just odd. But what other explanation was there?

By the time I finished Mom’s cinnamon-laden meal, I felt much better, if a little drowsy. I would still argue any day that sugar was best for me.

Although Jenna had distrusted me and was mean the whole time, I still went to see her in jail before heading to work that evening.

When I arrived at the holding prison where they put people before their cases were conclusively decided, I showed my identity band to the guard droids at the gate, and they buzzed me in. At the front desk, I started my

business, and the greeter droid scanned for Jenna Coyl. A temporary pass was imprinted into my identity band, and a bot no more than three feet high began leading me to Jenna.

That's right, we lived in a world run by bots and watched by a million eyes. You got used to it, though, especially if you were born into the world my generation and younger were. My father, on the other hand, still carried one of those old chip cards that had your information on it. These days, babies are issued identity bands as soon as they're born. Just scan it anywhere, and your identity could be verified, you could pay for stuff, or do anything else. Without it, you were a non-citizen, and was a jail cell for you, if you were lucky.

The bot led me to a partitioned area where Jenna was waiting on the other end. She scowled when she saw me.

“Come to gloat, Amari?”

“I came to see how you were doing. But I see prison has done nothing to mellow you out.” I may be kind, but I wouldn't be spoken to in such a manner. I don't tolerate meanness from anyone.

“As you can see, I'm doing just fine. You can go report to Kain now.”

“Kain?” Kain was our boss. “Kain didn't send me here. I came on my own.”

“What for?” She asked puzzled

“I told you, to check up on you,” I replied frankly.

“Why? I’m going to prison for a long time, that’s for sure. Don’t tell me you intend to do this till I’m out?”

“Of course, not.” I didn’t like lying.

“So, why are you here?” She leaned forward, dislike for me very obvious in her eyes.

“Why don’t you like me, Jenna? I never did anything to you.”

“No, you didn’t, but you have everyone eating out of your hand, and no one else can see what is very clear to me.” She laughed a bitter laugh. “You know, you and I should be sitting on this side together. That’s even if this is where they lock up your kind.”

“What do you mean, my kind?”

“Don’t play coy with me, Miss. I’ve seen people who were mean as sharks just become putty in your hands. Kain is a good example. We both know what you are, and how the government doesn’t know is what I just can’t figure out.”

My heart was racing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” There were cameras everywhere. This conversation would be recorded. What if someone decided to pick me up because of Jenna’s hatred? Coming to see her was a bad idea. She just wanted me in prison with her.

“Of course, you do. You know, it’s quite lucky for you that I was caught, because I was bent on finding out what you are before reporting you to the authorities. I’ve seen what

they do to freaks like you. It's not pretty, but I love it. That's what you deserve."

Angry, I met Jenna's eyes. "That's not true, and you'll stop talking about this right now!" I said forcefully.

Immediately, she became placid and smiled. "Of course, I will stop talking about it because it's not true," she said and just sat there gazing at me expectantly.

I was freaked out. What just happened? What was going on with Jenna?

"Jenna? Are you ok?" I asked tentatively.

"Yes," she replied in that same tone. "I'm very well. Thank you for coming to see me."

I bolted. I just got up from my seat and power walked out of the prison. I was panicking as I flashed my band at the gate and exited the prison. I didn't know I was holding my breath until I released it.

I stepped into my car, closed the door, and was immediately gripped by a vision—this one so intense that I cried out a little.

A pair of green eyes stared into my head. The gaze was so intense that I physically shrunk back from it. A hand reached out, and I had a premonition that if that hand touched me, something terrible would happen.

I gasped out loud as I came out of the vision. I was sweating through my clothes, and it took a while before my breath could return to normal.

I was aware that the cameras would be watching me. I just hoped that they wouldn't decide to investigate me.

I quickly drove out and called Kain.

"Hey, how's my favorite cocktail waitress?" he said without cheer.

"Not very good, I admit. I won't be able to come in today."

"You know how many people won't drink simply because you're not in here? Unless you're dying, you best get your butt here," he said and hung up.

I sighed. Jenna was right. Kain didn't care about me. But I could always convince him in person. I turned the car toward Desert Rose, Kain's bar.

I entered through the staff entrance at the back and went straight to Kain's office.

The system showed me walking up to his door, so he let me in.

I met Kain's eyes immediately. "Shut the bar down for the rest of the day."

"Are you crazy?" he replied and looked away.

I sighed. So, what was that with Jenna? Or had she been fooling me?

"What did you come here for, Amari? Besides that ridiculous joke."

"I don't feel good today, Kain."

"You're standing here, aren't you?"

“Yes, but I do—ah forget it. I’m going home. You can fire me if you want.” I turned around and started leaving.

“You think I won’t do it?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass, Kain.” I turned back to him, and our eyes met. What I wanted more than anything was for him to just shut the hell up and let me go home. If people wouldn’t drink, would it kill them to close for the rest of the day? The annoyance I felt at his stubbornness burned in my eyes.

“What do you want, Amari?” he asked calmly.

“I told you. I’m going home. You can go fuck yourself.”

My eyes went wide when he started unzipping his pants.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Chapter 3: Sibling Peril

Fucking myself.”

“I didn’t mean that literally. And why would you even—”
He was wearing the same dopey smile that Jenna was wearing earlier. I was beginning to get very freaked out by this day.

“I’ll do whatever you say, Amari.”

“Is this a prank?”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Just close the bar for today. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

I rushed out of the bar the same way I came, but before I left, I stopped at the confectionery near Desert Rose and bought two slices of cake. Back in my car, I wolfed them down and immediately started feeling better. Much calmer, I started the car and headed in the direction of home as disgruntled patrons were leaving Desert Rose. Kain had closed down for the day.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked myself.

I barely noticed the people or the scene around me as I drove. I just wanted to get home and figure out what was going on.

Because my parents are administrative staff, we lived in the quieter parts of District Seventeen. As I got closer to home, the number of people moving about reduced. Most people were either walking their pets, leaving the district, or returning. But a few children were about, flying toy copters or playing some sport or the other in

their parents' yards. Only a few people were milling about. I scanned the sky for one of JT's drones and found none. He was probably engrossed in a book in his room or building something.

I drove past a group of boys who were clustered in a back alley between two family restaurants. I paid them no attention, but when a cherry red toy jet came flying out of the alley, I hit the brakes and turned around. That was JT's jet.

That was a traffic infraction, but I didn't care. Something was going on. A group of boys were looking at something on the ground, and the memory of today's second vision came. I silently hoped it was not happening already.

I jumped out of my car and called out, "Hey! What are you boys doing there?"

As a group, they turned around. One of them, probably their leader, replied, "That's none of your business, lady. It's men's business."

I moved closer and gasped. JT was on the ground, beaten badly, with one eye swollen shut. Another boy held a knife in his hand and was waving it in his face.

"We'll see how cute the girls find you after this. I'm going to open your face up and slit your nose, JT."

"You will do no such thing!" I screamed. I looked around and saw no one. Damn, these quiet streets. Not even a patrol bot was nearby.

"Look, if it isn't JT's sister, the bag of bones. Go away lady, or you'll join your pathetic brother here," he

replied, then turned his attention to my brother.

“Since girls won’t talk to us because of you. We’ll just have your sister instead. Don’t worry, I’ll leave you with one eye so you can see how a real man treats a woman.”

These boys were seventeen to nineteen, and they were bullying a kid because enough girls weren’t paying them attention. My blood boiled and I moved closer, the small chains attached to my pants around my waist jangling with each of my steps.

“Amari, no,” JT pleaded. He knew that the look in my eyes meant I was about to enter rampage mode. I unhooked one of the chains and started swinging it softly from side to side.

“Lay your hands on my brother again, and I’ll show you what women do with boys like you.”

In response, he punched JT in the nose. The bone broke, and blood squirted. They were ruining his perfect face. My blood started boiling, and I felt a calm descend over me.

I could hear all their heartbeats. They all felt confident in the dusk, and JT was fearful. I could even smell them—the pheromones the bullies were releasing, and JT’s fear. My eyes narrowed down on the one with the knife, locking him in my sight.

“You will get your hands off my brother,” I said, but he wasn’t looking at me.

“Get her,” he said.

Although I could fight, five boys were too much for me, and they eventually overwhelmed me. One took my chain and whacked me with it.

He dragged JT up and pushed him against a wall. “Now, bitch, we’ll do your brother in and then do you. What do you think of that?”

His leering sneer sent me off the edge. I roared and lunged for him. The grip of the boy holding me slipped, and I swiped at his face. With surprising force, I pushed him off JT, the knife dropping from his hands. He stumbled and grabbed his face where I’d just hit him. I yelled again, snarled, and pounced on his face, scratching it with my nails.

Blood burst forward as my nails raked—no, that wasn’t the right word—I had gored him. Four deep bleeding lines ran over his face, ruining it forever. All of his nose was sheared off and one eye was missing. His remaining eye showed me fear like I’ve never before seen. He grabbed his face and screamed while stumbling backward from me.

“Holy shit! What is that?”

With a snarl in my throat, I turned to the remaining boys to see what they were freaked out about.

“Oh my God, what the hell are you, bitch?”

Me. They’re talking about me. Were they freaked out by how much damage I’d done to their friend?

“Kill it!” one of them yelled as he backtracked out of the alley.

“With what? See how big she is? I’m out of here.”

But I was not done teaching them a lesson. I roared one last time and leaped for them.

One of them swung the baton they must have used on JT, but I swiped it aside. I could hear them move and breathe, and evading their attacks was easy.

A powerful urge overtook me, and I bit down on the arm of the boy who’d taken my chain from me. His bones crumbled like paper-mâché. What?

His screams pierced my ears, and our eyes met. Reflected in his eyes was a strange face.

The face of a beast, dripping with his blood. My eyes widened and I screamed in fear.

He’s a shifter!

But he was beneath me and still very human. That must mean... That must mean... Shit!

I’m a shifter! I’m a fucking freak! Fuck!

I bounded out of the alley and immediately bounded back, scaring the remaining boys. They were too paralyzed with fear to move. I looked at JT. He was also fearful, especially when I turned the full force of my gaze on him, but he wasn’t shrinking away from me.

I wanted to ask him for help, but I wasn’t sure I could speak. I had shifted into a panther. A panther! What the hell was I supposed to do?

Shreds of my clothing littered the ground while some still hung from my frame.

The two boys I'd mauled were bleeding out, and I could smell urine and something else. Several of them had soiled themselves.

JT took tentative steps toward me, and I stepped back. He stopped. *What if I hurt him?* I asked myself.

As if reading my mind, he replied, "You're not going to hurt me, Amari."

I let him approach and touch my black fur. He hummed our mother's lullaby, and it helped me calm down. The bone-popping noises that I'd missed the first time around soon filled the alleyway, joining the whimpers of the scared, the cries of the injured, the moans of the dying, and the song of the only one of us who somehow managed to remain calm.

When I returned to my human body, I was scantily clad, my clothes were left in shreds hanging from my body. It barely covered anything.

JT and I rushed to my car, toy jet and controller in hand, and I drove home. Once parked in the garage, we sat there for several minutes. I was shaking, and JT just kept humming until I stopped.

"Sorry, you have to see me like this." I gestured to my almost naked body.

JT cocked his head, making the blood from his nose drip sideways.

"Right," I replied.

JT turned his attention to his jet, inspecting it for damages. *Whenever you're ready to go inside.* That's

what he was saying.

Eventually, I was ready.

“Come on, JT.”

He turned the jet off and got out of the car.

“Paris will not be pleased.” I laughed.

“Yeah, another indecent occurrence. Sorry, Paris.”

Mom gasped and covered her mouth when we both walked in. One of us was bloodied, and the other was wearing scraps.

“Honey?” she called to her husband, her voice shaking and teary. “Honey? Come here, please. JT and Amari are hurt.”

Dad arrived very quickly.

“Oh my God!” he said when he saw us. “What happened?” He immediately deduced it. “Did it happen already?”

JT nodded. “So, we don’t have to cancel the road trip anymore.”

“That’s what you’re thinking about?” I asked. JT just shrugged. Life and its events were a one-direction street for him.

“The panther?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, it was there,” I replied instinctively as Mom covered me with a quilt and went in search of the first aid kit to tend to JT. It registered with me then that they had known about the panther before I even mentioned it.

“Did it do,” Dad paused and looked us both over, “this?”

“No,” I replied. “Well, my clothes are because of the panther, but not JT. It was some boys from school.”

“What? Why?” Mom asked as she returned, Paris in tow.

“What happened?” Paris’s voice had turned dark. His fists clenched at seeing JT injured.

“Something about girls. Terrence has this girl he likes that’s my friend. He said I should stop hanging out with her, but...” He shrugged.

“You didn’t,” Paris stated.

“Why should I do what he says? Because he likes a girl that means she can’t do what she wants anymore?” JT sounded angry.

“I didn’t mean that, JT. My apologies.”

“It’s fine. Ow!” he exclaimed as Mom started dabbing his injuries.

“I need hot water.” Paris went to the kitchen to boil it. We used minimal automated bots in the house. My parents were old-fashioned like that.

I took a deep breath and asked what I’d been meaning to ask since Dad mentioned the panther.

I wanted to confirm my suspicions, so I threw the question out. “How did you know it was a panther?”

Mom began intently attending to JT’s injury, and Dad started looking around the room awkwardly.

“Oh God, you knew? You knew all this time!” I stood up in anger, making the quilt fall off me just as Paris entered the room.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. Cover up, Amari,” he said and averted his eyes.

“Shut up! These two knew I was a freak and said nothing!” I almost yelled at him. Shock registered on his face, we are not a yelling family. I could feel some of the things I felt earlier rising within me.

“You’re not a freak, Amari. You’re just different, but you’re our child.” Dad said.

I was adopted. All three of us kids were. “How did they let you adopt a freak baby? They should have known.”

Mom looked at Dad and sighed. An understanding passed between them.

“We didn’t exactly adopt you in the conventional sense,” Mom began.

“We found you as a baby, only a few days old really. We used to work in damage assessment. Please know that we never hunted or fought Paranormals, we just assessed the damage done at the places where they chose to fight. That’s where we found you. A group of shifters had been on the run for several months, and they were finally cornered. They fought bravely, but eventually, they were overwhelmed.

“We were next on the scene after such fights. Sometimes it took days, sometimes we were deployed the very next hour. This time we were there about five hours after the

fight. The wreckage was a lot—bodies torn apart by fangs and claws, and bodies riddled with bullet holes. Both sides had taken casualties.

“It was in that wreckage that we found you. You were just a newborn. Luckily, you were asleep, probably having cried yourself to exhaustion, and weren’t making any noise because we had to hide you from the bots with us. After that, we couldn’t do it anymore, so we requested to be moved to another department.

“We had been partners for five years, but your father had just worked up the courage to ask me out six months before that.” She smiled at the memory. “We got married and had the adoption papers arranged without putting you through the system first.” Mom sighed as she applied one last Band-Aid to JT’s injuries. He looked like a wrapped-up corpse with all the bandages.

“About the panther, we found you near a dead one. Your birth father. He died protecting you.”

“So, that’s the reason for the cinnamon,” JT blurted out.

“Yes, JT. That’s why.”

“Wait, what reason?” I asked.

Everything Mom had just said was seriously heavy. I didn’t even know how to start to process it. I decided to do that later. For now, I’ll keep up my usual front.

“Cinnamon, for some reason, suppresses the powers of paranormal people. It makes it less detectable and less strong.”

“Sugar, on the other hand, makes it stronger. The thing about cinnamon is not common knowledge, but Unity knows about sugar. So, a lot of products have more glucose, sucrose, or fructose than needed,” Dad added.

“Oh.” That was all I could say. “You took me in despite knowing the risks?”

“We decided to raise you. Things like risks were not relevant.”

I didn’t know how to feel about this. They would have been jailed—or worse, executed—if I had been found out. Dad and Mom worked for the Unity Party, the government, and for 25 years, they had been lying to the government, because of me.

Oh crap, those boys will tell someone about me.

A maelstrom of emotions swirled through me. For twenty-five years these people have loved me and protected me. Having visions qualified as paranormal powers, but they’d just ignored the rules and kept feeding me cinnamon, knowing that there was a day that I might be exposed.

Everything made sense now, why people were so willing to do anything for me? I had been using my powers without knowing what I was doing.

There was no way I could stay here now. They would be investigated, and my parents and both my brothers couldn’t deny knowledge of my abilities. After all, even though I had never shifted, I constantly had visions. They knew that.

They didn't know about my mind control though.

I felt tears coming, but this was no time for tears. The government moved fast, and one of those boys would have said something by now. A report had probably already been made, and the hunt for me would start soon.

I rested my head on Mom's shoulder and stretched out my hand for a hug, signaling Paris and JT to join in. When we all were hugging, I looked into their eyes, one after the other.

"You will—" My voice wavered, choked with emotion. I paused and cleared my throat. "Listen to me," I said, putting the force of my will and desire in my voice and meeting their eyes one by one. "You will forget that I have powers."

I wanted to make them forget about me, but everyone knew they were my family. Trying to hide it would alert the government to their role in hiding a Paranormal and get them the punishment I was trying to avoid.

"You adopted me without knowing all this. You picked me off a random battlefield without knowing anything about me, and the tests showed no power. The documents support this."

To my brothers, I said, "You have never known or heard about me having powers. No one in this family ever showed any power. You will forget about the visions and this conversation. All of you will only remember that I turned into a panther when I saw JT being attacked and ran away."

Tears were streaming freely down my face, and I forced myself away. I wanted to hold them a little longer, but I got a vision right there. Agents poured out and headed toward District Seventeen.

I had few minutes at best, so I quickly changed, packed a few essentials, and got out of the house.

I considered taking the jar of cinnamon powder, but my powers were fully manifested—what was the point? If they're going to hunt me, I would need to be stronger to survive.

Sugar, I would need a lot of sugar.

Chapter 4: Relentless Pursuit

I had been running for what felt like an eternity, with each passing day, the thought that I was being hunted by the government bore heavily on me. How long before they really would be on my trail, closing in on me? The thought made my breath hitch as I turned the corner and entered the restaurant.

The truth is, I would feel so much better if I saw signs that I was being pursued rather than this weird silence. I knew the bullies must have been found by now, even if the survivors had said nothing, the nature of the attack would compel an investigation. It's been a little over two weeks since I ran from my home. Surely someone must be on my tail by now.

I was becoming unnerved by not seeing the signs. I was buying myself a double burger and soda for lunch. It was a good thing that I had money, or this would have gone much worse for me.

When I left the burger shop, I saw the sign I had been looking for. I felt an itching on the left side of my face, looked up and there he was—a sharply dressed man standing conspicuously amidst the crowd. His eyes locked on mine with an unmistakable intensity. My instincts screamed that he wasn't an ordinary passerby. This is the man Unity has sent for me. As if to confirm my suspicions, he lowered his sunglasses just enough to send me an arrogant wink. The government had found me.

Panicking, I didn't waste a moment and rushed to my car. The engine roared to life and I sped away, glancing occasionally in the rearview mirror. My heart sank as I noticed a bright red car tailing me. He wanted me to know I was being chased, there was no other reason for such a bright red car. Fear gripped my chest, and I pressed harder on the accelerator, weaving recklessly through traffic to lose my pursuer.

It was soon clear that my attempts to lose him were in vain—I was still being tailed. My mind raced as I thought about my next move. I needed to hide. Fortunately, I had a place where I could lay low.

When I reached a secluded area filled with old warehouses, stores, and the like waiting to be repurposed, I decided to abandon my car and continue on foot. My powers had made me physically stronger, and it was time to put them to the test. As I ran, my mind was in a whirlwind of thoughts, trying to come up with a way to shake off the agent chasing me.

The agent was skilled, that much was obvious. His footsteps echoed ominously, growing closer with each passing second. I couldn't shake him off. He just kept coming and the sinking realization that he might catch me was crushing.

But then, a thought occurred to me—my powers were not just limited to enhanced strength. I could use my mind to manipulate others' thoughts and actions. Maybe, just maybe, I could use this to my advantage.

I pretended to get tired, acting as if I was getting worn out from the chase, and I started to slow down, allowing him to close the gap. When we were both within each other's reach, I whirled around, met his eyes, summoned all my mental strength, and focused on his mind. But instead of bending his will, an excruciating pain slammed into my brain. It was as if my powers were being turned against me, used to cause me pain, leaving me in skull-splitting pain.

In the alley, we both collapsed, screaming in pain and gasping for breath, trying to comprehend what had just happened. The agent's eyes met mine, and fear flickered in his gaze. It looked very alien on his face.

I was very confused. *This has never happened before*, was my last thought before I passed out.

As we regained consciousness, neither of us knew what to make of the situation. I couldn't control him, this unfortunately did not mean he could not detain me. But something was stopping him, I could sense it.

I didn't care to know what it was, I just ran from the alley, my heart pounding with fear and curiosity. How had my powers backfired like that? I needed answers, but I was not going to get them from him. And the one place I can be safe is in my hidden sanctuary—a defunct sweets shop that I had turned into my new home.

So, I ran. I ran back to my car and hightailed it to the abandoned shop I had been living in since I left home. It wasn't very far from where the agent and I had collapsed, but going by car was faster than he could follow on foot.

The sweet shop was filled with remnants of a failed business. Some of its shelves were still stocked with essentials and the occasional bag of sugar—my lifeline, the source of strength for my powers.

Before I had taken it over, it had been a sad, empty place filled with empty shelves, unused products, and dust. The kitchen appliances were still miraculously functional.

When I started living in it, I had pushed the wooden shelves together, creating tight aisles. I first cleaned out the dust, which was not easy without a service bot. Then I bought a bed, which I moved into the shop under the cover of night. I placed the bed in the farthest corner from the door and made the place my home for the foreseeable future. I even barred the front door and only used the opening in the ceiling for entry and exit.

Every time I went out, I came back with something to make this place homier. Blankets, towels, and a few clothes, mostly hoodies and some cloaks, things that hid my face and body. Daruskov being a pristine city, there were no places to scavenge things. My little chair and pillows had to be bought. Occasionally, I used the kitchen to cook, and I somehow managed to convert the restroom into a kinda-sorta functional bathroom. Although that meant no more showers for me. I had to stopper the hand sinks. So, every time I wanted to take a bath, I filled it with water and used a bowl from the kitchen to pour over my body. At least the water still ran hot.

In the room, I breathed a little in relief. That pain had drained my energy, and I could barely drag myself across the room. But as I walked the nearly empty aisles, a familiar figure dropped into the near darkness from the trapdoor above. The agent stood before me, his gaze intense and unyielding. Panic surged within me, and I tried to back away, but there was no escape.

My mind raced with questions, but before I could find the words, the agent reached out to touch my hand. His touch sent a shiver down my spine, and I instinctively pulled away, wary of the emotions that surged within me.

“Stay away from me,” I warned.

But he wasn’t deterred. He just moved closer.

“You tried to kill me!” he accused.

“What? You were pursuing me. I just wanted to control your mind so you would leave me alone. It was your powers that tried to kill me.”

“I don’t have powers.”

“Well, something inside you nearly killed us both. That never happens!”

We were standing face-to-face now—well, almost. He was taller than me. There was now an underlying tension in the air, and it was pulling our bodies together.

“You still tried to kill me.” He threw his hands in the air, making me flinch and reflexively push him back. He caught my hands faster than I could move them and pinned them together behind me. I was left staring up at him.

“Well, agent, are you going to arrest me now?” I asked brazenly.

“For some reason, you think I won’t do that,” he said, and then he produced a power dampener. He was going to clamp it on me. I panicked and heaved with all my boosted strength, and even then, it was nearly not enough. This man was strong!

Out of his grip, I was semi-crouching, watching him dangerously. He stood there, just stood there calmly with a half-smile on his face. A very sinister half-smile and the power dampener dangled from his hand, ready to go around my ankle.

Suddenly, he leaped at me, causing me to yelp and leap out of the way. He immediately corrected course and swiped one hand in my direction. His reflexes were quick, too quick for a human. I had to do a small shift, sharpening my instincts and reflexes with the panther’s so I wouldn’t be caught. Retractable claws descended, and my teeth became fangs. My eyesight sharpened, and so did my other senses. I could hear the agent breathing. His heartbeat was oddly rhythmical and steady for someone in a fight.

Our dance continued, and twice he nearly cornered me. His left hand grabbed my neck, and he only let go when I raked him with my claws. The second time, he landed a heavy kick to my belly, throwing me onto a standing shelf. Me and the shelf went tumbling down, my fall tore open a sack of sugar. I buried my face in the spilled sugar, hastily munching it down and swallowing. He

jumped on me, but I was stronger now. I kicked him back, and he flew off me, but he managed to land in a crouch. I snarled and leaped for him. We started grappling, rolling on the floor, crashing into shelves and my stuff.

Impossibly, he had me pinned and was smirking down at me. I wanted to try mind control again, but when our eyes met, something different passed between us. My clothes were torn, and he was also showing off his toned, muscled body. The both of us were panting. Something passed between us, our lips met once, and the world around us fell away.

His kiss was slow and tentative, and yet it sent shivers down my spine. We drew apart for a moment, our eyes locked in an unspoken understanding before we leaned in once more. This time, the kiss was electrifying, our lips moving in perfect harmony, and I drew closer to him.

My palms found their way to his arms as his hands settled on my waist, fitting perfectly against me. The sensation of his body against mine was intoxicating, and a soft moan escaped his lips, causing me to respond in kind.

Our bodies seemed to meld together, like two pieces of a puzzle, and as the kiss deepened, our hands began to roam each other's clothed forms. There was no hesitation, just an urgent desire to explore and feel every inch of each other.

My tongue gently probed his mouth, and he eagerly welcomed me in. Our tongues danced in a fiery rhythm, and I pressed myself even closer to him. The clothes that separated us were becoming frustrating, and I took charge, guiding him toward the bed.

The agent willingly followed, pulling me along, and as soon as his legs touched the bed, I gently lowered him down, never breaking the kiss. He briefly pulled away to adjust our position on the bed, but I held onto him, my lips finding solace on his neck. I placed tender kisses along his neck, teasing and nibbling, savoring the taste of his skin.

His hand found its way into my hair, his touch sending shivers down my spine. I continued my trail of kisses, moving up to his earlobe, where I lightly bit, and then ran my tongue over the sensitive skin. He responded by pulling me closer, his other hand exploring my body.

My hands roamed his body as well, trying to feel his skin through his clothes, but I grew impatient. With a huff of frustration, I stood up and began to undress myself. The man followed suit, and as he stood before me, naked and vulnerable, I chuckled at his reaction.

His eyes were fixed on me, and I could see the desire in them. I stood confidently before him, no longer hiding any part of myself. The power I felt at that moment was intoxicating.

Once we were both naked, I crawled onto the bed, our gazes locked. I lowered myself over him, and he scooted backward, following my lead. We were like two

predators, each testing the other's boundaries, and yet completely captivated by the other.

Chapter 5: We Should Not Have Done That

The intense sex had left us both breathless, and we collapsed side-by-side, spent but deeply satisfied. The air around us in the sweet shop was thick with the mingling scent of lust and the musk of our lovemaking. The agent and I gazed at each other, our chests rising and falling as we tried to catch our breath.

“What just happened?”

“Damned if I know.”

“Well, that was certainly something, Amari.”

“You know my name?”

“Come on.” It was then that I remembered that he was the agent pursuing me, and I was the paranormal freak running from him.

“I don’t know your name.

“Alden, Alden Cross,” he replied.

Alden Cross.

We were unsure of what to do next.

But something had happened earlier, and I was determined to understand what had gone wrong so I tried to use my powers on him. I tentatively reached out with my mind once again. The pain returned, searing through my consciousness, leaving me gasping for breath. The vision that followed was unexpected, a glimpse into the past and another into the future.

In the vision, I saw a woman and a man on the run, both of them cornered. The woman wielded a long, wooden staff with grace and determination, while the man transformed into a large panther, his movements fluid and deadly. It was as if they were supernaturally connected, each complementing the other's abilities.

As the vision shifted from the past into the future, I saw Alden surrounded by a menagerie of large predator animals—wolves, big cats, coyotes, and even some snakes. He held a gun, and his eyes were hard as granite. They said, *I might die here today, but I will take some of you with me, and you had better make sure I am dead when you're done.*

Confused by the vision, I turned to Alden. “Do you have any Paranormals in your ancestry?” I asked.

He laughed loudly, mocking my question. “Paranormals in my ancestry? That’s an interesting idea, but I’m just an ordinary human.”

The response left me perplexed. The vision had shown something beyond ordinary, and I was sure that Alden was somehow connected, yet how could he, an agent of Unity be related to any paranormals? Could it be that his powers were dormant or unknown to him? Maybe he was someone like me, and no one had told him about his powers.

His fingers were tracing a trail of little fires from my sternum down to my belly button. In his eyes, a deep hunger for me shone.

“You can’t want to—”

I kissed him full on the mouth before he could finish.

Yes dear god, yes, I wanted to do all that again. We drew closer, and I could feel the gentle pressure of my breasts against his chest. His hand moved from my face to my neck, pulling me in even closer, and I responded by deepening the kiss.

I broke the kiss momentarily, freeing my arm from beneath him, and then drew his face back to mine. There was no hesitation this time, only a fierce blaze of passion. His tongue darted out, tracing along my teeth, as he pulled me even closer by the waist. I took hold of his hand and placed it on my breast, our tongues meeting again.

In the dark of the sweet shop, our defenses crumbled, and we surrendered to the passion. Our bodies pressed together, the warmth of his touch sending ripples of electricity through my veins. We made love again, starting slow and building in intensity, passion, and speed. Our orgasms were even more intense than at first.

We must have fallen asleep again after the sex because I woke up to the sound of rustling clothes. When I opened my eyes, Alden was almost done putting his clothes on.

“I must leave now Amari.”

I nodded, unsure of what to say.

As he stood there putting his clothes back on, Alden seemed torn. He couldn't bring himself to turn me in, to hand me over to the government. But he couldn't just walk away either –I was, after all, the mission.

With a heavy sigh, he finally spoke. “I won’t pursue you anymore, Amari, not seriously anyway. But I won’t stop Unity either. Be careful and remember that I’ll still be on your trail.”

The warning was both a comfort and a threat. Alden was a skilled hunter, no doubt a reflection of the skill of the Bloodhounds as a whole. If he kept ‘hunting’ me, it could keep others off my trail.

Alone once more, I dressed and then decided to go get my car. I stepped out of the sweet shop, feeling what had just transpired press down on my shoulders. I was immediately confronted by two mean-looking strangers. Instinct kicked in, and I prepared to fight, my body tensing as I prepared to shift if needed.

“Who are you?” I demanded, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

The strangers exchanged a knowing glance before one of them stepped forward. “We’re not here to hurt you, girl,” he said gruffly. “But we know who you are, and we’ve got some questions for you.”

Tension hung thick in the air as I assessed the situation. I had to be careful. Trust was a luxury I couldn’t afford, not when my very existence was on the line.

“Questions about what?” I replied cautiously, my eyes never leaving their faces.

The strangers hesitated for a moment before the bolder one spoke again. “We know you’re on the run from

Unity. We've been watching, and we know what you are. We want to offer you a deal."

"A deal?" I repeated, my mind racing with possibilities. "What kind of deal?"

He leaned in closer, a sly grin crossing his face. "We've got some business that needs tending to. Things that require someone with your... special abilities. Help us out, and we'll make sure you stay off Unity's radar."

My heart pounded in my chest as I considered their offer. It was risky to trust these strangers, but it was also an opportunity to find allies in this dangerous world.

"And if I refuse?" I asked, my voice unwavering.

The stranger's grin widened, revealing a hint of menace. "Let's just say that turning down our offer wouldn't be the wisest decision."

Chapter 6: Hideaway

Cut the bullshit, Mikhail,” the woman said to her companion. “We’re people like you, and we know somewhere you’ll be safe. Somewhere where we’re all safe. I’m Evelyn.”

I was still wary. They could be Unity’s agents. I wanted to feel hope, but the world was dangerous for people like me. These people could be who they said, and they could be something else entirely. Something about Mikhail made me want to stay away from him.

Maybe they sensed my hesitation, Evelyn and Mikhail briefly shifted into their animal forms before my eyes. I gasped in shock as Evelyn transformed into a majestic brown bear, and Mikhail took the form of a powerful wolf. I hadn’t even known bears were possible.

But what blew my mind was when they shifted back, their clothes were intact.

Seeing my bewildered expression, Evelyn teased, with a warm smile on her face, “What, did you think you were the only Paranormal around?”

My mind was racing with questions, but I couldn’t deny the evidence before me. There were others like me, hidden in the shadows. I had just naturally thought there were few others, each of them fighting a lonely battle for survival until they were caught by one of Unity’s agents.

“Fine, I’ll come with you,” I finally replied. It wasn’t like I had a lot of options.

“But first, we need to destroy your identity band,” Mikhail said.

That shocked me. “What? I have money on that thing, and besides, it’s indestructible.” At least that’s what the government says.

Evelyn stretched out her hand and took a step closer. “I’m sorry, but that’s how they find everyone. It’s a wonder you haven’t been taken yet.”

Should I tell Mikhail that one of Unity’s agents had taken me several times in the shop behind us? I decided against it, although it was a struggle to not give my thoughts away with a smile.

“If it’s any consolation, we aren’t destroying your records or anything. You can access your money later. We just have a different way of doing that,” Evelyn reassured me.

Eventually, I nodded in agreement. Identity bands were the government’s way of keeping constant tabs on its citizens, and as long as mine remained intact, I would never be truly free from their surveillance.

Mikhail produced a toolset and got to work. Soon, the identity band was reduced to pieces. All my life I had thought it was a plastic band holding a high-grade, damage-proof chip. It turned out, the band itself was a piece of electrical work. It was a liberating feeling, knowing that I was no longer tied to the watchful eye of the government.

“Don’t worry, you’re not going to starve. We have our ways of getting what we need,” Evelyn reassured me with

a smile. It was hard to imagine that she was a bear. She was so sweet-natured and easy to be around. Mikhail, on the other hand, behaved as you would expect of a semi-wild dog.

With some trust in my newfound companions, I followed them to their hideout. We drove for what seemed like an eternity, the distance between us and the main city growing and the lights of civilization fading behind us. Fear gnawed at the edges of my mind as I realized how far I was from everything I had ever known.

Finally, Mikhail stopped driving. We had arrived. I looked around and was somewhere on the outskirts of Daruskov, around the much older parts, which were abandoned. Unity could have renovated the area, but they left it alone as a reminder of the days before they took over. To me, the air was heavy with a sense of desolation, but for me, it held a glimmer of hope—hope for a new beginning.

“We call this place the Sanctuary,” Evelyn explained. “It’s a haven for people like us. Here, we’re shielded from the prying eyes of the government. A place where we can breathe freely, away from the constant threat of discovery.”

The Sanctuary was hidden in the ruins of Old Daruskov, its entrance concealed behind a massive stone wall, covered in overgrown vines and thorny bushes. Evelyn led the way, navigating through the dense foliage until we reached a hidden door camouflaged to blend seamlessly with the surroundings.

As the door creaked open, I stepped into what I can only describe as a hidden paradise. I immediately felt relieved. The place was filled with people—others like me, people seeking refuge from a world that sought to suppress and control them. Or experiment on them before killing them.

The Sanctuary was a breathtaking sight, the main courtyard was adorned with colorful flowers and shimmering crystals that cast dancing rainbows across the ground. People of all shapes and sizes moved about, their unique abilities displayed in broad daylight. I saw animals roaming around, talking to people, it was obvious the place was filled with magic.

“This place is incredible,” I marveled, unable to tear my eyes away from the people surrounding me.

“It’s been a labor of love,” Evelyn replied, pride obvious in her voice. “Mikhail and I, along with others, built this place from the ground up.”

“And it’s more than just a hiding place,” Mikhail added, his eyes filled. “It’s a community. A family that supports and protects each other.”

Evelyn and Mikhail introduced me to the group that came to greet us.

“I’m Amari,” I said, offering a small smile.

“Welcome to the Sanctuary, Amari,” a woman with small features greeted me. “I’m Ruby, and this is my brother, Jade.” Her words were filled with a softness that put me at ease.

Chapter 7: Rarest

As we walked deeper into the Sanctuary, I was introduced to more people. There was Aria, a siren whose voice could calm even the most restless soul. Beside her stood Lisa, a sprite. Kung, a shifter, and his son who had no abilities but lived with him regardless. The names and faces rolled together as people called out greetings to Mikhail and Evelyn when we passed them by. Half of them wanted to know, “Who’s the new girl?”

Evelyn and Mikhail led me to a quaint wooden cabin nestled under a canopy of ancient trees. “This will be your home for now,” Evelyn said with a warm smile. “Take your time to settle in, and when ‘you’re ready, we’ll show you around the rest of the place.”

“Thank you,” I replied, gratitude filling my heart. “I can’t believe how lucky I am to have been found by you both.”

Not just because I had no idea how to hide but because I was already feeling an itching need to do something stupid

“You’re family now,” Mikhail said, his eyes gentle and reassuring. “We look out for each other here.”

“You’ll be sharing a room with Lady,” Evelyn said with a warm smile. “She’s not a shifter like you, but her abilities are—you know what? She likes introducing herself.”

I followed Evelyn to the room where I would be staying, and there I met Lady. Lady was a shock, with her bald head and colorless eyes. Her irises were completely devoid of color like glass, but for some reason, they

weren't see-through. She wasn't blind, it was obvious that she could see very clearly. We exchanged greetings, and as I settled into our room, I felt a sense of unease in her presence.

"So, Lady, what are your powers?" I asked, unable to stop thinking about her eyes.

"Just the one. And I know the eyes are freaking you out."

I guess she had caught me staring. "Sorry."

"Oh, it's alright. It took me a long while to get used to them also. I cast illusions."

"Illusions?"

"Yeah. This entire area? It's blanketed by illusions so that if anyone looks, they only see ruins."

Suddenly it made sense how they managed to live here for however long they had without getting caught. I was impressed. The district was large, and to constantly maintain illusions over the whole area must require a lot of power.

"You must be powerful."

"Oh, it's not just me. There are about thirty or so of us. Half of us are always maintaining the illusions at any given time."

That made sense. But still, they had to be very powerful. The hideout was large.

"How did you end up here?" I asked.

She smiled wistfully. "I didn't know what I was as a child, and I ended up in the wrong hands," she admitted. "I

accidentally revealed myself to the wrong kind of people, and they tried to use me for profit. They were using me for profit until Evelyn and Mikhail found me and brought me to the Sanctuary. They've been like family to me ever since. Did you know there's a black market for Paranormals in the underworld?"

"Daruskov has an underworld?"

Lady who had been lying down all these while, sat up, facing me with a serious expression which made her eyes even more disturbing. "Where did you grow up?" Lady looked at me curiously.

"District Seventeen," I replied uncomfortable with being pinned under her blank eyes.

"Ah, I see. But that's odd."

It *was* odd. District Seventeen was where most government employees, academics researchers, and the like lived. People who were most loyal to the government and were not likely to break the rules.

"I'm adopted." I clarified.

"Oh, that makes some sense now," Lady said. "How did you discover your abilities?"

I hesitated for a moment, unsure if I wanted to start telling people about myself. But something about Lady's genuine curiosity and demeanor made me feel comfortable opening up, despite the eyes.

"It's a little funny. I didn't know it, but I have been manipulating people's minds forever."

“Mind control?” Lady’s eyes widened. “That’s a strong power.”

I nodded solemnly. “It is, but it’s also dangerous,” I admitted. “One of my co-workers suspected and was trying to catch me in the act before she was arrested for stealing.”

“Lucky save.”

“Right now, it doesn’t feel like it. She’s the reason I know. I went to visit her, out of pity, but it didn’t go well. Things went bad not long after that, although it had nothing to do with her. I’m just happy Evelyn and Mikhail found me in time.”

Lady placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You’re not alone anymore, Amari,” she said softly. “We’ll help you, just like we’ve done for each other.”

I nodded. “I’ve also had visions ever since I can remember,” I continued, recounting the events that led me to this point. “But it wasn’t until recently that I shape-shifted for the first time.”

Lady’s eyes widened with surprise and she climbed out of bed. “A Seydon?” she whispered, her expression shock and awe. “You’re a Seydon?”

“What’s a Seydon?” I replied, feeling a bit bewildered by her reaction.

Lady’s excitement bubbled over, and without hesitation, she grabbed my hand and dragged me back to the common room.

“Evelyn, you have to hear this!” Lady exclaimed, pulling me toward the bear shifter.

Evelyn looked at us both with a bemused smile. “What’s going on?”

“Amari is a Seydon!” Lady announced proudly.

Chapter 8: What's A Seydon

The room fell silent at once, and Evelyn's eyes locked onto mine. "Are you sure?" she asked softly.

"What is a Seydon?" I asked, feeling a little uneasy again.

Evelyn explained. "Seydons are incredibly rare," she explained. "They possess all three classes of power, making them one of the most formidable Paranormals."

Mikhail, who had now joined us, added, "Shifting, elemental affinity, and manipulation powers. On top of that, they are also seers. Seers are rare, and they never, ever, have another power with their gift of prophecy. Seydons combine all of them, making them even rarer than seers."

"Well, I'm glad to inform you that you're wrong because I don't have any elemental affinity."

"You're a jaguar or some other big cat, aren't you?" Evelyn asked.

"How do you know that?"

Mikhail folded his arms and grumbled. "Seydons are always, always cats. For some weird reason." I got a feeling Mikhail was a little resentful about that fact. "And you may not know it, but you do have elemental powers. If you have visions and you're a shifter, the other two are there. It's an all-or-nothing deal."

"Do you particularly like any element?"

"I've been called hydrophilic in the past."

“Maybe, we’ll see later,” Mikhail responded.

“So what does this mean for me?” I asked, feeling a little overwhelmed.

“You have a powerful gift, Amari,” Evelyn said gently. “You can do things that no one else can do, and when you come into the fullness of your power, you’ll be stronger than most, if not all of us. Soon, others will start looking up to you.”

I nodded, absorbing the gravity of my situation.

“Why have I never heard of this before?” I asked.

Lady grinned. “As I said, Seydons are incredibly rare, even among paranormals. It is said that some very powerful Seydons were capable of altering fate. You have a unique gift.” Lady was bouncing on her feet, vibrating excitedly. It was then I realized she was short. She couldn’t be taller than 5’1”, even if she was that. It’s either she was younger than I thought, or Lady was just plain diminutive.

I feel humbled by Lady’s words. “But what am I supposed to do with these powers?”

Lady placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “That’s something only you can know. Only you know what path to tread with your powers.”

At her words, a vision overcame me, much clearer and more vivid than any I had experienced before. In the vision, I saw the faces of the people I had just met in the safe house appear before me, their expressions contorted with fear and anguish. I could feel their desperation and

impending danger. But the odds were stacked against them.

Then Evelyn was there, bloody but still fighting, I did not recognize the attackers, they didn't carry the standard bearing of Bloodhounds or any other task force I knew of.

Then, as quickly as the vision began, it ended, leaving me breathless, shaking, and sweaty. The vivid images were etched into my mind.

“What was that?” Lady asked in concern.

I found a seat and slumped in it, deeply exhausted. “I just had a vision. Something terrible is going to happen to everyone. Evelyn was there.”

I quivered with fear and urgency, my heart racing with the thought of the vision I had just seen.

Mikhail's expression turned serious as he regarded me. “Are you sure, Amari? Visions can be tricky, and they don't always come true.”

I took a few deep breaths before looking up at him. “Mine always does, especially when they're clear like that. We have to do something.”

Evelyn just waved me away as if she wasn't the one I had just said was in danger. “We will.” She even sounded reassuring.

Chapter 9: Betrayal and Confrontation

One evening, several days after my arrival, I found myself sitting alone under a tree. In the distance, I was watching several earth elementals work the plants around them. But the tranquility of the scene did nothing for me. The last few days since I arrived at the Sanctuary faded as my mind wandered back to the moment Alden and I had met. I had been thinking about him a lot lately.

“Amari, are you okay?” Lady’s voice interrupted my thoughts as she settled beside me on the floor.

I managed a weak smile. “Yeah, just thinking.”

Lady studied me for a moment, her gaze searching. “It’s about a guy. You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?”

I nodded, not bothering to hide my emotions from her. “I just can’t stop thinking about him, Lady. I’m worried for him, and I can’t bear the thought of something happening to him because of me.”

“Why is that?”

“He knows about my powers, and he’s hiding it from Unity.”

“Wow. Is he like us?”

“No.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Yeah,” I replied.

Lady placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “You care about him a lot, don’t you?”

I sighed. “No, it’s not like that,” I said, even though I blushed a little. “I already know I can’t be with him, not when it puts him in danger. But I know he is or will be in danger, and I need to warn him, but I can’t find him, because then that would put us both in danger. I need to stay away from him, for his safety”

“Sometimes, you can’t control who you care about,” Lady said softly. “And even if you try to push him away, the heart always wants what it wants. And as for the danger, well, visions have a way.”

I looked at my friend, grateful for her understanding. “What am I supposed to do, Lady? He needs to know.”

She shrugged. “Follow your heart, I guess,” Lady advised. “But be careful if you want to protect him. Maybe there’s a way to do that without putting him in harm’s way.”

I pondered Lady’s seemingly wise words, realizing that she had called my bluff about not caring for Alden. I couldn’t deny my feelings for Alden, but maybe I could take steps to keep him safe. I just needed to figure out how.

The same evening I sought out Mikhail. I found him standing at the edge of the safe house, gazing out into the darkening landscape. He does that every evening until the sun is gone.

“Mikhail,” I began, my voice steady despite the nervous flutter in my chest.

Mikhail turned to look at me, his silver eyes reflecting the moonlight. “Amari, what brings you here?”

“I need to talk to you,” I said earnestly. “I had a vision about someone I care about getting hurt by someone else I care about.”

Mikhail briefly glanced at me, his expression serious. “And you wonder if there’s a way to avoid this?”

“Yes.”

The older man’s gaze softened with understanding. “Visions are powerful, Amari. They show us possibilities, but they are not set in stone. They are a glimpse of what might be, and it’s up to us to use that knowledge however we like. But often nothing is the best thing to do.”

I was not satisfied with his words. “I want to protect all of them, Mikhail. But I don’t know how to do it. I’m supposed to be this all-powerful Seydon, and I can’t even do this simple thing!”

“Be careful, Amari,” Mikhail responded. “Remember that power can be a tool for self-destruction. It can drive us to always want to protect and do good, to the point where we start doing the very opposite.”

As I listened to Mikhail’s wise counsel, I felt a sense of clarity wash over me. I shouldn’t charge headfirst into any situation. But I was still determined to somehow avert this vision. With newfound resolve, I returned to my room, my mind set on finding a way to warn Alden without putting him in danger. I couldn’t ignore our

connection any longer, and I couldn't bear the thought of him or my newfound community harming each other.

As I lay in bed that night, I tuned out Lady's very tiny snoring and focused my mind on Alden, attempting to reach out to him through our inexplicable connection. I closed my eyes and visualized him, hoping that somehow, my thoughts would reach him.

Lady had said, "*It is said that some very powerful Seydons were capable of altering fate.*"

Well, it's time to see if I can call myself a decent Seydon.

I focused on Alden, bringing his face to mind. For a moment, his body came to mind instead. The way he touched me and the way he had responded to my touch, the way he had felt, throbbing and thrusting inside me. I blushed and dispelled that image, bringing his face to mind. Somewhere in the darkness of my mind, I saw a faint glimmer of light—a thread of consciousness connecting me to Alden. It was weak, but it was there. Or at least I thought it was.

"Alden, you are in potential danger, danger involving shifters and I don't know if—, just, please be careful, whatever you do."

I wasn't even sure if my message would reach him, but I hoped with all my heart that it would. If our connection was as strong as I wanted to believe it to be, then maybe, just maybe, my words would reach him in time.

The next day came with a surprise.

I was walking alone when I saw a man standing far away, dressed in black. The figure lowered their sunglasses and winked at me with a little nod.

Alden?

The man turned around and I quickly followed without closing the distance.

What the hell was he doing here?

My heart raced as I spotted Alden standing in the ruined house, just a few feet away from me. I couldn't believe my eyes. He had found me in the heart of the safe house, which I thought was protected from prying eyes.

"What are you doing here, Alden?" I whispered urgently, trying to keep my voice low enough not to draw attention.

Alden's expression softened as he met my gaze. "I told you, I'm not here to bring you in. I'm not tracking you anymore. But I couldn't stay away. Besides, you called me," he pointed out.

My mind raced as I tried to process the conflicting emotions swirling inside me. Part of me was relieved to see him, to feel his presence again after all that had happened between us. But another part of me was terrified for him to be here, surrounded by Paranormals who might not take kindly to his presence. Might not? They wouldn't.

"How did you find me?" I asked, my voice tinged with curiosity and concern.

Alden hesitated for a moment before answering, “Ever since that day you used your powers on me, I have felt this strange connection to you. The closer I get to you, the stronger it becomes. But last night, I felt something, and it tugged me here.”

My heart softened at his words, realizing that the connection between us ran deeper than I had earlier imagined. But the gravity of the situation quickly brought me back to reality.

“You can’t be here, Alden,” I pleaded, my eyes filled with worry. “It’s not safe. They’ll find out, and I don’t think they like Unity’s agents that much.”

“I know the risks,” Alden replied, his voice firm. “But I had to see you. I couldn’t stay away, Amari.”

Feeling a mixture of emotions, I took Alden’s hand and let him lead me deeper into the old house. We were soon pressing up against each other and kissing. In that brief moment, we allowed ourselves to forget the dangers that surrounded us and embraced the comfort of each other’s presence.

But our moment of solace was short-lived. Before I knew it, we were discovered in the heat of the moment by a group of Paranormals who had sensed the intrusion of a non-Paranormal.

Someone yanked me away, and I heard growls as the room filled with shifters. They turned into their animal forms.

My heart sank as I realized the gravity of the situation. Alden was immediately surrounded by shifters, their eyes gleaming with suspicion. In response, Alden drew his gun, instinctively protecting himself.

“Amari, what have you done?” the only one of the shifters who hadn’t shifted growled, his voice filled with anger. “Do you know who this is?”

“It’s not what it looks like,” I stammered, my mind racing for an explanation. “He found me. I didn’t lead him here.”

The shifters eyed me warily, clearly not convinced. The tension in the air was palpable as they assessed the situation.

“Wait, you know Alden?”

“So, his name is Alden,” he replied.

“Please,” I begged.

“Go on, Alden, tell her your code name in the agency. We know you even if she doesn’t. Oh, we know you all right.” His voice dripped with venom as he confronted Alden. But Alden’s eyes never left the animals surrounding him, and his hands on his guns never wavered.

“Amari, the man you were necking is known as Last Order. Do you know why? Because he is Unity’s last resort when they’re hunting Paranormals. He is the number one agent amongst the Bloodhounds.”

The Bloodhounds is the code name for Unity’s specialized Paranormal hunting agency. But to me, he’s just Alden.

“He’s just Alden. He didn’t come here for any of us,” I pleaded.

“Oh, he came here for something alright.” The man was looking at me with disgust.

Amidst the turmoil, I tried to reason with them, pleading Alden’s innocence. I didn’t want him to get hurt because of me, but it seemed that fate had other plans.

“If you kill him, they’ll know! They’ll come looking for him, and they’ll come right here. Alden isn’t going to tell anyone about me or us or this place. But if you kill him, they’ll find us.”

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, my words got through. The shifters reluctantly released Alden, but not without a warning. “Stay away from him, Amari. He’s bad news.”

My heart sank as I watched Alden being escorted away, his gaze locked with mine, filled with a great deal of amusement. What was funny about this whole thing? He mouthed something to me, but I didn’t figure it out until later.

“I’ll see you later.”

Once I was alone, I couldn’t shake the feeling of guilt that washed over me. I had put Alden in danger because I had been trying to avoid a vision I had seen. I had led him right into the danger.

Visions are tricky, Mikhail had said. Now I understood.

But despite the warning from the shifters, I couldn’t deny the connection I felt with Alden. We were bound by

something deeper than just unbridled passion. We were bound by history and powers that I didn't understand yet.

That night, I was startled awake by a hand on my mouth.

Chapter 10: Oh Alden

My eyes widened disproportionately when it turned out to be Alden.

“Why are you still here?” I whispered hotly when he lifted his hand from my mouth.

“You can talk normally. Nobody near this room is going to hear us.”

“What did you do?” My brows furrowed.

He smiled. “Relax. I just put them to deep sleep for about the next six hours.”

The incident earlier came rushing back. *Last Order*. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to fear him.

“Why six hours?”

“Because I would be gone by then.”

“Why are you still here?” I asked, my breaths getting heavy.

Alden leaned in with that irresistible smile, and our lips met in a passionate kiss. The warmth of his mouth against mine sent a shiver of desire through me. Our tongues entwined in a dance of longing, igniting a fiery desire that flowed between us. His strong hands encircled my waist, pulling me closer to him, and a primal need surged within both of us. The taste of our shared longing lingered on our lips, mixed with the remnants of wine and our heated breaths.

My hands, small yet purposeful, slipped beneath his shirt, exploring the contours of his toned physique. Each touch left a trail of electric sensations, setting his skin ablaze. The urgency between us grew, and for a moment, our lips reluctantly parted, allowing our bodies to find a rhythm of their own.

As his shirt was lifted, our mouths eagerly sought each other again, our hunger insatiable. My tongue, bold and exploratory, delved into his mouth, igniting a shiver of pleasure that coursed through his entire being. My hands roamed freely, and I responded, my desire manifesting as I caressed his supple curves. My grip tightened, drawing him impossibly closer.

Feeling the outline of his arousal straining against his pants, my desire surged. With an air of confidence, I slipped my hand beneath the fabric, freeing him from his confines. The moment my hand enveloped him, he groaned into the kiss, a guttural sound of ecstasy escaping his lips.

I stopped kissing his mouth, letting my lips and tongue wander down his neck to his clavicle. I kissed him and took tiny nibbles of his flesh, each one sending a wave of pleasure through him. He had one hand on my bottom, and I could feel his strong, possessive grip. It was a mild addiction for me, the way he touched, tapped, or even slapped my rear. The other hand was on my face and neck, guiding me to give him more room to kiss me.

While his tongue traced a line from my throat to my ear, I pushed down his pants and freed him. His arousal was

now fully exposed, and I began stroking its length. One of my legs was against his thigh, and I moved my waist in time with my strokes, lost in the sensations that were building between us. When we were alone, none of the shyness instilled by my upbringing held me back.

His hand slipped into my dress to grab one of my breasts. He ran his thumb over my nipple as he bit down on my neck, not too hard. I stroked him harder and quickly applied saliva to ease my stroking. I pushed his underwear down, and he stepped out of them.

As our bodies stood intertwined, desire crackled in the air like electricity, casting a veil of anticipation over the room. My eyes roamed over his naked form, drinking in every curve and contour, a hunger building within me. My fingertips yearned to trace the lines of his body, to explore the depths of pleasure we would discover together.

Our lips met again in a fiery kiss, our mouths melding with an intensity born of our shared passion. His hands found their way to my breasts, and he grasped, squeezed, and rubbed my hardened nipples. His fingers glided over the skin of my vulva, his touch teasingly rubbing against the delicate lace fabric of my light blue panties. Each stroke ignited a cascade of sensations, causing my already moistened undergarments to cling to my skin. Both of us wanted more, so we lowered my panties, revealing the glistening evidence of my arousal.

His fingers ventured beneath the fabric of my panties, diving into the warm, wetness of my womanhood. The

three middle fingers danced across my sensitive folds, drawing forth a fresh wave of moisture that coated his fingers. A soft moan escaped my lips, a response to the pleasure that coursed through my veins.

His middle finger traced a path from the entrance of my slick passage, parting my labia as it traveled upward. The gentle flick of his fingertip against my clitoris sent delicious sparks of pleasure shooting through my body. He repeated the motion, his touch becoming a rhythm of pleasure that matched the beats of our entangled bodies.

My lips found his nipples, my mouth exploring the hardened peaks with tongue and teeth. Each flicker of my tongue and graze of my teeth sent waves of ecstasy rippling through his body. Meanwhile, he continued his ministrations, his middle finger coated in my wetness, returning to my swollen clitoris, caressing and rubbing, heightening the intensity of my pleasure.

He dropped the straps of my nightdress, something I'd picked out amongst the large collection of clothes they had in the sanctuary. I was pretty sure most of the clothes were stolen, not bought. His mouth latched onto one of my exposed breasts, his tongue tracing the darkened areola before finding my erect nipple. With a blend of soft suction and the tantalizing graze of his teeth, he lavished attention upon my sensitive bud. Simultaneously, his free hand took hold of my other nipple, pinching and rolling it between his thumb and index finger, playing with my clitoris.

I could feel my arousal building as he touched me, his fingers caressing my clit, his lips teasing one of my nipples, and his hand lovingly exploring the other. Moans of pleasure escaped my lips, and I called out his name and occasionally invoked a higher power.

“Oh, Alden,” I moaned as he increased the pressure on my clit. An orgasm was building within me, and I pressed his head closer to my breast, encouraging him to take more of it into his mouth. My other hand roamed down his back, fingers tracing a path in the throes of ecstasy. Thankfully, he had trimmed his nails. Otherwise, he might have scratched my skin.

I sensed that I was approaching climax, so I focused on my clit, his fingers moving faster and faster, aided by the wetness between my thighs. I clung to his head, my moans and pleas becoming a continuous litany of ecstasy and profanity. “Oh my God, I’m coming. Oh, God, oh, God, I’m coming,” I cried out.

Leaving my breasts, his kisses grew hungrier, and I found myself responding eagerly. The kiss took a slightly rough turn, and I was surprised by how much I liked it. I pressed his hand against my breast, urging him to handle me more vigorously. I surrendered to his mouth, our bodies pressed together as he continued to stroke my clit, pushing me to another wave of pleasure.

A torrent of moaned pleas, profanity, and declarations filled the air as my climax approached. “I’m coming, I’m coming, I’m coming,” I repeated, my voice rising in pitch as I climaxed once again, ending in a half-squeal, half-

scream as I threw my head back. I took his hand, moving it away from my clit and placing it on my buttocks, enjoying a playful slap and a mischievous smile.

“Do you like that?” he asked, delivering more playful slaps, each one harder than the last, making my behind jiggle slightly.

My raised thigh started to cramp, so I lowered it and kissed his neck, savoring his groan. As I kissed and returned the playful bites from earlier, I gradually made my way down his body, planting kisses on my way down to my knees. Stepping back to give me room, he grasped my thighs, his hands exploring my firm buttocks as he playfully teased a gentle breeze against my throbbing desire.

Starting at the base, I kissed my way up his arousal, culminating with a loving kiss on the tip. Then, my tongue got to work, circling the crown and venturing beneath it, all the way down. My hand caressed his balls as I took them into my mouth, moving slowly, savoring every moment. I met his gaze, my eyes locked with his, and I continued to play with my breasts. I was well aware of the effect this had on him, and right there, I nearly drove him over the edge with desire. I smiled around his member in my mouth, fully aware of the power I held over him.

“You want me to suck this dick, Agent Cross?”

“Yes, baby, I want you to suck it good.”

I took his whole length in my mouth, pushing my face up against his crotch until I could feel the tip of his dick

touching my throat. Up and down I went, letting him out and taking him back in, until all of his cock was glistening with my saliva. I ran the top of my tongue over the underside of the tip, adding to the sensations I was giving him. He started to gently thrust his hips in time with my sucking.

He grabbed my head, running his fingers through my hair as I pleased him with my mouth. But I wanted more, so I grabbed his thighs. He grabbed my head in response, tangling my hair in his hands, and started fucking my face, he spared not one inch pushing everything down my throat and making me repeatedly gag as he used my mouth roughly. I was rubbing my clit as he fucked my face even harder. His cock made me gag again and again, which just made me hornier. Just before he came, he withdrew from my mouth.

He bent to kiss me and in the same motion pulled me up by the throat. He pushed me up against the side of the bed, kissing me deeply while stroking his thick cock. We broke the kiss, and he turned me around so he could admire my ass.

With one hand he bent me over the bed, while the other positioned his dick for entry. My pussy was wet, and his cock was glistening with my saliva, so it slid right in. He went in slowly, putting first only the tip and then withdrawing it. Then he rubbed the tip all over my vulva, stopping to stroke my clit with the tip of his dick.

Having had enough of his teasing, I reached down between my thighs and pushed him back. This time, he

went in all the way, and we both exhaled upon his entry into my wet vagina. I grabbed the back of the cushion for support, and he started thrusting slowly. He leaned into me, his hands slithering into my shirt from behind to grab my boobs and kiss my neck while he moved inside me. The sound of his hands slapping against my ass and my voice solo filled the bedroom.

For the next several minutes, we fucked, him pounding my ass from behind while grabbing my boobs roughly, and me meeting his every thrust with one of my own. To give him better access, I lifted one leg on the couch and started rubbing my clit. Soon I was coming again. He squeezed my boobs and nipples harder.

“I’m gonna come. I’m gonna come.”

“Come for me, baby. Come for me.”

My body jerked, and he had to hold on tight to me so he wouldn’t slip out. My body spasmed with my orgasm, and I became wetter around his member. He kept rubbing my nipples while I came with his penis inside me.

Once my body had stilled, he resumed fucking me. He was soon nearing orgasm and he announced it. Remembering how he’d finished deep inside me the first time we’d had sex in the old store, I told him to pull out of me.

“I want it on my face,” I said as I got on my knees, grabbed his phallus, and started stroking with a double-handed twisty motion. I was looking up at him the whole

time, watching his mouth open in a small o, as it always did when he was near nutting.

“Oh God.” He groaned as he ejaculated on my face. Ropes of hot come landed on My dusky face, and I gladly accepted them. When he stopped spurting, I squeezed from the base, getting the last of it out. With his come on my face, I took him in my mouth to get the rest. He started to soften in my mouth, and I let the penis out. He exhaled heavily.

Semen was dribbling down from my face to my chest, and as I watched it dribble down my breasts, the milky white of Alden’s come created a sharp contrast to my caramel skin. It looked like a river coursing a path through the dark soil. I rose to my feet, scooping the semen before it dripped on my shirt. I put the finger in my mouth, watching him closely as I did so.

Without a word, I bent over to pick up my shed dress and panties, exposing my shapely rear and glistening genitals to him. I headed to the bathroom.

“I should wash this off.”

He picked his own discarded clothes and followed me. He joined me just as I was turning the water on. Hot water gushed from the showerhead, spraying us both. I got started on washing his seed from my face while he stood there and let the hot water run down his body. When I’d washed it off, I faced him with a smile.

With the soap in my hands, I started to lather his body. It took me time to run the soap over every inch of his six-foot-one-inch frame. I moved behind to lather his back.

When I reached his buttocks, I squeezed it playfully before moving on to his legs.

My hands rubbed his thighs, going all the way to his feet. I returned to his inner thighs, paying special attention to his genitals. I ran a soapy hand over his balls and through his ass cheeks.

When I was satisfied that I'd covered all of him with soap, I handed him the bar.

“My turn.”

He took the soap from me, and he started lathering my body at my neck. With gentle reverence, he progressed down my body, giving me a light massage in the process. he stood at my back, his rising dick poking my ass as he soaped my front to my belly button, his fingers brushing the beginning of my light bush. He stepped around me, hugging me in front of him so he could wash me back.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensations of his fingers on my body, I pressed my crotch closer to his, feeling his rising phallus pressed against my skin. I wrapped my arms around him, my fingers playing on his back as the water rained on us both. Slowly, he went on his knees to wash my body from the waist down in the same attentive manner that he'd washed my torso.

When he finished, he returned the soap to its place, and we let water clean off the last of the suds. We shared a few small kisses before leaving the bathroom. As soon as we turned off the water, drowsiness settled heavily on me. I'd been tense since we had been caught earlier today

and got even more tense when I realized he'd been telling me he'd see me later.

He toweled me off and dried my hair. I dragged him to bed with me. Thankfully it was a Saturday, and he could sleep in.

We got into bed naked and nested in his arms. My lashes fluttered as my eyes closed, giving in to sleep.

“Sleep well, Amari. I'll be gone in the morning.” That was the last thing I heard. True to his word, Alden was gone when I woke, and I almost thought the sex was a dream.

Chapter 11: What's an Amplifier?

As the days turned into weeks and then into months, I found myself facing a new challenge— a child growing inside me. I had discovered that I was pregnant, and it had to be Alden's child. He was the only man I'd been with in a long time. And though my heart swelled with love and excitement for the baby, I knew I had to keep it a secret for his safety. If I communicated with him through the link between us, I doubted any of the people living here would be able to keep Alden away.

My growing belly was a constant reminder of Alden, but also a source of worry. Everyone had heard about Alden sneaking in, and many now avoided me, while others openly scorned me. Besides Evelyn, Mikhail, and Lady, I had precious few friends left. I often found myself with the sirens or sprites when I needed company. They didn't mind my presence.

I continued my training, pouring all my energy into honing my powers and preparing for the day I would have to protect myself and my unborn child. My birth parents had died defending me, and I had a terrible foreboding that history might repeat itself. I had no visions. It was just a niggling feeling.

My thoughts were always drawn back to Alden. I longed for him, yearning to be by his side, to share with him the joy of our growing child. But the dangers that surrounded us made that impossible.

One day, as I was meditating in my room, my mind suddenly filled with a vision. I saw Alden, cornered on one side by Paranormals and the other by agents like himself. He was reaching out toward me, his eyes unreadable. Something dead lay at his feet, and I wasn't sure if it was a Paranormal or Bloodhound.

Tears filled my eyes as I felt the helplessness wash over me. I had to do something, but I didn't know what. I couldn't risk putting myself and my unborn child in danger.

In the following days, I isolated myself even further, spending more time in meditation and focusing on strengthening my powers. My belly grew bigger, a visible reminder of the life growing inside me, and my heart ached with the knowledge that I couldn't share this joy with Alden.

Evelyn and Lady did the best they could however and they made it somewhat more bearable.

We finally figured out my elemental affinity, and it was water—no surprise there.

I had been sitting with Lady, watching her weave illusions for a group of little children playing by the water. Three girls, all of them sirens. There were no male sirens. Sirens only gave birth to girls.

The girls were super delighted by my burgeoning belly, and they provided me with much-needed relief from the stares and animosity.

They played within Lady's illusions, occasionally dragging me into their play. It was then that I felt something in the water—it was coming at them, and it was coming fast.

I couldn't move quickly due to my pregnancy. I yelled at them to move away from the water, but the sirens loved the water. Lady, however, quickly grabbed them, pushing them away, and I continued moving backward.

Something burst out of the water, slamming into the ground where the little girls had been, splashing us all with water. It turned out to just be water.

Someone had controlled the water to scare us. I had a feeling I was the target of the prank. We couldn't find the culprit, and the girls soon returned to their play.

"Water, huh?" Mikhail said when Lady told him.

"That's nice I guess," Evelyn replied. I could sense their apprehension.

"Wait, what's nice? What's going on?"

"You did that. You controlled the water, called it to you."

I tried to argue, but Mikhail held my gaze and asked, "Who sensed the water?"

"Me, but that--"

"How did it feel?"

"Like a tingle all over my body. That's why I knew something was wrong. All my senses started tingling and pointing toward the water."

“Amari, that was no prank. Your element just chose you.” Lady sighed, and I had a feeling something about that was bad.

“What’s wrong with water?” I asked.

“It’s... difficult,” Evelyn said. “Mastering earth or air is quite easy, even fire is more compliant than water. Water doesn’t want to be controlled. It resists and it takes a long time for anyone to understand their powers. Many just use the brute force of will. Water breaks many of its elementals eventually.”

Great. As if having painful visions was not enough, I had to get the element that would try to kill me.

Even though everyone still hated me, Mikhail convinced a water elemental to begin my instruction. One week later, he quit angrily, stating that I was lying and mocking everyone because I knew how to handle water. I was doing it better than anyone he had ever seen or heard of.

He was right, of course. Mastering water was ridiculously easy, which made me wonder about Mikhail and Lady’s apprehension. But nothing I said could convince the elemental that I didn’t have elemental powers until that day by the river.

Everyone was puzzled. Until a sprite solved the puzzle for us.

“Maybe she’s carrying an amplifier.”

Everyone in the room turned to look at my belly. I had to ask, “What is an amplifier?”

Mikhail replied, “Nobody knows. But when they’re around, everyone’s powers are heightened. But they’re supposed to be born to people without powers at all. Two non-Paranormals each born to two Paranormal parents are the ones who are supposed to be able to conceive amplifiers. Not that they always do or often do, but all amplifiers have been born that way.”

“Let me guess, they’re rarer than Seydons, and a Seydon carrying one has never happened before?”

“They’re not as rare as Seydons in that given the right conditions, more amplifiers will be born than Seydons. Seydons and seers are the true rarities in our world. But a Seydon having an amplifier? That’s unheard of. That’s quite the baby you’re carrying there, Amari.”

They were all looking at my belly again.

I sighed. One oddity after the other, that’s all my life has been since I saved JT’s pretty face in that alley. That little guy owed me for these inconveniences.

First, the Seydon thing, then I meet someone on whom my powers are useless, and now I’m carrying his child, and that child is an amplifier. Mikhail’s next words gave me cause for alarm.

“They’re also always hunted, even by Paranormals. Everyone wants one for themselves. You will have to be careful with that baby. Extra careful.”

“You’re like a little ember causing great fires, aren’t you?” I said, looking down at my stomach.

Chapter 12: Hunted

The provisions run had started like any other day, go out, meet with our contacts for food and the like, and return without any problems. Evelyn led the group with an air of confidence that reassured us all.

I wasn't required or needed, but it was the first time I would be outside since coming into the safe house, and they just couldn't fight off the guilt when I played the pregnant woman card.

Evelyn kept up a lively chatter, and with a warm smile guided us through the bustling streets, the sun's fading rays painting the city in hues of gold and crimson.

There was a modus operandi since none of us had identity bands. There was a contact who bought and paid for everything, while money from members of the safe house was paid to him through several backdoors that made everything look legit.

As we made our way to the rendezvous point, a sense of unease washed over me. I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being watched. That danger lurked just beyond our vision. My instincts screamed at me to be vigilant, and I clutched the straps of my backpack tighter, trying to push away the sense of impending doom and tiredness.

Suddenly, a sharp glint caught my eye, and I turned to see a man in a dark coat and sunglasses. He gave off an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

“Evelyn, we’ve got trouble,” I whispered urgently, but even as I spoke, the others had already sensed the danger. The atmosphere shifted, tense with anticipation.

We had no idea what these people wanted, but they were not Unity’s Bloodhounds. The specialized unit of dangerous people’s hunters would have attacked by now. But we were Paranormals, each possessing unique abilities, to some, we were a commodity, a means to gain wealth and power.

Evelyn’s eyes darted around, assessing the situation. “Everyone, stay alert. We have company,” she warned, her voice steady despite the rising tension.

The man in the dark coat approached us with an air of arrogance, his eyes scanning our group as if sizing up his prey. “Well, well, what do we have here?” he sneered, his voice dripping with malice.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Evelyn replied, her voice calm but firm. “We’re just passing through.”

The man’s smirk widened, and he chuckled darkly. “Passing through? In that case, I think I’ll help you through.” With a quick motion, he pressed a button on a small device in his hand, and suddenly, we were surrounded by a group of bounty hunters. They emerged from the shadows, their eyes fixed on us with a hunger for the rewards they would reap.

My heart raced as I assessed the situation. The odds were against us, and I began to panic. I couldn’t shift, pregnant as I was, but I could seize minds and control water.

“Evelyn, what do we do?” a young wolf shifter, Jackson, asked, his voice tinged with fear.

“We fight,” Evelyn replied. “Stick together, and remember to have each other’s backs.”

With that, the battle began. You could tell that these men were not rookie bounty hunters, they had some experience in fighting and capturing paranormals. Their weaponry was advanced and it was a tough fight. I tried to control the men, but not only was it hard to meet their eyes amid battle, but I was also being shielded by our group.

But there were only five of us, and there were more than a dozen of them. Currently, they couldn’t break through the brute strength of Evelyn’s bear, and two of them were fighting, their minds firmly in my grasp. But we couldn’t hold them for much longer. I couldn’t seize any more minds, as they’d shielded their eyes.

“We can’t hold them off for long,” Jackson called out, his voice urgent. He fought with katanas instead of shifting. “We need to retreat.”

Evelyn nodded, her eyes scanning our surroundings for an escape route. “Fall back, everyone! Stick together!” The words sounded powerful coming from a bear’s mouth.

As we moved to regroup, Unity’s agents arrived, called by the bounty hunters. Their arrival was announced by the whirring of their chopper. I was not the only one that began to panic. We were not only outnumbered but severely outgunned.

“We have to split up,” Evelyn called. “It’s our only chance to escape.”

“No, we can’t do that!” I protested, but she silenced me with a determined look.

“It’s the only way. Everyone, find a safe place to hide, and we’ll regroup later,” she said, her voice unwavering.

Reluctantly, we split into smaller groups, then each of us eventually ran in different directions.

We heard a roar, and I turned around to see Evelyn’s bear launch herself at several attackers in a rampage. Gunshots rang out in rapid staccato sequence, all of them hitting the brown bear, but she went on.

She caught my eye and mouthed one word. “Go.”

Tears obscuring my vision, I ran from the scene, taking the opening Evelyn had given us.

After what felt like an eternity, I found myself in a quiet alley, hidden from view. My breaths came in ragged gasps, and my heart pounded in my chest. I had to find a way to regroup with the others or find my way back to the Sanctuary.

But before I could make a move, I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Someone had tracked me down.

In a desperate attempt to escape, I summoned all the strength I could muster. My powers surged within me, making me feel stronger than ever before. The adrenaline coursing through my veins fueled my resolve as I made a split-second decision.

I turned around, punching my pursuer hard in the face. His nose broke and his spectacles broke. Bits of the glass lacerated my fist, but that was irrelevant at the moment. His eyes were exposed, and I immediately seized his mind. There was no time for anything fancy. Bloodhounds were trained to resist mind control, but they were not trained to resist a Seydon's power magnified by an amplifier.

I gave his brain only one command. *Erase*. I saw it take effect immediately as the man stumbled and halted. He looked around, confused, unsure where he was or even who he was.

It was cruel, but I had been left with no other choice—besides, I was angry about Evelyn's death.

I found my way back to the Old District, where I found Jackson wrapped in bandages. One of his katanas was missing.

"You made it," Lady said, and she deflated with relief.

"Where are the others?"

Jackson shook his head, and my heart broke. Mikhail was there to catch me as I stumbled.

I looked at him. "This is my fault. I saw that vision. I shouldn't have let Evelyn go."

"She knew the risks, Amari. So did Mason."

Mason was the other person who had died.

But I had no time to grieve because an alarm rang through the Sanctuary. We had been discovered.

“What? How?”

Immediately, I knew the answer. Alden. From the look on Mikhail’s face—and everyone else’s—they were thinking the same thing.

“Amari, this isn’t your fault. You don’t know him like we do. Besides, he found you. You didn’t invite him here.”

I nodded mutely, but I knew the truth. I had called Alden that day when I sent him that message through the link we had. He could not have found me here otherwise.

What followed was a well-rehearsed operation. The vast majority of those who lived in the safe house ran into the tunnels, sprites bolted into the light forest surrounding us, and they soon became hard to notice in the vegetation. The sirens dove into the water, swimming for what they were worth. A few—less than two dozen—took up arms and started strapping them on.

Elementals readied to fight, manipulators prepared to control minds or matter or perception. Mikhail was handing me off to one of those leaving but I stopped him.

“What’s going on?”

“You’re a Seydon carrying an amplifier. We cannot risk you,” he shouted.

Angrily I replied, “That’s Alden out there, Mikhail. The father of my child. If you don’t want to suddenly find yourself wearing frocks and thinking you’re my baby’s magical nanny, I suggest you get the fuck out of my way.”

Thankfully, I didn’t have to make good on my threat. Lady immediately popped beside me.

“I’m staying with her.”

Mikhail sighed. “Fine.” He shook hands with Jade and Ruby. “Lead them to safety.” And they were off.

As the noise of choppers and carriers filled the air, we readied to fight, and with my heart in a million pieces I prepared to face the man who had betrayed me.

The battle that followed was ridiculously short—we were outnumbered at least six to one, and that was not counting the reserves that didn’t enter the grounds of the Sanctuary. They lost ten men, and we lost two—a water elemental who broke under the strain of his element—his head exploded in my face, painting all of us near him with bits of bone, flesh, and brain— and a shifter.

The rest of us were captured while the men kept pursuing those who had fled. The men must not have known I could control their minds because one of them took off his goggles. I immediately made him drown himself, pretending that he had been grabbed by something in the water.

We were locked up, everyone getting power dampeners that fit their powers, and the shifters were locked in extra heavy and extra thick cuffs. Rows of agents in red battle gear lined the carrier that they shoved us in, guns and weapons at the ready.

The journey to District One was quick, and a few minutes after landing, I was uncuffed with gun turrets bigger than my head pointing at me and pushed roughly into a stone cell barred with reinforced glass that was several feet

thick, “Where you’ll be spending the rest of your life,” as an agent had put it.

“But don’t worry,” she said with a smirk. “You’ll be provided a crib for the mutt you’re carrying.”

“How generous,” I replied.

Well, Jenna had said I belonged behind bars. I suppose she would be happy to see me behind them now.

Lost in my thoughts, I was startled by a familiar voice. Alden stood before me, his eyes filled with concern and remorse. “Amari,” he said softly, his voice carried his emotions even through the walls of the cell I was in.

I recoiled, hurt and anger coursing through me. “Why? Why did you betray me?” I demanded, my voice shaking with emotion.

Alden’s eyes widened in shock. “What are you talking about? I wasn’t there. I didn’t betray anyone,” he replied, his voice tinged with hurt.

His words cut deep, and even without any further explanation, I knew he was telling the truth. The bond between us would never allow him to lie to me, or me to him. Oh, we can voice a lie to the other person, but we would know. But the others weren’t so easily convinced.

“I’m sorry I ever doubted you, Alden,” I said, tears welling in my eyes. It was then that I stood up to stand closer to the glass.

Alden’s face contorted with anguish, and he hesitated before speaking again. “Amari, you’re pregnant?” he

said, his voice barely a whisper. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Alden asked, hurt obvious in his eyes.

I shrugged, my emotions too heavy to bear. “I didn’t know how to tell you,” I replied, my voice barely audible.

Alden left without another word.

Chapter 13: A Badly Planned Prison Break

My heart was beating hard against the cages of my chest as my mind raced with a daring plan. It was time to break free from this prison, and I knew exactly how to do it. The agents who had captured us and the guards outside my cell had no idea what I could do, and that would be their downfall.

The reports from when I attacked those boys only spoke of shifting, and I figured Alden hadn't turned in whatever else he found about me to the agency. Lady and about eight others were wearing dampeners around their ankles, but I wasn't. Dampeners had no effect against shifters.

I took a deep breath, and started on the first part, drawing the guards' attention. I began banging on the cell door, creating a commotion. The guards rushed toward my cell, their expressions of annoyance and curiosity.

"What's going on in there?" one of them barked as he peered through the small window.

I put on an act, feigning desperation and frustration. "Let me out of here! This place is driving me insane!"

The guards exchanged wary glances, but they were falling right into my trap. They smirked cockily and stared into the cell, getting a good look at me. And that was all I needed.

Once they were close enough, I locked eyes with them and commanded, “Release me and the others.”

Their expressions glazed over, and they became my automatons, mechanically obeying my words. With the guards under my control, I directed them to free not only me but also the others imprisoned in this wretched place. This entire area was for holding Paranormals, and by the time we were done, we numbered somewhere above thirty. The others were too weak to move, having been severely abused, starved, or experimented on. Others had died in their cells, their bodies beginning to rot. In a few, we saw skeletons.

Before we left, I had the guards go to the surveillance room and make sure the guards there wouldn't make trouble for us.

I had to stay with the guards as they carried out my orders, they occasionally came out of it and I had to recontrol them. Although my powers were strong, the sheer daring of what I was doing made me unsure which caused me to sometimes slip.

Finally, we managed to find our way through the prison areas, phase two was successful but that was as far as my plan went. Thankfully, Mikhail was around, he took charge and told us to split up into smaller groups to avoid arousing suspicion. But others didn't think it was a good plan, especially some of those who had been there for longer. They thought it was a ploy for Mikhail and the rest of us to use them as a distraction so we could escape District One. As we argued in whispers about what to do,

Alden appeared before us, his imposing figure commanding attention.

Everyone except me immediately drew back and went on guard. Alden was on one side, the rest of the other were on another and I was somewhere slightly in the middle.

“What in the world are you doing, Amari?” he demanded, his voice concerned and frustrated. He threw a quick look over his shoulder and raised a finger for everyone to be quiet. When he was satisfied, he dropped the finger and faced me. He fiddled with his tie, drawing it up then loosening it again.

Fuck, that was so hot. I shook my head slightly. Focus Amari, focus! “I’m freeing them, Alden. They don’t deserve to be imprisoned like this.”

“They are dangerous!” He replied. Even though he whispered, his voice was still powerful enough.

He got many death stares.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that! You are all dangerous individuals,” Alden repeated. “And do you think you would get out of here without help? What are these pathetic guards going to do for you?”

“They helped us out.”

Alden laughed. “Right, they did. Amari, you’re coming with me. The rest of you can do whatever the hell you want.”

“Like hell she is!” Lady spoke up.

“You think I’m taking her back? The mother of my child? I’m done here, and I’m getting her out.”

The rest of the group erupted in vehement opposition to Alden’s words. Fear and anger clashed in the corridor, and I knew I had a decision to make.

Just then, an alert blared throughout District One, announcing our escape and implicating Alden as a rogue agent. The government now deemed us all extremely dangerous and called for our immediate capture.

Everyone was quiet for a while and we all stared dumbly at Alden. He stared back, and we all shifted our eyes.

“What? You thought these guards helped you evade the security crawling through this place for the past two hours?”

“You’ve been—” I started and stopped. Alden had been following us and clearing the path for us. That warmed my heart.

Amidst the chaos, I looked at Alden, our eyes locking in a moment of silent understanding, there was no time for lengthy deliberation.

“I’m sorry, Alden,” I said firmly, “for ever doubting your words. Right now, we need your help to get out of District One. We’ll all listen to you.”

Alden’s gaze held mine for a moment longer before he made his decision. “Fine, but we have to be careful. Heavy surveillance blankets District One. We won’t get far if we’re bickering or if I have to stop to convince you

every five minutes. You're already too large of a group as it is."

The rest of the group grumbled their discontent, but I knew it was the right call. We needed him if we were to survive.

The alert continued ringing out, branding us as fugitives and implicating Alden as our ally. Words like "extremely dangerous" and "use extreme measures" kept ringing out. Our circumstances had intensified, and it was now clear that we were in this together.

As we moved through the shadows, the situation bore down on us. Each step felt like a tightrope walk between freedom and capture. Fear gripped me, knowing that any misstep could lead to the end of our journey and our lives.

Alden's presence was a reassuring constant amid the chaos. I wonder what drove him to join our cause. His loyalty to Unity was undeniable, yet he risked everything to help us escape. Maybe there was more to him than met the eye. But I couldn't afford to be sidetracked by these thoughts. Survival was our priority.

The hours turned to days and we were constantly on the move, hiding in the darkest corners of District One—places we wouldn't know existed if Alden hadn't led us to them. Twice, he took us into a Bloodhound safe house, a bold move if there was one. The exhaustion gnawed at us, both physically and mentally. Yet, he kept pushing us ragged. If it had been just us, we would have taken several breaks already.

Once, at the very beginning, Lady tried to cast illusions, but Alden sharply rebuked her. “Even the slightest paranormal activity within districts one to three will set off an alarm. Do. Not. Even. Think. About. It! Do you all understand me? Amari, the moment you took those guards, they knew!”

He left the rest unsaid, he was the reason we even made it out at all. We all mellowed out a little after that scolding.

Throughout our journey, I noticed how Alden’s relationship with the group evolved. At first, met with suspicion, he slowly earned our trust through his actions. Lady, in particular, seemed to form an unexpected rapport with him. Maybe she sensed the same thing within Alden that I did. By day three, they were more or less buddies.

As we neared the end of District Three, our group faced its most difficult decision yet. We now needed somewhere to go to the ground and here, Alden could not help. He turned to me.

“Do you have any safe houses anywhere nearby?”

Lady and Mikhail exchanged a look, Mikhail nodded, and Lady spoke.

“There’s one under District Three.”

“Bold,” Alden said. But he was smiling.

Chapter 14: The Crow and the Ember

Following Lady's directions, Alden and I led the group on a treacherous journey through the labyrinth under District Three. The ruins of the old world were interesting and dangerous, as many animals and shifty characters have made it their home, not just Paranormals. Again, Unity could have done something about it, but they left it alone. As we descended deeper into the earth, the air grew cooler, carrying with it untold mysteries and an ancient, damp smell.

At some point, it looked as if we were going nowhere, and I called Lady to my side. "Are you sure this is the right way?" I asked, my voice hushed as we navigated the dimly lit tunnels.

She nodded, her small features looking very worn out by the last week. "I've been here before, Amari. Trust me. The safe house is concealed under here, and it gives easy access to the surface."

Alden, silent but vigilant, followed closely behind us, not saying a word. He would occasionally come to my side to check on me then return to the back of the group to watch over all of us.

After what felt like an eternity, Lady halted at a particular intersection. Her eyes narrowed as she surveyed the surroundings. "This way," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

We followed her lead, our steps sounding hushed in the creepy silence of the underground labyrinth. The air grew colder with each passing moment, a stark contrast to the sweltering tension that clung to us.

Lady's guided us through a winding passage that seemed to defy the laws of time. Finally, we reached a massive house that looked as though it was carved into the earth. Or maybe the earth had crept up around it after years of being under the new world.

The door bore a meticulously carved crow, Lady explained that it is the symbol of Sebastian Crowe, the leader of the paranormals. She whispered it to me as we came upon the house. Sebastian himself was standing before the doors, his dark eyes sharp and calculating.

"Welcome," he greeted us, his voice refined.

Fatigue weighed heavily on our shoulders, the relentless pursuit of freedom having exacted its toll. The rest of our group, who had taken different paths to reach this sanctuary, trickled in one by one. For most of us, the immediate desire was to wash the dust and grime off and sleep.

Sebastian observed us, especially me and Alden who was now by my side, one protective hand by my waist. I was leaning into him more than was obvious. "We have much to discuss," he said, "but first, you all could use some rest."

Alden and I got a room to ourselves, and we immediately settled in for a long sleep. Alden cradled me as we slept,

his hands on my belly. It was the first time he'd been alone with me since he had snuck into the Sanctuary.

We didn't talk much about anything, just slept.

We had arrived in the early hours, so I woke up late in the evening, having slept for a little over twelve hours. Alden had gotten up several hours before me. After taking a bath and putting on the clothes that I assumed Alden had brought for me, I went to the large living room of the old mansion.

What I saw surprised me a little. Alden was dressed as sharply as always, and he was speaking with Sebastian, Mikhail, and three other people. They were bent over a map.

Are they strategizing? With Alden?

"Uhm, what are you gentlemen up to?" I asked.

Alden immediately came to my side. I let him hug me and rub my belly. I was enjoying having him beside me, even if there were less than two months left in the pregnancy.

"Amari," Sebastian said, and I lifted my face off Alden's chest.

"I hear you're a Seydon."

"I am."

He held out a staff. It was gnarly, and at first, I thought it was an old piece of stick. But it had been carved that way. The top was pronged, and it held a sapphire so blue it looked like the ocean.

Sebastian began speaking, his rich voice filled the underground room as he recounted the tales of an era long past, when our world had been different, and the Paranormals lived with a different kind of hope. Before technology was built that could do the things we could, and paranoia and Unity propaganda turned the normal people against us.

“In the old world,” he continued, “Crowes served as advisors and guides to the Seydons, the natural-born leaders of our kind.”

His eyes, deep and knowing, locked onto mine as he continued, “The Seydons possessed a unique combination of powers, which makes them the strongest amongst us. Naturally, they led, but Seydons tended to be volatile, so they needed a counterbalance. Which is where we come in.”

Sebastian’s fingers traced the gnarled surface of the staff he held, and his voice took on a reverent tone. “This staff, carved ages ago, symbolizes that heritage. The sapphire sitting in its crown is for the Seydons. It’s called the Stone of Alchemy.”

I saw reverence in the eyes of everyone present in the room, except for me and Alden. They knew the lore, we didn’t. To me, that was just a usually symmetric yet somewhat asymmetric jewel.

But as his words hung in the air, the meaning of the unspoken bits settled upon me. This mantle –or staff– of leadership had been passed down through generations. And now it was my turn to lead. But I didn’t even feel like

it, besides, what do I know about the paranormals of Daruskov that qualified me to lead them?

Sebastian's gaze held mine, unwavering and resolute. "In the absence of a season," he said, his voice carrying both conviction and expectation, "I have taken on the role of mentor and strategist for the resistance. But you're here now."

His words left no room for doubt— leadership would inevitably settle upon my shoulders. I would be expected to lead our people and take charge of the resistance, a responsibility that would come to me, maybe not immediately, but maybe after I had delivered my child.

"Uhm, can we not do this right now?" I said.

Sebastian gave me a good, long look and nodded. He turned back to the map and invited me to join them. But I was very pregnant and still very tired. Also very hungry.

"Can I get something to eat first?"

It was Alden who replied. "Come." He had taken the time to know the place while I was asleep.

Days passed and we fully settled into the underground mansion. Sebastian was a pragmatic leader, he did not bother with distrusting or questioning Alden, he just put him and his skills to use. His high clearance provided us with a wealth of knowledge about the government and Daruskov's inner workings.

Very soon, the day we had been expecting came and I went into labor. Lady and a few other women who were trained midwives and one doctor saw to my labor. They

tried to keep him out of the room but, Alden bullied his way into the room. His hands held mine throughout the three-hour-long labor.

When the moment finally arrived, a hush fell over the room. My daughter was born, bathed in a soft glow that came from somewhere inside her. My child was a literal nightlight. A fresh breeze blew into the room when she belted out her first cry. It shouldn't have been possible, considering we were underground, but the breeze blew, nonetheless.

Alden was immediately captivated by the child, his eyes softening with tenderness. "She's a miracle," he whispered.

We named her Ember, my little nightlight baby.

Chapter 15: Technological Aid

Ember's birth marked a turning point for the paranormal. She was not just a child. She was a symbol, of hope and strength. With my arrival and her birth, it seemed everything was gearing us towards a fight with Unity.

Ember fascinated everyone, especially because of how she glowed. In those early days of motherhood, I often found myself gazing at her tiny form, marveling at the wonder of my baby and wishing I could share it with my family. I missed them.

One evening, as I sat cradling Ember in my arms, Alden approached, his expression of concern and determination. "Amari," he said softly, "we need to talk."

I shifted Ember to one arm and turned my attention to him. "What's on your mind, Alden?"

He gestured for us to move to a quieter corner of the underground mansion, away from prying ears. We settled on a pair of worn-out armchairs, our faces illuminated by the soft, gentle light radiating from Ember. Mikhail, Kylian, and Lady were with us.

"I've been thinking," Alden began, his voice low, "about our next steps. We can't stay hidden forever, Amari. Unity is relentless, and with me here, they won't rest until they find us."

I nodded, his words made sense. "So, what are you thinking, Alden?"

Alden's gaze never wavered from mine as he spoke, his eyes reflecting the same determination that had drawn me to him. "We need to take the fight to Unity. It's the only way you'll truly be free."

I felt the skepticism among the others at his suggestion. A frontal assault was not their usual way of doing things. They were more used to stealth and subterfuge.

Mikhail voiced what many were thinking. "Alden, you can't seriously be suggesting that we charge into Daruskov, guns blazing. That's a suicide mission."

Alden's response was measured but unwavering. "I understand your concerns, but it's only a matter of time before Unity finds us. They won't rest until they either capture or kill me, and I won't let that happen."

"Looks like you're the problem here. You leave and we're safe." Mikhail replied to him.

I gave him a sharp look. "Alden's not leaving my side! He's the father of my child," I blurted out.

Mikhail laughed. "Relax, I was only joking." Alden raised an eyebrow at that.

Lady chimed in, "Alden look, we've survived by staying hidden, by using our abilities to avoid confrontations. A direct assault goes against everything we've been doing."

Alden's gaze swept over the group, his eyes meeting each person in turn. "I'm not guaranteeing victory," he admitted. "But I am guaranteeing that I'll do everything in my power to help you fight Unity. You've seen their cruelty firsthand. They won't stop until they've crushed

every last one of you. They've already done half of the work, and Unity doesn't care if it takes another hundred years. The government is not in a rush. But you, can you all hide forever and hope they'll go away?"

A palpable tension hung in the air as we considered Alden's proposal. The prospect of confronting Unity head-on was daunting, but the point he made was also undeniable. At some point, everyone here will be caught and those that weren't will die of old age. Unity, on the other hand, was not going anywhere.

Sebastian, who had joined the conversation, finally spoke. "You have a point, Alden, Unity's relentless pursuit leaves us with few options. But we must also be careful in everything we do. The goal is to ensure that we're not all wiped out."

Alden nodded in agreement. "I wouldn't have it any other way. We'll need every advantage we can get. We need to be prepared for the absolute worst-case scenario and trust me, it will come to that." he said. "Unity won't hesitate to use extreme measures to finish this fight."

Lady raised a hand. "Well, what do you suggest then?"

Alden's gaze swept over the group, his eyes locking with mine for a moment before he continued. "We'll need to strike hard and fast, catching Unity off guard."

"There must be some weak points we can use," Mikhail said. Which for some reason made Alden chuckle.

"Unity has no weaknesses, none. But Mikahial has a point, what we'll do is create weaknesses and exploit

those weaknesses. You hit someone in a spot for long enough, it becomes sore.”

Kylian raised an eyebrow “And what if we can’t?” he said slowly, speaking each word one at a time, his voice heavy with doubt. “What if we just, fail?”

Alden’s response was resolute, his gaze unwavering. “Failure is not an option,” he declared. “We’re fighting for your freedom, for the future of paranormals everywhere. You can’t afford to back down now.”

Sebastian added his voice to Alden’s conviction. “Alden is right. When you’re fighting tyranny and oppression, setbacks are allowed, but failure is not an option. Not for us. It’s time for dinner, we’ll continue this conversation later.”

The next day Alden left.

I was mad as hell when I woke up and couldn’t find him and Mikhail was giving me smug looks. That was until Lady handed me a note Alden had written before leaving. The note said we needed information if we were going to plan a proper attack and he was going to help us get it.

Five days later, Alden returned to the hideout, and he wasn’t alone. He entered with a man who wore his hair in a ponytail that looked like it was slicked back with grease. He had sunken eyes and wore extra thick glasses, the man looked like he could be blown away by the slightest wind, especially with the oversized clothes he was wearing. Alden introduced him as Draven Blackthorn.

Draven's presence was immediately felt when Alden led him to an isolated room where he began to set up his equipment. We all followed, wondering about this new man and his odd behavior. He didn't even ask, Alden just pointed to a room in a corner and he immediately started setting up without a word. He completely ignored the group that he had attracted.

Sebastian was the first to extend a hand. "Welcome, Draven," he said. "If you're here, it means you're willing to help our cause."

Draven accepted Sebastian's hand with a nod and a smile, but he didn't speak.

Lady cut to the chase. "What can you do for us, Draven?"

It was Alden who answered. "He specializes in infiltrating the most secure digital spaces. He has a bunch of digital copies of himself. If anyone can help us with breaking Unity's systems and communications, it's him."

Draven ignored the conversation about him and continued passing wires and setting up strange devices. He would occasionally tap Alden or the nearest person and gesture for them to help him with something. Eventually, people left him alone.

However, one question remained unanswered, one that had been nagging at our minds since Draven's arrival. How did Alden know Draven? What connection did they share that made Alden trust him?

We were back in the living room when Kylian finally dared to ask the question.

He cleared his throat, his eyes locked on Alden. “Alden,” he began cautiously, “we are kinda sorta curious about wonder how you came to know Draven. Your connection to him seems... unusual.”

Alden seemed to weigh his words carefully before responding. “Draven and I go way back,” he admitted, his tone cryptic. “We share a history that’s years long.”

The room fell silent as we waited for further explanation. When none came, it was clear that Alden had no intention of elaborating.

Frustration and curiosity gnawed at us, but it was me who finally broke the silence. I gently placed Ember, our radiant baby, on a couch and rose from my seat. My voice carried a mixture of exasperation and affection as I addressed Alden. “Alden, you can’t just leave us hanging like that. You brought him in here, we deserve to know.”

Alden’s eyes met mine in a silent standoff. Finally, Alden sighed, conceding defeat.

“Draven is one of my assets in Daruskov. He generally works in the underbelly of the city, but he and I have a working relationship.”

I raised an eyebrow, my curiosity piqued. “Assets for what, Alden?”

Alden hesitated for a moment before responding. “Let’s just say I have a network of informants and allies who

help me gather information and navigate the city. Draven is an important part of that network.”

“Let me guess,” a temperamental shifter with a blue mohawk said, “he helped you collect information on your missions using every method available to him since he can do unauthorized things and you can’t?”

“What makes you think I was not allowed free reign?” Alden fired back. He faced me and Sebastian. “Draven is a luxury I could afford due to my status. With me decommissioned, he’s in as much danger as any of you here, maybe even more. He has an interest in seeing that this place remains safe.”

The shifter scoffed and left, everyone watched him go.

Chapter 16: Internal Divisions

Since Draven's arrival, the atmosphere in the house had grown tense, many people were not okay with how much Alden was being involved in our plans but of course, he was my partner and they could not say anything about it. Yet, they remain resentful, which was understandable, considering his history. Eventually, some people felt bold enough to approach Sebastian about it.

Draven's presence had injected a sense of urgency into our preparations, and with it came a dose of uncertainty. Are we not letting this Unity agent move us too fast?

Mikhail was the one who finally said something, after almost two weeks of simmering tension in the mansion. "Sebastian," Mikhail began, his brow furrowed, "I hold your leadership in the highest regard, but I can't help but wonder if we're moving too hastily. We've always been careful and that's how we survived so far. Must we now be in such a rush?"

Sebastian met Mikhail's question with patience. "Mikhail, your concerns are both valid and appreciated. But we must not just be shrewd now, but also bold enough to accept that we are now in a different situation. Things are moving whether we like it or not, and we have to either keep up or be caught by surprise by events."

"Such as letting a Bloodhound take over the whole place?"

I sighed. Sebastian however was more calm. "How has Alden taken over the place? There's nothing he has done

that I did not approve of besides, the Seydon agrees with him, what more do you need?”

Sebastian was turning the concerns over to me and I did not want that responsibility yet.

“Sebastian,” I addressed our leader, “These people respect you, they respect your authority. You’ve guided them through countless years of struggle, and I believe you are more than capable of continuing to lead us, especially in the times we are entering.”

Sebastian turned his gaze toward me, his eyes reflecting a blend of gratitude and understanding. “Amari, I’m deeply appreciative of your support. However, it’s crucial to acknowledge that we now have a Seydon among us. Tradition dictates that we follow the guidance of the Seydon.”

My response was quick and unwavering. “Sebastian, I have no intention of assuming leadership, at least not at this moment. Your leadership has been a pillar of strength for them for years, and I firmly believe you should continue to lead us.”

“Amari, your deference to my leadership is greatly appreciated,” he began, his tone reflecting the gravity of the decision. “I’m willing to set aside tradition for now, but it won’t be long before you must take charge of your role. For now, your support reinforces our unity.”

I nodded in acknowledgment, my heart heavy with the knowledge that a time would come when I would need to step into the role. I led, it was an absurd idea, and I was only trying my best to push it away for another day. I was

thankful that Sebastian agreed with me and we were unified.

However, the doubts were far from being cleared. A voice from the crowd reignited the simmering tension. “Are we truly going to follow Alden’s advice and go to war?” the voice asked. I looked around but I didn’t find the person who had spoken.

I took a deep breath, my determination clear. “Yes,” I replied firmly, my gaze steady. “I stand by Alden’s plan. It’s time we confront Unity directly and put an end to their tyranny.”

As doubts and suspicions about Alden’s strategy swirled in the room, voices began to rise, each person expressing their concerns and questions. Mikhail is always the one to voice his thoughts, voice his skepticism.

Mikhail raised an eyebrow, his tone heavy with doubt. “So we are trusting Alden’s plan, even after what happened at the safe house in the Old District?”

A hushed murmur of agreement rippled through the group, and I could see fear and uncertainty etched on their faces.

I feel a surge of frustration and a need to defend Alden against these allegations. “That’s not true,” I interjected, my voice carrying an edge of anger. “Alden wasn’t even there during the raid on the safe house. He has risked everything to help us.” But they weren’t listening anymore.

A tall woman named Elara, her arms crossed, spoke up next. “Alden might not have been at the safehouse physically, but he was the one who found Amari. What if he had something to do with it? What if he’s leading us into a trap?”

Alden, who had been standing quietly, finally decided to address the growing suspicion. “I understand your concerns,” he began, his voice steady and measured. “But I had nothing to do with the raid on the safe house. I was miles away at the time.”

Another man, Fieri, joined Elara’s side. He scoffed. “We’re supposed to believe you??”

I stepped in, my voice unwavering in defense of Alden. “I can vouch for him. Alden has risked everything to help us escape from Unity’s clutches. He has provided us with valuable information and resources. I trust him.”

Sebastian, our leader, decided to add his perspective, his voice filled with wisdom. “Doubt can be a powerful force, but it can also weaken us. We must remember that we are all united by a common goal—to secure the freedom of Paranormals and end Unity’s oppression.”

“He wants to hand us over to the government,” someone accused, the fear in their voice palpable.

Alden’s presence in our group had always been a complex issue, and now, it was obvious that the doubts and suspicions surrounding him had come to the forefront. Sebastian stepped forward, his voice carrying his authority. “I understand your concerns,” he said, addressing the group. “But we must remember that we

are all in this together. Remember our fallen who would want us to carry on in this fight? We can't just give up now."

He paused for a moment, allowing his words to sink in before continuing. "Alden's plan is a risky one, but it is a plan that offers us a chance to fight back. We cannot let doubt and suspicion divide us now. We must stand united and trust one another."

Sebastian's words resonated with many in the room, and I could see a shift in the atmosphere. Alden remained silent, his gaze focused on the group. But the tension in the house since Draven's arrival had finally escalated into a storm of dissent, and despite my best efforts, I found myself unable to quell the rising tempest of conflicting opinions. Voices clashed like crashing waves, each person voicing their stance on Alden's strategy.

I stepped forward, my voice carrying an urgency born of frustration and a deep desire for unity. "Please, everyone, let's calm down and listen to each other. We can't afford to let this divide us."

But my words fell on deaf ears as the argument raged on, voices growing louder and more impassioned. The room seemed to shrink as the tension thickened, and I could feel the uncertainty pressing down upon us.

Mikhail, his brow furrowed in anger, spoke out against Alden's plan. "I won't risk the lives of our people on some reckless scheme. We've survived by staying hidden and avoiding conflict. Why change that now?"

Others in the room echoed his sentiments, and the divide among us deepened. It was a fight within our ranks, a battle of ideas and beliefs that threatened to tear us apart.

I continued to plead for a reason, my voice rising above the din. “We can’t stay hidden forever. Unity will find us eventually, and we must be prepared to fight back. Alden’s plan may be risky, but it’s a chance to strike back at our oppressors.”

But my words were drowned out by the cacophony of dissent, and I felt a sense of helplessness wash over me. Unity did not even need to do anything and they were already winning.

Sebastian finally stepped forward, his voice commanding attention. “Enough,” he declared, his tone firm. “I understand your concerns, and it’s natural to have doubts. But right now, we need to not let our frustrations distract us. We’ve been hiding in the shadows for far too long.”

His words seemed to carry a weight that silenced the room, if only momentarily. “Amari is right. We can’t stay hidden forever. Unity’s grip on us tightens with each passing day. We must now prepare to fight back, to take a stand against the tyranny that threatens us.”

A sense of weariness washed over me as I watched the group continue to argue, their voices filled with anger and fear. I had hoped to bring unity and clarity to our discussions, but it seemed that the emotions and doubts were too deeply ingrained to be easily dispelled.

Sebastian approached me, his voice softer as he spoke directly to me. “Amari, sometimes people just need to vent their frustrations. We can’t force them to see reason. But if it’s worth anything, I believe it’s high time we stopped sneaking around and started fighting back.”

The frustration and discord within the hideout had become overwhelming, and I could no longer bear the cacophony of voices clashing in disagreement. With Ember cradled in my arms, I decided to step away from the heated debate that seemed to have no end in sight.

Leaving the building behind, I ventured out into the ruins of the old world that lay beneath the imposing structures of the modern Daruskov. The crumbling remnants of a bygone era surrounded me, a stark contrast to the turmoil and uncertainty that filled the present.

Ember’s tiny fingers gripped at the fabric of my clothes as I wandered through the dilapidated streets, my footsteps echoing in the silence of the decaying city. There wasn’t much to see in this desolate landscape, but the solitude offered a momentary respite from the tumultuous discussions within the hideout.

As I continued to explore the ruins, I began to hear the faint sound of footsteps approaching. My senses immediately went on high alert. Ember, sensing my tension, grew very still in my arms.

A figure emerged from the shadows, and my heart raced for a moment before I recognized the familiar form of

Alden. Relief washed over me, and I let out a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding.

"Alden," I greeted him, my voice a mixture of relief and exhaustion. "I needed some fresh air, away from all the arguments."

He nodded in understanding, his expression calm and composed. We found a nearby spot to sit, and I settled down with Ember still in my arms, her wide eyes taking in the world around her.

For a while, we sat in companionable silence, the only sounds being the distant echoes of the ongoing debate back at the hideout. The ruins of the old world stretched out before us, a testament to the passage of time and the resilience of humanity.

After a time, Alden broke the silence, his voice gentle and measured. "You know, this part of the old world has an interesting backstory of its own. Before Unity brought the new world, these streets were bustling with life."

I turned to look at him, curious about the history he seemed to know so well. "Tell me more," I encouraged.

Alden's eyes were distant as he began to speak, his words carrying knowledge and experience. "This district was once a hub of commerce and culture. People from all walks of life came here to trade and exchange ideas. It was a place of diversity and innovation."

I listened intently as he painted a vivid picture of the past, a time when the world had been very different from the one that we know now. The richness of his

storytelling left me in awe, and I marvel at how much he knew.

The house, now abandoned by the upper world, had been a part of a large estate. Most of the part of the Old District that had been converted into the hideout was once used as a commercial ground. You could find anything you wanted, literally anything you wanted to buy. There were all kinds of trades going on in the district and the mansions had been part of the buildings that made up the trading offices which were part of the School of Commerce, which was what the area had been called until Unity rose to power, built Districts One, Two and Three and it became the Old District.

Based on the structures I was looking at, it must have been a really impressive place, filled with color and people.

“You seem to know a lot about history,” I commented, my curiosity piqued.

Alden offered a small, rueful smile. “The Bloodhound program wasn’t just about training us to hunt and fight Paranormals. It was a comprehensive education that covered a wide range of subjects, including history.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued by this revelation. “So, you were trained not only as hunters but as scholars as well?”

He nodded. “Bloodhounds are a high-risk task force, designed to handle a variety of dangerous situations. Paranormals were just one aspect of our training. Unity wanted us to be versatile and adaptable, capable of handling any threat.”

Alden and I sat together in the desolate ruins of the old world, our quiet conversation a momentary respite from the chaos and uncertainty that surrounded us. The decisions we faced bore down on me, and I confided in him, sharing the fears that had been gnawing at the edges of my resolve.

“Even though I agree with your plan,” I began my voice a fragile thread in the silence, “I’m terrified of what might happen if we choose to fight. What if we fail, Alden? What if we die, and it’s all for nothing?”

Alden’s eyes, usually so composed, held a glimmer of sadness as he met my gaze. He didn’t sugarcoat the truth, choosing instead to be brutally honest. “Amari, if we go up against Unity, there’s a very real possibility that many of us will die. It won’t be an easy fight, and there’s no guarantee of success.”

My heart sank at his words, the reality of our situation crashing down on me like a wave. The fear I had been harboring was now an overwhelming presence, threatening to drown me in doubt and uncertainty.

Alden’s next words, however, caught me off guard and gave me a sliver of hope. “But since you have me, your chances of success have just shot up to about eighty percent. Give or take another ten.”

I blinked in surprise, my fear momentarily replaced by confusion. “Isn’t that a bit... cocky?” I asked, a hint of skepticism in my voice.

Alden responded with a wink and a confident smile that managed to ease some of the tension that had been

building within me. “Sometimes, confidence is what makes the difference in a battle, Amari. I’ve seen it firsthand.”

“Walk me back?” I asked as I rose to my feet.

He took my arm and led the way.

Chapter 17: Stolen Innocence

The night was still and enveloped in hushed silence, broken only by the distant sounds of people in hushed discussions, sounds of animals scuttling by the mansion, and the like. It had been a long and taxing day of debates and heated arguments about our uncertain future.

I lay in bed, my body exhausted from the emotional turmoil of the day. Alden, beside me, breathed steadily in his slumber, Ember was sleeping soundly in her crib in the adjoining nursery, watched over by the two nurses we had grown to trust.

But then a noise pierced the stillness of the night, jolting me awake. It was a muffled cry, followed by the sound of hurried footsteps and a struggle. Panic surged through me, and without a second thought, I scrambled out of bed.

Alden, awakened by my sudden movement, was already on his feet, his instincts sharp and alert. I could see the concern in his eyes as we exchanged a wordless glance, our hearts pounding in unison.

The chilling realization that our sanctuary had been breached by an unknown assailant gnawed at my thoughts as we hurried through the dimly lit corridors of the hideout. My heart clenched with fear, but I drew strength from the knowledge that Alden was by my side, his unwavering presence a source of comfort amid chaos.

We rushed into the nursery, and what met our eyes was a scene of chaos and horror. Ember's crib was empty, her

tiny form snatched from its confines. One of the nurses lay lifeless on the floor, her vacant eyes staring into the abyss, while the other nurse was writhing in pain, clutching her injured leg.

Time seemed to slow as I took in the gruesome sight before me, my mind struggling to process the nightmare that had unfolded in mere moments.

The injured nurse's urgent plea reached my ears and I rushed to her side, my heart heavy with sympathy for her suffering. I thought she was asking me for help. My trembling hands reached out, seeking to assess her injuries, but her voice snapped with a desperate urgency that struck me like a dagger to the heart.

“Go after your baby! Don't waste time on me!”

Her words, filled with raw urgency, pierced through my fear and confusion, igniting a blaze of determination within me. I tore my gaze away from her, my mind singularly focused on one purpose—to find my daughter and bring her back to safety.

Outside the building, the cold night air met my bare skin as I joined Alden. In the distance, figures darted away, their forms moving quickly through the darkness. Among them, a soft, ethereal light glowed dimly, unmistakably Ember's. The sight sent a surge of rage coursing through my veins, and I couldn't suppress the guttural growl that rumbled in my throat.

Sebastian and our comrades had gathered outside the mansion, their expressions filled with fear and uncertainty as they watched the unfolding scene, some

people wanted to immediately give chase but Alden, his eyes locked on the retreating figures, barked at them to stay back, his voice carrying an air of authority that demanded compliance.

But I couldn't afford to waste another moment. The scent of the attackers lingered faintly in the night air, a trail that beckoned me to follow. My instincts screamed at me to give chase, to hunt down those who had dared to threaten my daughter's safety.

Alden stepped forward, his hand extended toward me, and he placed a strip of cloth into my waiting hand. It was torn from one of the attackers during their hasty escape, quick thinking on the dead nurse's part. I would miss the sprite.

I took the cloth, my fingers gripping it tightly, and I inhaled deeply. The scent was a mixture of unfamiliar scents, but it now led me toward the people who had dared to take my baby.

My gaze locked onto Alden, my voice a low growl as I asked, "Can you keep up?"

He met my question with a knowing smile, a glimmer of anticipation in his eyes. "They're getting away," he replied simply.

Without further hesitation, I shifted, the exhilarating rush of transformation coursing through me like a drug. Pleasure thrummed beneath my skin as I embraced the panther's form, my muscles coiled with power, and my senses heightened beyond a razor's edge. It had been so long.

With a powerful roar that echoed through the night, I bounded forward, my body flowing effortlessly over the ground. The sensation was exhilarating, and freeing, and a primal satisfaction surged within me as I gave in to the panther's instincts.

Even without the scent, Ember's softly glowing light served as a beacon, a distant point of hope that guided my pursuit. Each bound brought me closer to her, the distance between us narrowing with every powerful leap.

Alden ran alongside me, his agile form keeping pace with the quickness of my panther strides. As the night enveloped us, the ruins seemed to blur into a dark, undulating tapestry. The scent of the attackers grew stronger, their panic obvious in the chaos of their footsteps and the erratic path that they left behind.

I followed the scent trail with unwavering focus, my senses attuned to every nuance of the terrain. The scent trail led us deeper into the ruins, the terrain growing rougher and more treacherous with each passing step. But I refused to falter, my panther form was a testament to the strength and determination that flowed within me. Ember's light, a beacon of hope, glowed brighter in the distance, filling me with exhilaration as we closed in on the kidnappers.

With a deafening roar, I announced our presence, a primal declaration of our intent. The kidnappers, taken by surprise, panicked and scattered, their fear obvious in the chaotic scramble of their footsteps. It was the scent

of their terror that spurred Alden and me into action, our instincts as predators kicking into full effect.

We closed the gap quickly, the thrill of the chase coursing through our veins. The scent of fear hung thick in the air, a tantalizing aroma that drove us onward, closer to our prey. As we gained ground, Ember's soft, glowing light served as a guiding star, leading us to the confrontation that awaited.

With every stride, my resolve hardened, and I refused to allow fear to encroach upon my thoughts. My panther form surged forward, a force of nature, that night, she was an embodiment of vengeance and fury. The anticipation of the impending confrontation filled me with a wild exhilaration.

Amidst the chaos, I let out another earth-shattering roar, my voice a symphony of rage and retribution. The kidnappers, their panic intensifying, fumbled in their attempts to escape. Their fear-filled scent spurred me on, a relentless pursuit of justice.

In the blink of an eye, we closed the distance, and I didn't hesitate. There was no room for questions or mercy. I tore into the group of kidnappers with primal ferocity, my claws and teeth sinking into flesh. The air was filled with their screams and the scent of their blood.

Alden, his instincts honed by years of training, immediately engaged the woman carrying Ember. He punched her nose, disorienting her, he snatched our daughter from the body strap she was secured in.

Ember's cries filled the night, her voice piercing the chaos that surrounded us.

With Ember held protectively in one arm, Alden fought off his assailants, his movements a graceful dance of combat. With a baby in his hand, he held his own still, using his body to shield Ember from harm as he fought off his attackers.

Meanwhile, I continued my relentless assault, my rage propelling me forward. My roars reverberated through the ruins, a fierce declaration of our dominance. I tore through the remaining kidnappers, my claws and fangs rending flesh and bone.

In the end, there was no room for mercy, no need for questions. The threat was neutralized, and justice had been served.

As the dust settled and the adrenaline began to ebb, my chest heaved with exertion, my body covered in the remnants of the confrontation. The lifeless bodies of our attackers lay scattered around us, a grim testament to the consequences of their actions.

With Ember cradled in Alden's arms, we began our journey back to the mansion. My large paws tread upon the uneven ground, and I dragged one of the lifeless bodies behind me as a grim reminder of my anger.

The return trip took longer as we walked, the darkness of the night seemed to press down on us, a shroud of somber reflection. Our footsteps echoed through the ruins, a stark contrast to the chaos we had left behind.

When we finally arrived at the mansion, the others had gathered outside, their expressions horrified and at the same time, I could see some awe in it. The pale glow of Ember's light cast creepy shadows across their faces, like specters emerging from the darkness.

I shifted back into my human form, standing before the assembled Paranormals, completely naked and bloody. Alden stood beside me, cradling our daughter, her soft, radiant light illuminating the grim scene.

Sebastian, the leader of our group, stepped forward, his eyes widening in disbelief as he took in the lifeless body at my feet. It was Mikhail, one of our own, his features frozen in a twisted mask of pain.

"But how?" Sebastian whispered, his voice barely audible.

I met his gaze, my own eyes filled with a potent mixture of anger and determination. I didn't need to speak to convey the message, for the truth was obvious in the gruesome tableau before them. Mikhail had paid the price for his betrayal, a stark reminder of the consequences of crossing me.

I turned to face the gathered Paranormals, my voice filled with a simmering rage that reverberated through the tense silence. "You can either hunt her, and I'll fucking kill you all," I declared, my words laced with a deadly promise. "Or you can protect her, and she'll boost our collective strength in this fight. It's your choice."

With that ultimatum hanging in the air, I turned and walked back into my room, leaving the others to grapple

with their decisions. The silence that enveloped them was deafening, broken only by the gentle cooing of Ember as she reached out toward me, a beacon of hope in the face of darkness.

After feeding Ember, I cradled her gently until she drifted off to sleep, her tiny form nestled in the crib that had now been moved to our room. The soft, warm glow of her presence filled the space, casting a serene ambiance around us.

As I turned away from the crib, I felt Alden's arms wrap around me, drawing me close. His touch, as familiar as my heartbeat, sent a shiver of anticipation through me. Our shared experiences, the battles we had faced together, had deepened our connection in ways words could never express.

I nuzzled against Alden's chest, my lips grazing his skin as I peppered kisses along his collarbone and neck. The sensation of his warmth against my skin ignited a passionate desire within me, a longing that had been building for far too long.

My hand found its way to his, fingers entwining with his as I gently cupped his cheek, gazing into his eyes. The unspoken understanding that passed between us was electrifying, a silent invitation to explore the depths of our desire.

With a subtle tug, I led him toward our bed, our movements filled with a fervent urgency. As we reached the edge of the mattress, Alden's pants fell to the floor, discarded like the remnants of our burdens.

I climbed onto the bed, straddling him, my body trembling with anticipation. As I lowered myself on his hardened cock, taking in the entirety of his length, our bodies merged in a passionate union.

Our lovemaking was frantic and bestial. I rode him quietly –to not wake Ember– but roughly, and when he took charge, he returned the favor. Alden fucked me ruthlessly, using my pussy and my mouth roughly until we both reached an explosive orgasm and collapsed to sleep.

Chapter 18: Farewell and Fury

The morning sun cast a soft, golden glow over the mansion as we gathered to pay our final respects to Anya, the nurse who had tragically lost her life during the attack. The atmosphere was heavy with sorrow as we stood in a somber circle, our heads bowed in reverence.

Anya's body was laid to rest in a makeshift grave, the earth swallowing her form as we offer our condolences and prayers. It was a painful reminder of the sacrifices we had all made in our fight for freedom, a stark testament to the brutality of the world we lived in.

As the burial ceremony came to a close, some among us suggested that we should also give Mikhail a proper burial, despite the circumstances of his death. But when the idea was raised, a cold, unyielding anger welled up within me, my panther instincts taking hold.

I refused to let them. With a determination that bordered on fury, I took it upon myself to cast Mikhail's lifeless body out into the ruins, a brutal and final gesture of my rage. I could feel the eyes of the others on me, their protests falling on deaf ears.

One brave soul dared to speak out, questioning my actions, and that's when it happened. My eyes shifted into the piercing, predatory gaze of my panther form. My fangs descended, bared in a snarl of anger and defiance.

"He's lucky," I hissed, my voice laced with a dangerous edge, "that I didn't stick his head on a pigpole."

"But—" he started but stopped when I snarled in his face.

“One more word and I’ll introduce you to that pig pole.”
He blanched and slunk away.

The words hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder that my determination to protect Ember and our people knew no bounds. I had faced too much loss and too much pain, and I wouldn’t allow anyone to threaten the safety and security of my newfound family.

After Anya’s funeral, I called a meeting of our leadership. It was time for us to address the pressing issue of our scattered comrades from the old safe house. We couldn’t afford to remain divided if we hoped to present a formidable force against Unity. The fate of our people rested in our hands, and we needed to establish a clear plan of action.

Sebastian offered his wisdom. He cautioned against the idea of bringing all our scattered comrades together in one location. “They would have likely found or established new safehouses,” he advised, his tone laced with concern. “Having everyone in one place would make us all vulnerable in the case of another attack.”

Alden nodded in agreement. His sharp mind was always focused on strategy, and he understood the need for caution. I listened to their counsel, but I still wasn’t sure about the we were scattered around Daruskov.

“We may not be able to bring them all together physically,” I began, “but we can establish a communication channel. We need to ensure that our comrades are safe, that they have what they need to survive, and that they know we’re here for them.”

Sebastian and Alden both nodded, acknowledging the wisdom in my words. Just then, the door to our meeting room swung open, and Draven entered, his steps hurried.

Alden was the first to approach him, and Draven wasted no time in showing him a screen that held shocking information. Unity had placed a massive bounty on Alden's head. Twenty million for his lifeless body, payable after DNA confirmation, and a staggering fifty million for anyone who brought him in alive.

Alden's reaction was a devilish smile that sent shivers down my spine, the shivers settled between my thighs and I was immediately wet when he declared, "Let them come."

Draven, however, wasn't finished. He tapped Alden's shoulder lightly and revealed even more disturbing news. The announcement wasn't confined to Daruskov alone. It had been broadcast across the entire New World. Unity had issued a global warrant for Alden's capture, and they were offering a pardon and lifelong immunity from prosecution to anyone who brought him in, including wanted criminals and Paranormals.

The gravity of the situation weighed heavily upon us. Unity had declared an all-out war against Alden, and by extension, against us. The world was now our enemy, and the odds were stacked impossibly high.

As the dire situation settled upon us, I expressed my shock. "They're turning the whole world against you," I said to Alden, my voice tinged with disbelief.

Alden looked at us and then left without another word. I apologized to him and hurriedly followed him. When I found him, he was packing supplies and food.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked him.

Alden didn't respond immediately. Instead, he continued packing supplies, focusing on food, as if preparing for a long journey. My heart clenched as I watched him, realizing that he was planning to leave. Panic and confusion welled up within me, and I couldn't fathom why he would choose to abandon us in this time of crisis.

“Where are you going?” I finally managed to ask, my voice quivering with a mixture of fear and frustration.

Alden's gaze met mine briefly, but he didn't explain. Instead, he zipped up one of the bags and shouldered it. The silence hung heavily in the room, broken only by the soft rustling of supplies.

I couldn't let him leave without understanding his reasons. I hurried after him, catching up as he moved toward the exit. “Alden, please, talk to me,” I implored.

He paused, looking at me with a somber expression. “I have to leave, Amari,” he replied, his voice laced with resignation.

My heart sank further. “Leave? But why?”

Alden sighed, his eyes revealing the turmoil within him. “So that you can be safe. You and Ember.”

I shook my head, struggling to comprehend his decision. “Safe from what?”

He didn't mince words. "From me."

Confusion swirled in my mind. How could he pose a threat to us? I voiced my confusion, hoping he would clarify.

Alden's voice held a heavy truth as he explained, "Unity has made it impossible for me to trust anyone, especially now that they've offered criminals and Paranormals a pardon to bring me in. They knew what they were doing when they broadcasted that message. Even the people I helped break out of District One could turn against me. What loyalty do they owe me, the one who once hunted them?"

I locked eyes with him, stubbornness taking hold. "But not everyone among us would betray you," I argued. "We're a family, Alden. We're loyal to each other."

He sighed deeply, his eyes searching mine for understanding. "Mikhail led kidnappers to take Ember for her powers, Amari. Loyalty in our world is a fragile thing. Do you think that just because you're on my side, it will prevent anyone from considering that bounty?"

I refused to back down. The thought of Alden leaving us behind was unbearable. "I won't let you go alone," I declared, my determination unwavering.

Alden and I had reached a silent agreement to face the unknown together, to protect each other and our precious Ember. We continued packing, the urgency of our situation propelling us forward. The outside world had become a treacherous place, and unity among our ranks had never been more critical.

Just as we were deep in our preparations, the door swung open with a creak, and a familiar voice disrupted our focused determination. “Sorry to interrupt such a lovely moment, but I think the both of you are equally stupid.”

Alden and I whirled around to find Sebastian standing there, his staff in hand, an air of disapproval about him. In his arms, he held Ember, and the nurse beside him appeared meek and unable to meet my eyes.

Chapter 19: Aghillas and Amara

My paranoia reached its peak when I noticed that Sebastian's gaze lingered on Ember a moment longer than necessary. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I couldn't quell the unease that welled up within me.

Unable to contain my suspicions any longer, I bared my fangs, my growl low and threatening. My instincts told me to protect my child, even if it meant confronting Sebastian, whom I had considered a close friend.

Sebastian's eyes widened in alarm as he hastily handed Ember over to me. "Relax, Amari," he said, his voice shaky but filled with understanding. "I'm on your side. I'm your crow, remember?"

My fangs retracted as I blinked away my irrational anger, my heart pounding in my chest. "I'm sorry," I mumbled, cradling Ember in my arms. "I don't know what came over me."

Sebastian offered a weak smile, clearly shaken by my outburst, but forgiving nonetheless. "It's alright. I should have been more mindful of your feelings. I promise I'm here to help."

Alden, who had been watching the exchange in silence, finally spoke up, his voice gruff with irritation. "What the hell was that just now?"

Sebastian sighed, rubbing his temples as he explained. "Before you start planning a family trip, maybe remember to have your baby in sight. Or even in your

hands? We still don't know if that was the only group keeping an eye on her."

His words hit home, a stark reminder of the dangers that surrounded us. I held Ember closer, my protective instincts taking over once more. Unity's relentless pursuit of her and the looming bounty on Alden's head meant we could trust no one, not even those within our group.

Alden's expression softened as he understood the gravity of the situation. "You're right, Sebastian. We need to be more vigilant. Ember's safety is our top priority."

Sebastian nodded, his concern for Ember obvious in his eyes. "I'm glad you see it that way. We can't afford to let our guard down, not now."

"Thank you, Sebastian," I said with genuine gratitude. "We appreciate your concern and your warning."

Sebastian waved my thanks away with a dismissive gesture. "Don't worry about it. I just wanted to let both of you know you needn't run just yet. Nobody is going to attack Alden while he's in the house with us."

Alden, however, wasn't as easily convinced. "That's bullshit, Sebastian," he retorted, his voice laced with frustration. "You can't know that for sure."

Sebastian's response was calm and measured. "I didn't say that none of them who heard the news won't think about it. But they also know your reputation, Alden. It would be foolish to attack Last Order alone. Unless they

can muster a force big enough, it's going to be hard to convince people to take that risk."

Alden scoffed at the idea. "How hard can it be? Twenty million or fifty, plus a life pardon—it's a hell of a deal. They could take the money and live their lives in the open. Or, if they want to make themselves feel less selfish, they'll say they can use the money and their newfound freedom to help other Paranormals."

Ember stretched her tiny hand toward Alden. He gently took her in his embrace, never breaking eye contact with Sebastian. "Trust me, I've seen this tactic work out very well many times. Desperation can drive people to do unthinkable things."

I nodded in agreement, my mind filled with images of the harsh realities we faced. "We can't underestimate what people might do when faced with the allure of that bounty."

Sebastian's words resonated with me as I considered the precarious situation that we found ourselves in. His reminder of Ember's unique abilities and her potential as an amplifier was a compelling argument. Still, I couldn't shake my concern for the people who had turned to us for help, for the fledgling community we had started to build.

Sebastian leaned on his staff, his piercing gaze locking with mine. "Everything Alden said is true. He has more experience than any of us in how these situations tend to play out. But have you forgotten, Amari, that anyone planning to attack him must also consider that they'll be

facing you—a Seydon? And not just any Seydon, but one who will be amplified by Ember’s presence. An amplified Seydon is not something anyone wants to face, regardless of their numbers.”

He made a valid point, one that sent shivers down my spine. The thought of a battle with an amplified Seydon was a grim prospect for anyone foolish enough to attempt it. The powers I possessed had already grown substantially since Ember’s birth, and I had only begun to scratch the surface of my potential. If only that scratching would go faster.

Sebastian’s words hung in the air for a moment before I responded. “So, what you’re saying is that the three of us together have a good chance of making it?” I asked, seeking clarification.

Sebastian nodded. “That is true. Despite the odds against you do have a chance of making it through this.”

I feel a glimmer of hope at his words, a spark of optimism that we might overcome the challenges ahead. But Sebastian’s gaze remained steady, his expression unyielding, as he posed a question that cut straight to the core of my dilemma.

“But,” he continued, “do you want to abandon the people who have begun to look to you for salvation?”

His question hit me like a punch to the gut. I had been so focused on Ember’s safety, and on keeping our family intact, that I had lost sight of the larger community we were responsible for. The people who had sought refuge with us, who had placed their trust in our leadership.

However, were they ready to fight or were they looking to me to make a martyr of myself and Alden and possibly Ember too?

“They’re not even ready to fight for their freedom,” I said in frustration. It was true. Many of them seemed content to live in the shadows, avoiding the attention of Unity whenever possible.

Sebastian’s voice held a note of caution as he countered my argument. “Amari, just because you’re new to this world doesn’t mean you should disparage a way of life that has served us for years and years. There’s a reason our people have survived by keeping a low profile, by staying hidden.”

His words stung, and I realized that I had been too hasty in my judgment. The fear and caution that had become ingrained in our community were not simply the result of complacency. They were born out of necessity. Unity’s relentless pursuit of Paranormals had forced us into the shadows, where we could only hope to avoid detection and capture.

But Sebastian’s next words hit even harder, a stark reminder of the consequences our people had faced in the past. “The last time we had combat-ready Paranormals in charge,” he continued, “we lost our leaders, Aghillas and Amara.”

Alden’s reaction was quick and visceral. His head whipped around to face Sebastian, his expression shock and disbelief. He took a step closer to Sebastian, his voice low and intense as he demanded, “Say that again?”

Chapter 20: Pop-Pop

Sebastian repeated his statement, each word hanging heavily in the air like a dark omen. “The last time we had people clamoring for freedom, we lost our leaders, and I had to take charge.”

Alden’s determination remained unshaken as he pressed Sebastian further. “No, their names.”

I watched as Alden took another step closer to Sebastian, his eyes locked onto the older man’s with an almost palpable intensity. It was a strange sight to see someone so formidable in the presence of a softly glowing baby cooing in his arms. Even I, with my powers and newfound role as a Seydon, felt a twinge of fear on behalf of Sebastian.

Sebastian, clearly unnerved, took three hesitant steps back, his voice quivering as he answered, “Aghillas and Amara.”

“How can Alden know them?” Sebastian asked, his voice tinged with confusion. “They were Paranormals, and the last time I saw them, they were being attacked by a unit of Bloodhounds. Aghillas was in panther form, injured and defending his injured wife, Amara, who had gone into labor on the battlefield.”

The words were like a heavy punch to my gut.

A torrent of emotions swirled within me as I processed the revelations that unfolded before us. My mind was a jumbled mess of thoughts, memories, and unanswered questions. The story Sebastian had shared about Aghillas

and Amara, our fallen leaders, tugged at my heartstrings, and I felt a deep sense of anger and sadness.

I turned my gaze toward Sebastian, my voice heavy with accusation. “You left a woman in labor to fend for herself?”

Sebastian’s expression shifted from offense to a mixture of regret and pain. “No, Amari, it wasn’t like that. I would never do that to Amara. She forced us to leave, to run when the fight turned hopeless. Agent Farlowe was leading the Bloodhounds, and before Alden,” he pointed toward our unexpected guest, “arrived, Farlowe was the greatest threat we faced. Amara used her powers to control our minds, all fifteen of us, and she made us save ourselves.”

I turned to Alden, concerned by the sudden change in his demeanor. He muttered a phrase that seemed out of place in the conversation. “Pop-pop.”

The word hung in the air, and I furrowed my brows, trying to make sense of it. Alden stumbled, his balance faltering, and I rushed to his side, my own emotions still swirling within me. “What’s wrong?” I asked, my worry deepening.

Alden repeated the word, his voice unsteady. “Pop-pop.”

The nurse, who had been standing nearby, asked if he was okay, her concern mirroring my own. I shook my head, unsure of what to make of this sudden reaction from Alden. “I don’t know,” I replied, my voice tinged with worry and frustration.

Chapter 21: Once Upon a Birthday Party

Alden's voice carried the warmth of nostalgia as he began to recount the story of his childhood birthday party.

"I was going to turn seven when Pop-pop died."

"The kitchen was alive with activity," he said, his eyes sparkling with the memories. "Mom was in charge, overseeing the preparation of pancakes, scrambled eggs, and well, everything else. She was always in charge"

"Mom greeted me with a warm hug, it was the last day she ever hugged me."

"When the doorbell rang, signaling the arrival of our guests," Alden said, his voice brimming with enthusiasm, "I returned downstairs, all dressed up and ready to celebrate."

As he described the arrival of his extended family, I could almost hear the laughter and cheerful greetings that filled the air.

"Uncles, aunts, cousins—they all flooded in," he continued. "Their laughter and joy infected me. Hell, was I happy? I was probably the happiest kid in the world that day."

Alden's words brought the lively gathering to life, and I felt as though I was right there with him, sharing in the happiness of the moment.

"My cousins' infectious energy swept me up in a whirlwind as we caught each other up on our lives. It was

not just my birthday. It was also my grandfather's retirement."

I could almost see the playful tousling of hair and the camaraderie between family members.

"Aunt Clara," Alden chuckled, his tone fond. "She made every gathering feel like a party."

I could picture Aunt Clara's cheerful presence amid the celebration.

"Uncle Leo teased me about growing as tall as Dad."

"Aunt Emily asked about my art and whether we should expect a masterpiece soon."

"And then there was Pop-pop," Alden said, his voice filled with pride. "Everyone congratulated him on his retirement." The love and admiration for his grandfather shone through in his words.

"The party continued with laughter and conversations," Alden said, his voice carrying the joy of the occasion. "Well-wishes and presents filled the air, tokens of love and celebration."

I could feel the sense of unity and happiness that enveloped the gathering. Mom announced the cake, and we gathered around the table."

"The cake itself was a masterpiece," Alden said, his tone awed. "I made a wish and leaned forward to blow out the candles when..."

As he reached the dramatic turning point in his story, I felt a sense of anticipation, knowing that something

unexpected was about to happen.

“A sudden, thunderous roar shattered the atmosphere,” he continued, his voice filled with tension. “My heart raced as chaos erupted.”

Alden’s storytelling painted a vivid picture of the shocking and chaotic moment that disrupted the celebration.

“A big brown bear burst into the room, followed by two wolves,” he said, his voice filled with fear and urgency.

I could feel the fear and adrenaline coursing through him as he described the terrifying intrusion.

“Instinct kicked in,” Alden said, his voice carrying the moment. “Pop-pop tossed me to Uncle Leo as he got up to fight the intruders. But the odds were against him,” Alden continued, his voice heavy with sorrow. “The bear’s sheer power overwhelmed him.”

I could sense the helplessness in his voice as he described the tragic battle that unfolded.

“In a matter of moments, it was over,” he said, his voice somber. “Pop-pop lay motionless, bloody, and torn apart. His blood splattered everywhere and there was cake on Uncle Leo’s face. vanilla frosting.”

The sorrow and shock of the moment were palpable in his words.

“One of the wolves explained their vengeance,” Alden said, his voice filled with bitterness. “Blood for blood, she said, pop-pop for Aghillas and Amara.”

Alden's revelation hung heavy in the air as Sebastian confirmed the identities of those responsible for Pop-pop's death. I watched as emotions roiled within Alden, his fists clenching in anger.

"The bear and the wolf... They led the party that killed him," Alden muttered through gritted teeth, his eyes fixed on Sebastian.

Sebastian nodded solemnly. "Yes, I sanctioned the mission. I even led them there in my crow form."

Alden's rage boiled over, and before anyone could react, he lunged at Sebastian, his hands reaching for his throat. The room erupted into chaos as chairs toppled and voices cried out in shock.

I couldn't let this escalate further. I quickly moved toward them, my heart pounding with a mixture of fear and determination. I reached out to gently take Ember from Alden's arms, passing her to the nurse, who held her protectively.

With Ember in safe hands, I turned my attention back to the confrontation unfolding before me. Alden and Sebastian were locked in a fierce struggle, both fueled by anger and pain.

"Enough!" I shouted, my voice cutting through the chaos like a blade. I had to put an end to this before it escalated further.

I summoned the power within me, feeling the familiar transformation take hold. My body shifted, and in

moments, I stood before them in my panther form, my eyes fixed on Alden.

I inserted myself between them, my massive feline presence serving as a formidable barrier. I glared at Alden, my gaze unwavering and filled with a stern warning.

“Alden, stop,” I growled in a low, rumbling voice that carried my authority. “This won’t bring your Pop-pop back. We need to find a way to honor his memory and seek justice, but violence won’t accomplish that.”

Alden’s rage met my unwavering resolve, and for a moment, the room seemed to hold its breath. His fists slowly unclenched, and he took a step back, his anger giving way to a profound sadness.

“I took my justice,” he said.

Sebastian’s somber tone hung in the air as he continued the tragic tale. “There isn’t much left to tell,” he began, “except those days after the fight, before Unity comes to collect the dead bodies for their experiments...”

I interrupt, my voice trembling with shock. “Experiments?”

Sebastian nodded gravely. “Yes, the Bloodhounds kill us. They assess the battlefield for whatever they need, and then they send another unit to come collect the dead bodies for their experiments. They experiment on all Paranormals that fall into their hands, dead or alive.”

My heart sank as I absorbed the horrifying truth. The very thought of what those experiments might entail sent

shivers down my spine.

Turning to Alden, I asked, “Did you know about this?”

Alden’s expression was heavy with guilt as he met my gaze. He nodded slowly. “I knew, Amari. I’ve seen some of the things they do to our kind. It’s... it’s unspeakable.”

I couldn’t hold back the anguish that welled up within me. My eyes filled with tears as I looked away, struggling to process the depth of the horrors inflicted upon Paranormals by Unity’s merciless experiments.

Sebastian’s voice hung heavy in the room, carrying sorrow and regret. “By the time we got there to retrieve Aghillas and Amara’s bodies, we realized that Amara had given birth. Her baby had been taken. To this day, I’m still haunted by nightmares of what the poor infant might have been put through.”

His words seemed to echo in the stillness that had descended upon us. The mere thought of an innocent child torn from its mother’s embrace, thrust into a world of cruelty and suffering, sent shivers down my spine.

Ember’s presence, her soft coos and gurgles served as a poignant reminder of the vulnerability of the young. I held her close, determined to shield her from the horrors that had befallen her parents.

But then, the revelation came crashing down, threatening to shake the very foundations of my understanding. I shakily inform them, “The baby... the baby wasn’t taken by Unity.”

Alden's brows furrowed as he sought clarification. "How do you know that?"

My voice quivered as I revealed the astonishing truth. "Because I am the baby. I was taken off the battlefield by my parents. They were there to assess the fight and found me. Since then, they've hidden me from the government."

The room fell into stunned silence as my words hung in the air, each person grappling with the enormity of what I had just disclosed.

Alden's eyes widened as comprehension dawned. "That's... impossible. We searched your family's minds after a report was made on you. There was nothing. How did they take a baby from a paranormal and not know it's a paranormal?"

I hesitated, my secret heavy upon me. "Well," I began, "I erased the information from their minds."

Alden's expression shifted, awe and realization. "You erased their memories? But even the smallest or most perfect mind manipulation would be detected by Unity's machines. They should have found something. Not even a suggestion of mind control." He laughed then. "Oh, oh. Unity has no idea what they're up against in you." There was pride in his voice which made me smile.

Sebastian's voice cut through the mood in the room. "Amari, you realize this man's grandfather killed your parents?"

His words hung in the air, and a wave of confusion swept through the room as everyone exchanged uncertain glances. The truth of his statement slowly sank in, leaving me grappling with a complex mix of emotions.

Chapter 22: Past and Future

I retreated from the group, my arms cradling Ember, who cooed softly in my embrace. The revelation hung heavily in the air, and my thoughts swirled in a chaotic whirlwind. Alden's grandfather had been the one responsible for the death of my birth parents, Aghillas and Amara. Ember's great-grandfather was the very man who had torn my family apart.

Confusion and a tangled web of emotions enveloped me. How could I reconcile the fact that Ember was connected by blood to the man who had brought tragedy into my life? The man who had robbed me of the chance to know and be raised by my parents. The man who had left me an orphan on that fateful battlefield.

Yet, as I gazed down at Ember's innocent face, her tiny fingers grasping at the air, I felt a sense of dissonance. She was not responsible for her lineage. She was a pure, unblemished soul, untouched by the sins of her ancestors. It was unfair to hold her accountable for a legacy she had no control over.

My thoughts drifted to Alden, who stood at the center of this revelation. He was the bridge between two worlds, two legacies, two families were torn asunder by a conflict neither of us had chosen. How must he feel, knowing that his grandfather had been the cause of my pain, my loss? Did he harbor any guilt or remorse for the actions of his bloodline?

As I continued to walk, the soft murmur of Ember's breaths grounding me in the present, I grappled with my own emotions. The past couldn't be changed and assigning blame or holding grudges would only perpetuate the cycle of suffering that Unity had subjected us to. Ember was a symbol of hope, a new generation born into a world that desperately needed change.

I looked down at her, her eyes bright and filled with curiosity as if she sensed the moment. It was a reminder that life, even in the face of tragedy and injustice, continued to march forward. Ember was a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, a beacon of light in a world shrouded in darkness.

As I stood there amongst the crumbling buildings, the revelation bore down on me like a leaden cloak. Aghillas and Amara, my birth parents, had been mentioned in such a casual, almost offhand manner. Their names, mere words to others, held a profound significance for me, though I had never known them, never heard their voices, never felt their embrace. They were strangers bound to me by the fragile thread of blood.

The room's atmosphere was charged with an unspoken tension. Sebastian, with a heavy heart, continued his account of the past, unraveling a story that seemed more like a dark legend than reality. These were the details of my parents' fate, a fate that had been sealed long before I had even drawn my first breath.

Alden had been calling Agent Farlowe "Pop-pop," a term of endearment heavy with familial connection. It was a

term laced with an intimacy that I had never imagined could exist between him and my birth father. Pop-pop—a name that bore memories and stories, a name that held more weight than I could ever have anticipated.

The realization that Alden's grandfather had played a role in my parents' demise was like a sharp blade that sliced through the fabric of my understanding. Questions and doubts swirled within me, blurring the lines of my relationship with Alden.

Did I truly know him? Had I been blinded by my feelings for him, unable to see the shadows of his past? What did this revelation mean for us, for our future together? Was I a fool for trusting him, for loving him?

As the room's air grew heavy with silence, I felt a torrent of emotions surging through me. Confusion, anger, sorrow, and above all, doubt. Doubt about the choices I had made, the path I had chosen to walk with Alden.

I couldn't deny the tiny, almost imperceptible connection I felt to Aghillas and Amara, simply because they were my birth parents. It was an inexplicable bond that transcended logic, a bond that whispered of shared blood and shared destinies. They had brought me into this world, and that fact alone had created a link, no matter how tenuous.

Yet, standing here, grappling with the revelation of their deaths, I wondered if I had missed something. Maybe it was the lack of knowing them, of having no memories of their faces or voices, that left me with an emptiness that I couldn't quite comprehend. It was as if a piece of my

identity had been concealed from me, a puzzle with missing pieces that refused to reveal the full picture.

Alden's presence in this narrative further complicated the emotions that churned within me. He had been a constant in my life, a pillar of strength and support in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. The journey I had embarked upon, from the day I had saved JT from his school bullies to the revelation of Alden's true identity as Last Order, had been a whirlwind of trials and tribulations.

I'd found him during turmoil, and ours was a connection that transcended words, a silent understanding that had formed between us. We had faced adversaries together, confronted our vulnerabilities, and emerged on the other side, scarred but unbroken.

I recalled the countless nights when our whispered conversations had filled the silence, the stolen moments of intimacy in a world that seemed determined to tear us apart. I remembered the warmth of his embrace, the softness of his lips, and the depth of his gaze that had held the universe within it. It was a connection that couldn't be denied, this bond that had brought us together even in the face of unimaginable adversity.

Yet, the revelation of his grandfather's role in my parents' deaths had cast a shadow over our relationship. Could I trust him? Could I trust myself for falling in love with a man whose family had been responsible for such tragedy?

I began to question the authenticity of my feelings, to scrutinize the choices I had made. Was it possible that my love for Alden had been merely a response to the tumultuous events that had unfolded in our lives? Had I been swept away by the tide of circumstances, my heart carried along by the current of fate?

The confusion threatened to overwhelm me, and I closed my eyes, searching for clarity amidst the chaos of my thoughts. I reminded myself of the moments when our love had been pure and unburdened, the times when I had looked into his eyes and seen only the man I loved, not the legacy of his family.

The truth was, I knew Alden better than anyone else ever could. I had witnessed the depths of his character, the struggles he had faced, and the unwavering determination that fueled his actions. He wasn't a heartless hunter. He was a man with a mission, driven by a desire to protect those he cared about. That link between us was a window into his soul and I have seen all that he held within him.

The doubts that had clouded my judgment began to dissipate. I had chosen Alden, not out of blind trust, but because I had seen the essence of his soul, the goodness within him that transcended the sins of his family and his past. I had felt the depth of his love for me, a love that had withstood the tests of time and adversity.

I realized that my doubts had been stirred by the shock of the revelation, by the past that had been unveiled before me. But our love was not defined by the actions of

our ancestors. It was defined by the choices we made in the present, by the love we shared in this moment.

With this newfound clarity, I knew what I had to do. I needed to seek out Alden, confront the shadows of our past, and reaffirm our love in the present. Our journey had been marked by challenges and hardships, but it had also been filled with moments of profound connection and love.

As I turned to go back to the mansion, my heart felt lighter, and a sense of purpose burned within me. I had faced the storm of doubt and emerged on the other side, stronger and surer of my love for Alden. Whatever obstacles lay ahead, I was determined to face them together, hand in hand, for our love was a force that couldn't be shaken by the ghosts of the past.

I needed to find Alden, to bridge the gap that had suddenly emerged between us and reaffirm the love that had been the cornerstone of our relationship. The past was just that—history. It held no bearing on the future we could build together, and I was determined to make him see that.

When I entered our room and found him lying on the floor, his eyes carrying his burdens, I felt a pang of empathy. It was as if the world had descended upon his shoulders, and I was determined to help him bear the load.

“So, do you also hate me now?” he asked, his voice tinged with a bitterness that caught me off guard. I assumed he was joking, trying to break the tension that had settled

between us, so I responded with a light laugh, though my heart ached with the realization of his genuine concern. “Nobody hates you, Agent Cross.”

I moved closer to him, lying down beside him, and gently placed Ember on his chest. He cradled our daughter closer, his arms forming a protective cocoon around her. I nestled close to him, finding solace in his warmth and the familiar scent that was uniquely his.

“You didn’t talk to your people,” he said, his voice tinged with regret. His gaze never left Ember as he kissed her tiny head. “The nurse blabbed about my grandfather, and now all I get are stinky faces. Even Sebastian keeps his distance, and nobody wants to hear my battle plans anymore.”

The absurdity of the situation struck me like a lightning bolt. I couldn’t fathom how anyone could equate Alden with his notorious grandfather, Agent Farlowe. The man I loved, the man who held our daughter so tenderly, was nothing like the shadowy figure from the past.

“That’s ridiculous,” I declared, sitting up and turning to face him. “You’re not your grandfather.”

His response was tinged with self-deprecation, as he admitted, “I am not. I am way worse than Agent Farlowe.”

I stared at him, incredulous at his self-assessment. How could he see himself in such a light? Had his family’s legacy worn him down to the point where he believed himself to be beyond redemption?

“Alden, that’s not true,” I reiterated, my voice firm with conviction. I gently cupped his cheek, turning his gaze toward me, hoping to convey the sincerity of my words. “You have a kind heart, a loving soul, and a determination to protect those you care about. Your past may be filled with shadows, but it doesn’t define who you are today.”

As I tried to comfort him, Alden’s initial response was to brush off my words. his self-perception seemed too heavy for him to easily shed. But I was determined to help him see the truth.

“We can face this together,” I assured him, my voice soft and unwavering. “No matter what others think or say, I believe in you, and I believe in us.”

With those words, I leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips, a kiss filled with love and reassurance. It was my way of reaffirming our bond, my way of telling him that I would stand by his side no matter what.

But then Alden, his eyes still clouded with doubt and self-recrimination, shifted the focus to me. He asked how I was doing with the news, and I felt a pang of vulnerability. It was a question I had been trying to avoid, even from myself.

I took a deep breath, my gaze dropping momentarily before meeting his once more. “At first,” I began slowly, “when I heard about your grandfather and the connection to my birth parents, I questioned everything. I wondered if I had made the wrong choice in choosing you. If my feelings were genuine, or if they were just a

result of everything that has happened since I saved JT from his school bullies.”

Alden listened intently, his eyes never leaving mine as I bared my soul to him. It was difficult to admit my doubts, but I knew that honesty was the foundation of our relationship.

“I even started to question whether I truly loved you or if I was simply being pulled along by the tide of events,” I confessed, the words heavy on my heart. “But then, I realized something. Even before I knew the full extent of your past, even when I discovered that you were Last Order, the very name that strikes fear into every Paranormal’s heart, I never doubted you. I never doubted my feelings for you.”

I paused, allowing my words to sink in. “We have a connection, Alden. An actual link that goes beyond words or actions. And our connection makes it incredibly difficult for us to hide our true feelings for each other. And no matter what challenges or revelations come our way, that connection remains unshaken.”

Alden’s expression softened, and for the first time since our conversation began, I saw a glimmer of hope in his eyes. He reached out to gently brush a strand of hair away from my face.

“Amari,” he said, his voice filled with sincerity, “I may not be able to erase my past, but I can promise you this—I will do everything in my power to build a future with you. A future filled with love, trust, and happiness.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, not tears of sadness or doubt, but tears of love and gratitude. I leaned in and kissed him again, sealing our renewed commitment to each other.

The air in the mansion had grown dense and heavy with unspoken feelings of hatred ever since the revelation about Alden's lineage. People had started to look at us differently, whispering behind our backs as if we were no longer the same people they had known. The news had severed the threads of camaraderie that once bound us to our fellow Paranormals, leaving Alden and me feeling isolated and judged.

One of the most noticeable changes occurred with the nurse who had been tending to Ember. She had been a comforting presence, offering guidance and support as we navigated the challenges of parenthood. However, as soon as the news about Alden's grandfather had circulated, her visits became sporadic, and when she did appear, her demeanor was marked by a newfound unease. She would steal glances at Alden, her eyes filled with uncertainty as if she were unsure whether to trust him or not.

Sebastian, our close friend and collaborator in our mission, had also distanced himself from us. He began involving us less in discussions, leaving us out of plans and initiatives. His loyalty, once unwavering, seemed to waver in the face of this unsettling revelation. We feel abandoned by those we had once relied on.

But it was a seemingly innocuous day, much like any other, that pushed me over the edge. Alden and I found ourselves in the main gathering area, where a group was organizing a provision run. Alden's strategic acumen had always been an invaluable asset when planning such expeditions. His ability to assess risks, strategize, and adapt to ever-changing situations saved us more time than I could count.

However, on this day, his suggestions fell on deaf ears. It was as though an invisible barrier had materialized around him, rendering him an outcast in his community. The members of the group exchanged furtive glances, pointedly ignoring Alden's presence as if he were an unwelcome intruder.

I watched as people who had once regarded him as a trusted ally now cast him aside, their actions cutting deeper than any blade. The atmosphere grew stifling, and the pain in Alden's eyes was palpable. My heart ached for him, and I couldn't stand idly by any longer.

Fueled by frustration and anger, I erupted like a storm. My voice reverberated through the room as I shouted at the top of my lungs, imploring everyone to awaken from their ignorance.

"For crying out loud!" I exclaimed, my voice trembling with a mixture of anger and despair. "You all need to wake up! Alden and I are not our parents or our grandparents. We have a baby together, and in case

you've missed it, the government is hunting Alden more relentlessly than anyone else.”

My words hung in the air like a heavy fog, their weight bearing down on everyone in the room. The unspoken truth that had been conveniently forgotten now echoed through the silence. Furious and hurt, I stormed away from the gathering area, my footsteps heavy with determination.

The dead garden offered a sanctuary of solitude. I settled onto a weathered bench, my emotions still seething within me. Lady soon joined me. Her presence was a soothing balm, a reminder that not everyone had forsaken us.

We sat in silence for a while, our situation pressing down upon me like an unyielding burden. But with Lady by my side, I couldn't allow the prejudice of others to dictate the course of our lives. Alden and I shared a love worth fighting for, and we had Ember—a precious symbol of our unwavering commitment to each other.

The path ahead might be filled with challenges, but as long as we had each other, we could navigate the tempest and emerge stronger on the other side.

Chapter 23: Year Two Hundred

The mansion lay cloaked in darkness. The hush of slumber hung over the inhabitants like a shroud. Our world existed in the fragile tranquility of these stolen moments, where we could almost forget the dangers that lurked beyond our sanctuary's walls.

But the illusion of safety was shattered when the abrupt clamor of hurried footsteps and urgent whispers disrupted the peace. The shrill alarm bell rang through the mansion, rousing everyone from their rest.

Alden and I bolted upright in our bed, exchanging anxious glances. Our hearts raced as we hastily dressed, the chill of fear gripping us.

The infirmary wing was a hub of activity, a stark contrast to its usual serenity. Injured people lay on gurneys, their wounds tended to by skilled healers. The room was awash with the metallic scent of blood and the low hum of whispered conversations.

Sebastian stood at the center of the room, his expression very grave. His black eyes bore countless burdens, and his crow perched on his shoulder, a silent sentinel of his power.

We approached the group of injured Paranormals, their faces etched with exhaustion and anguish. One man, his arm grotesquely mangled and bloodied, was being tended to by a healer who wore a somber expression. The prognosis was clear, even to someone like me, who possessed no medical expertise.

I ask the healer, my voice trembling, “Will he make it?”

The healer’s eyes met mine, filled with sorrow and resignation, and he shook his head ever so slightly. It was a death sentence, a verdict passed down by the merciless hand of fate. I felt a pang of despair as I turned away, my heart heavy with another loss.

Stepping out into the dimly lit corridor, I couldn’t contain the storm of emotions that raged within me. Anger, sadness, frustration—all tangled together in a chaotic web. Alden followed closely behind me, concern etched into the lines of his face.

“What’s going on, Amari?” he asked, his voice gentle but filled with worry.

I paused, taking a deep breath to steady myself. “It’s this whole world we live in,” I replied, my voice quivering with grief and frustration. “How long have these people been living like this?”

From the shadows behind us, Sebastian’s voice cut through the silence like a blade. “Almost two hundred years now.”

two centuries pressed down on us, an oppressive force that threatened to crush our hopes and dreams. I turned to face Sebastian, my eyes locking onto his weary gaze. The dimly lit corridor seemed to close in around us, the shadows playing tricks on my senses.

“Two hundred years,” I repeated, my voice trembling with a mixture of anger and despair. “Generations have suffered, and for what? When will it end?”

Sebastian's expression remained stoic, his crow perched on his shoulder, its obsidian feathers ruffled in the dim light. His voice carried experience and resignation. "Amari, this is the life we've known. It's a life we've accepted, for better or worse."

I felt a surge of frustration building within me, a storm of emotions that threatened to engulf my senses. Ember, nestled in my arms, began to cry, her wails adding to the chaotic symphony of our world unraveling. Alden moved closer, his hand reaching out to take Ember from me, but my agitated pacing made me an unpredictable target. I couldn't stand still, not now.

"This is not living," I exclaimed, my voice rising in intensity. "This is hell! Watching your friends and family die, living in hiding, and on constant high alert. This is not life."

Sebastian, his dark eyes steady and unwavering, tried to calm the tempest within me. "Amari, it's the only life we know. We've survived by staying hidden, by blending in with the ordinary world. It's what has kept us safe."

But I couldn't accept that as an answer any longer. My heart ached for something more. Something beyond the shadowed existence we had been forced to endure. I tightened my grip on Ember, her cries echoing the turmoil in my soul.

"What's the point of these powers?" I demanded, my voice quivering with rage. "Why do we have these gifts if we're going to live on scraps like rodents?"

Sebastian's response was measured, his words heavy with the truth of our situation. "The government has agents like Alden to hunt Paranormals. They have machines, gadgets, and facilities designed specifically to capture, contain, and handle Paranormals. Unity is hundreds of years old, and it has dedicated its entire existence to fighting us."

I stared at Sebastian, my frustration boiling over into determination. "Well, I'm done hiding," I declared, my voice resolute. "Aghillas and Amara were right. I'd rather die fighting than live a life of rodents."

As the words left my lips, I felt a strange mix of fear and empowerment wash over me. It was a declaration of defiance. A promise to myself and Ember that we would no longer cower in the shadows. Our world might be steeped in darkness, but I was ready to confront it head-on, to challenge the status quo that had bound us for far too long.

Sebastian's gaze met mine, his expression a complex blend of concern and understanding. It was a pivotal moment, a crossroads that would shape the path we chose to walk. In that dimly lit corridor of our hidden sanctuary, I felt history bearing down on his shoulders, but I also sensed the glimmer of hope, a spark of rebellion that refused to be extinguished.

I left the dimly lit corridor, my determination burning brighter than ever. There was an urgency in my steps as I made my way toward Draven's workstation. Alden followed closely behind, his voice laced with concern.

“Amari, what are you planning?” he asked, his eyes searching mine for answers.

I stopped in front of the workstation, my fingers tapping impatiently on the surface. Draven looked up from his work, curiosity etched across his face. His dark eyes met mine, and I could see the flicker of anticipation.

“Draven,” I began, my voice resolute, “show me everything you can about districts one to three and their layout.”

Draven hesitated for a moment, his gaze flicking between me and Alden. It was clear that my request was unusual, even within the context of our hidden world. But he nodded slowly and began to work on the console, calling up maps and data.

Alden’s concern deepened as he moved closer. “Amari, what’s going on? Why do you need to see those districts?”

I turned to him, my eyes reflecting the determination that had taken hold of me. “I don’t know yet,” I admitted, my voice unwavering. “But I’ll tear down Unity myself if I have to.”

Chapter 24: How to Not Break The World

Alden settled beside Draven, his expression calm and concerned as he turned his attention to me. His voice, measured and steady, held a sense of reason that contrasted sharply with my fiery determination.

“Amari, you can’t just tear down Unity,” he said, his tone unwavering. “It’s not just buildings and a few agents. It’s not even just Daruskov. Unity is the entire world. Are you prepared to tear apart the entire world?”

His words hit me like a cold wave, momentarily freezing my resolve. I had been so focused on my desire for change, for freedom, that I had failed to grasp the enormity of what I was thinking about. Unity wasn’t just a physical entity. It was a global presence, an intricate web that held our world together, however oppressive it might be.

I whirled around to face him, anger simmering beneath my skin. “So, what then?” I demanded, my voice sharp. “Are you suggesting we resign ourselves to living underground or behind Lady’s illusions for the rest of our lives?”

Alden’s eyes met mine, and there was a quiet intensity in his gaze. “Of course not,” he replied, his voice tinged with frustration. “But I also don’t want to live in a world that’s broken.”

I clenched my fists, my emotions churning within me. “And that’s not a good reason to break it further?” I shot

back, my voice rising. “Alden, we’ve been living in a world where we’re hunted down like animals, where we’re forced into hiding, where we can’t even use our powers freely. How can you say it’s not broken?”

Alden’s jaw tightened, his eyes reflecting his turmoil. “I’m not saying it’s not broken,” he replied, his voice softer now. “But we can’t just rush into this without a plan. We need a strategy, a way to change things without causing chaos and destruction.”

I turned away, pacing back and forth in the dimly lit room. My mind raced with conflicting thoughts and emotions. Alden was right. We couldn’t simply tear down Unity without considering the consequences. But the idea of living in perpetual fear and oppression gnawed at me.

“We need to find a way to dismantle Unity from within,” Alden continued, his words thoughtful. “Expose their secrets, reveal their true nature to the world. If we can rally enough support, we can bring about change without resorting to violence.”

I stopped pacing, my mind absorbing his words. It was a different approach, one that required careful planning and patience. But it held the promise of a future where our powers could be a force for good, where we could live openly without fear.

Alden moved closer to me, his hand gently resting on my shoulder. “Amari, I know you want to make a difference, and I do too,” he said, his voice filled with sincerity. “But

let's do it in a way that doesn't destroy everything we know."

Draven's voice pulled my attention away from Alden, and I turned to face the screen that displayed intricate layouts and security details of Districts One, two, and Three. The sight that greeted me was nothing short of daunting, and my gasp of shock escaped involuntarily.

"It's impenetrable," I whispered, my eyes scanning the screen in disbelief. The layers of security, the fortified structures, and the meticulous defense systems were a stark reminder of the formidable adversary we faced.

Draven nodded solemnly. "Yeah, they tightened everything up since Agent Cross smuggled your group out. Did you plan on infiltrating the districts?"

Then I realized that Draven had spoken. "You can talk?" I shouted, startling everyone, including Ember.

"You thought he couldn't speak?" Alden asked.

"What? He never talks, just taps people and points."

"I can talk, Amari. Back to your plan?" Draven said.

I turned back to the screen, frustration and determination warring within me. The layouts and security measures before us presented a seemingly insurmountable challenge. But I refused to back down. "We can't just sit here and do nothing," I said, my voice resolute. "There has to be a way to break through their defenses."

Draven leaned forward, his fingers dancing across the keyboard as he brought up additional data. "There might

be a weak point,” he said, his voice tinged with cautious optimism. “I’ve been monitoring their systems for a while now, and I’ve noticed a pattern in their security routines. They have a blind spot during shift changes, a brief window where the guards are distracted.”

My heart quickened at the prospect of a vulnerability, no matter how small. “How long is this window?” I asked, my mind racing with possibilities.

“About fifteen minutes,” Draven replied, his eyes fixed on the screen. “It’s not much, but it’s something. you’ll need a diversion to make the most of that window. Something that will draw their attention away from the vulnerable area.”

I considered our options, weighing the risks and potential outcomes. “What if we staged a protest or a rally near the districts?” I suggested. “It would create chaos, and Unity would likely deploy agents to control the situation. That could be our chance to slip through.”

“And then do what?” Alden asked.

I tore my gaze away from the screen to answer him. “I... I was thinking that if we could somehow kidnap the leaders, Unity might naturally crumble on its own. Or we could use them as bargaining chips to secure our freedom.”

Alden’s voice cut through the air, his tone firm and unwavering as he reiterated the principle. “Lesson number one, Amari—we don’t negotiate with anyone, ever. That’s the first thing they drill into your head if you

work for Unity, even if your job is to walk past the buildings every day.”

Alden’s words hung in the air, emphasizing the unwavering stance of Unity—no negotiations, no compromises. I turned to him, curiosity piqued by the mention of seemingly mundane jobs within Unity. “They hire people just to make the buildings look less intimidating?”

Alden nodded, his expression grave. “As the government grew more powerful, people became increasingly afraid of government buildings. Unity wanted to maintain a sense of normalcy, so they started hiring individuals to just walk in and out, walk past, and sit around. You know, whatever to create the illusion of innocence and make the structures blend in with the surroundings.”

I whispered in disbelief, “Unbelievable.”

Alden’s gaze remained fixed on the screen displaying the layouts of the districts. “Anyways,” he continued, “you won’t be able to infiltrate the Inner District with an attack force, and you can’t do it alone. The blind spot is a lie, and the window is a trap. Besides, you don’t even know who you’re looking for.”

Draven, who had been quietly working at his computer, again piped up. “I do.” With a few keystrokes, he pulled up images of the government leaders, their faces illuminated on the screen.

I leaned in to examine the images, scanning the names below each one. My eyes stopped on a woman with the

last name “Farlowe.” I turned to Alden, my voice barely above a whisper. “Related?”

Alden’s reply came without hesitation. “That’s my mother.”

I nodded, absorbing the newfound information. “I see.”

Draven shifted his attention back to the screen and asked, “So, what’s the new plan?”

I smiled as I studied the names before me, a glimmer of determination igniting within me. “I’ll work on it,” I said with newfound resolve. “Thank you, Draven.”

Chapter 25: Bounty

The Unity facility was a sprawling, labyrinthine complex, and it took me some time to navigate my way out of the underground levels. My heart raced with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation as I approached the administrative area. I knew this was the moment of truth, the culmination of everything I had risked and planned for.

Finally, I reached a well-lit room with a glass door that bore the emblem of Unity. I took a deep breath and pushed open the door, entering the bustling administrative hub of the facility. Agents in sharp suits moved purposefully, attending to various tasks. It was a stark contrast to the ominous atmosphere of the underground.

Approaching the reception desk, I found a middle-aged woman with a severe expression. She glanced up at me, her eyes sharp and calculating. “How can I assist you?” she asked in a no-nonsense tone.

“I’m here to deliver Alden Cross,” I replied, my voice steady despite the butterflies in my stomach.

The woman raised an eyebrow, her gaze scrutinizing me. “Is that so? You’re the one who captured him?”

I nodded. “That’s correct. I have him in custody.”

She reached for a phone on her desk and dialed a number, speaking in hushed tones. After a brief conversation, she hung up and motioned for me to follow

her. I trailed behind her through a series of sterile hallways until we reached a nondescript door.

Inside the room, Alden was seated in a chair, still bound and restrained. He looked up as we entered, his expression resignation and defiance. The Unity agent who had been guarding him nodded at the woman from reception and then left the room, closing the door behind him.

The woman approached Alden and began the process of verifying his identity. She scanned his retinas, took his fingerprints, and entered various codes into a computer terminal. It was a thorough and meticulous procedure, and I watched as Alden endured it with an air of quiet defiance.

Finally, the woman stepped back and nodded. "Identity confirmed. You may proceed."

She reached into a briefcase and produced a document—a pardon signed by several high-ranking Unity officials. The woman inspected it briefly before nodding me forward. "Name."

"Amari Zephyr and Ember Zephyr-Cross."

"The pardon is for one person."

"No, the pardon is for everyone involved in his capture. Ember is."

"Ember is your daughter?"

"Yes."

“And his?” She cocked her head toward Alden. I nodded. She smiled. “Interesting.”

“I’ll need both your details.”

When I gave her Ember’s birthday, she frowned. “She’s just a baby.”

“I couldn’t have done it without her.”

“Whatever.” She filled in our names and had the pardon ready. “There you go.”

With that, she turned to a computer terminal and began typing rapidly. I could feel the tension in the room as we waited, the seconds ticking by like hours. Then, there was a faint chime, and the woman turned back to me.

“Your account has been credited with the agreed-upon reward,” she said, her tone businesslike. “I can’t find your baby in the records.”

“Ahh, she was born off the grid.”

“Her reward?”

“I’ll hold on to it for her.”

The woman shrugged. She wired me another fifty million. Two identity bands popped out of her briefcase, and she opened one and handed it to me. I put it on, my heart fearful.

The other goes on your baby’s arm within twenty-four hours, or everything is nullified, the pardon and the reward.

I nodded and swallowed.

“Is there anything else you require?” she asked.

I hesitated for a moment, my mind racing. This was the moment I had been working toward the chance to secure a future for Ember and me. But as I looked at Alden, still bound and under Unity’s watchful eye, I felt a pang of doubt.

“No,” I said finally, my voice steady. “That’s all.”

I stood there, the cold, sterile air of the Unity facility surrounding me as I watched the agents take Alden away. His hands were cuffed, and his gaze locked with mine for a moment before they led him down the corridor. I had delivered Alden, the Last Order, to Unity, and now it was their turn to fulfill their end of the bargain.

But something was amiss.

The agents who had taken Alden didn’t leave as I had expected. Instead, they remained in the room, their presence a lingering discomfort. I shifted uncomfortably on my feet, my eyes darting from one agent to another, searching for answers in their unreadable expressions.

Minutes stretched into an agonizing silence before I couldn’t bear it any longer. “What are you waiting for?” I finally blurted out, unable to contain my unease.

Alden’s voice, calm and composed, reached my ears. “The trap.”

I turned to face him, my eyes narrowing in confusion. “Trap? What are you talking about?”

Alden's gaze remained steady, his hands still cuffed, but there was a determination in his words. "They expect you to ambush them, Amari. To rescue me."

I scoffed at the notion. "Rescue you? Why would I do that?"

"Because that's how these things usually go. I'll be the bait you use to set up an ambush."

"Oh." I faced the agents. "You guys don't have to worry about that."

Alden's voice remained steady, unwavering. "And what about your dream of freedom for everyone? What about their chance at a better life? Don't they deserve that too?"

I clenched my fists, torn between the promise of freedom and the undeniable connection I felt with Alden. "They were fine before I came along, besides, as you said, I can't live in a broken world, Alden. I can't continue to live without my freedom. This is about me getting my life back, especially since I have a baby to take care of now."

"Cliche." The agent in charge of the operation muttered and yawned.

The agents exchanged glances. They were waiting for my decision, for me to make a move. But I had made my choice, and I couldn't let emotions cloud my judgment.

The room felt tense as I stood there, facing Alden, who was already bound and restrained. Unity agents surrounded him, their guns and weapons poised and ready, their vigilant eyes never leaving him. It was a

stark reminder of the power that Unity held and the dangerous game I was playing.

Alden's voice cut through the air. "So, what's your plan now, Amari?"

I met his gaze, my expression unreadable. "I'm going back home to my family. Maybe even work for Drea Mindara. Just for kicks"

Alden let out a humorless laugh, the sound hollow in the sterile room. "And what about all the people like you? The ones you're abandoning to their fate?"

I shrugged, a cold resolve settling over me. "They're used to scurrying around. I'm a District Seventeen kid."

Alden's eyes bore into mine, a mixture of disbelief and disappointment in his gaze. "You're just going to forget about them? Leave them behind?"

I felt a pang of guilt, but I couldn't let it sway me. "I have to think about my family, about Ember. Unity has too much power. They want a martyr, I can't be that."

The Unity agents exchanged glances, as if unsure of how to proceed. They knew I wasn't a threat, not at the moment. But they also knew I had the potential to be. I had delivered Alden to them, fulfilled my end of the bargain, and now I wanted what they had promised me—a pardon for myself and my baby.

Alden's gaze remained locked with mine, the unspoken tension between us thick in the air. It was a painful goodbye, and neither of us knew if we would ever see

each other again. But we both had our battles to fight, our paths to tread.

I turned away, my footsteps echoing in the sterile hallway as I left the room. The agents didn't stop me. They knew I had no intention of causing trouble. My mind was already focused on the life I hoped to build for Ember and me, a life away from the shadows of Unity.

I left the building, the identity band feeling a little scratchy after years of not wearing one.

Chapter 26: Infiltration

The Bloodhounds were closing in, and with each passing moment, the tension in our team grew thicker. We had infiltrated the heart of Unity's Inner Districts, a labyrinth of government buildings and fortified facilities, with a single goal in mind—to disrupt Unity's control and expose its oppressive regime.

Lady, with her extraordinary illusion-casting abilities, was our secret weapon. She had used her powers to create mirages that could divert the Bloodhounds' attention away from our true location. Illusions of multiple Amaris and Aldens weaved through the streets, confusing our pursuers and buying us valuable time.

Amid the chaos, our team split up to carry out our assigned tasks. Some Paranormals, including Alden and me, were tasked with infiltrating government buildings to gain control of essential communication hubs. Draven, with his digital cloning abilities, was to create a digital blackout, severing Unity's ability to coordinate.

As we moved through the dimly lit corridors of a government facility, I felt a rush of adrenaline mixed with apprehension. The building was eerily silent, the air heavy with secrets and deception. Our footsteps echoed faintly as we navigated the maze-like structure.

Lady's illusions had drawn the Bloodhounds away from our location, but we knew their specialized training and paranormal detection devices could still lead them back to us. We had to work quickly and stealthily.

Alden and I stood before the secured door, our mission pressing upon us like an invisible weight. The determination in Alden's eyes was palpable as he motioned for me to stand back. With expertise, he set the explosives around the lock, ensuring our entry would be quick. Draven, back at our makeshift headquarters, was working to disable the alarm from his end.

The seconds felt like hours as we waited for Draven's signal. The tension in the corridor was almost suffocating, each passing moment increasing our vulnerability. Then, with a subtle nod from Draven over our communication devices, the alarm was successfully silenced.

Alden moved with precision, his fingers deftly manipulating the explosives. The lock gave way with a muted explosion, and we rushed into the room beyond. Inside, we were greeted by a sight that held the key to Unity's power—the control center for their communication network.

Dim blue light bathed the room, emanating from the multitude of screens and terminals that lined the walls. The hum of machinery filled the air as we entered the digital battlefield. The government's lifeline was now at our mercy.

Our intrusion didn't go unnoticed. Immediately, the room erupted into chaos as agents and guards stationed within the facility reacted to our presence. Guns were pointed in our direction, their barrels gleaming ominously in the dim light.

Alden's training kicked in, and he moved with the grace and speed of a seasoned operative. His paranormal abilities came to life, his movements almost too fast for the human eye to track. Bullets whizzed past him, finding empty air as he deftly dodged and countered.

I fought by his side, my powers complementing his in this deadly dance. With a focused effort, I reached out to seize control of the guards' minds. Their eyes glazed over, and they slumped to the ground one by one, their weapons falling from nerveless fingers.

The room fell into a surreal silence, the battle paused in the wake of my psychic onslaught. Our adversaries lay unconscious at our feet, their threats neutralized. But we knew that our time was limited, and the urgency of our mission pressed on. I panted, suddenly out of breath, but I shook it off. This was not the time or place for exhaustion.

Alden turned his attention to the terminal before him, his fingers dancing across the keyboard as he accessed the heart of Unity's communication network. The screens displayed lines of code and intricate networks, each one a piece of the puzzle we aimed to dismantle.

He inserted the drive Draven had given him and we waited for it to be uploaded.

I was skeptical about this part of the plan, giving Draven full access to all Daruskov sounded dangerous, but we had little choice. Lady's illusions of multiple times and Aldens could only fool them for so long.

As Alden and I began our work, I wondered about the consequences of our actions.

We were challenging a regime that had held power for centuries, and Unity's response to our defiance would be ruthless. But I couldn't ignore our mission—the hope of countless Paranormals who had suffered in silence, the memory of Aghillas and Amara, and the future I wanted for Ember.

Alden's fingers danced across the keyboard as he gained access to the control systems. The displays flickered to life, revealing lines of code and intricate networks. It was a digital battleground, and Alden was our master strategist.

Meanwhile, Lady continued to weave her illusions outside, creating a surreal spectacle that would baffle even the most seasoned Bloodhounds. The hallways teemed with phantoms of Alden and me, moving in erratic patterns. It was a dance of deception, and Lady's powers were our greatest asset.

As the minutes ticked by, Draven's voice crackled over our communication devices. "I've initiated the blackout," he reported. "Unity's systems are scrambling. They won't be able to coordinate their forces effectively."

Alden and I exchanged a glance, relief, and determination in our eyes. Draven had done his part, and now it was up to us to cripple Unity's communication infrastructure. Every keystroke felt like a step closer to our goal, but it also deepened our commitment to the fight.

Outside, chaos reigned as Lady's illusions continued to confound the Bloodhounds. Reports came in over our devices of their confusion and frustration, their voices laced with anger. Unity was struggling to respond to a threat it had never faced before.

And then all the lights went off, and everything went dark.

"It's daylight outside," I said.

"No natural light or air enters here," Alden replied.

I could hear Draven laughing maniacally as he gained control of Unity's systems.

Chapter 27: Shapeshifting

The plan had been simple. Unity was looking for Alden, so I would give him to them, but I would also keep him with me.

The plan had been hatched out of desperation, a gamble born from the need to keep Alden safe while deceiving Unity. They were relentless in their pursuit of him, and we needed to find a way to throw them off our scent while protecting our own.

Sitting around a dimly lit table in our makeshift headquarters, I outlined the details of the plan to Alden and Sebastian. It was a risky scheme, but it was the best shot we had at the moment.

“Shapeshifters could achieve exact copies,” I explained, my voice steady but tinged with uncertainty. “Alden and I will go to collect the pardon. Meanwhile, several other shapeshifters will infiltrate key buildings within Districts one to three. We’ll create diversions, keep Unity’s forces occupied, and make them spread themselves thin, looking for us.”

Alden, who had been nibbling on a sausage, pointed it at me with a wry grin. “Amari, you’re overlooking one crucial detail here. Unity knows all our tricks. They’ve been hunting Paranormals for generations. Shapeshifters won’t stay hidden for long, and this diversion might just be what they were expecting. They have countless agents and resources at their disposal. They’ll flood those buildings with their forces, and we’ll be trapped.”

His words hit me like a cold wave, and I realized the gravity of the situation. Alden was right. Se couldn't underestimate Unity's capabilities. They had spent centuries perfecting their methods, and we were dealing with an adversary that was well-prepared for our every move.

Sebastian, who had been listening in silence, finally spoke up. "Alden raises a valid point. We need a plan that not only buys us time but also ensures your safety, Amari. Unity will stop at nothing to capture Alden, and we can't afford to underestimate them."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration gnawing at me. It seemed that every path we considered was fraught with peril. "So, what do we do then?" I asked, my voice tinged with desperation. "We can't just keep running forever. Unity will never stop hunting us."

Our heads were spinning with the possibilities, the pieces of a plan falling into place like an intricate puzzle. Draven, always the analytical mind, broke the silence with his insight.

"They can't trap us if they don't know where to go," he declared, his eyes gleaming with a spark of genius. "It's the alarms that tell the agents where to head. All we need to do is trigger all of them, or as many as possible while avoiding the one place we need to hit."

Alden, quick on the uptake, chimed in, his voice filled with a sense of purpose. "And it would be even more confusing if their monitors saw me leading the charge,

headed for particular locations where I can do real damage. We need to make our feints believable. Tricks and loopholes won't work on their systems. We have to attack them to get a response.”

Draven nodded, his digital eyes flickering as he processed the information. “Before the place locks down,” he added, “it will take fifteen to twenty minutes. If we can get my drive into the mainframe by then, I'll be able to take control of the entire District Two. And within twenty-four hours, all of Daruskov.”

The gravity of Draven's words settled over us like a heavy cloak. The plan was bold, audacious, and incredibly risky. But it was also our best chance at striking back at Unity, at crippling their power and giving Paranormals a fighting chance for freedom.

Sebastian leaned back in his chair, his expression a mixture of determination and caution. “This is our shot,” he said, his voice steady. “We can't afford to mess this up. We'll need to coordinate our efforts perfectly, from triggering the alarms to Alden's attack. Timing is crucial.”

Alden's voice held a note of caution as he outlined the next phase of our plan. “We still need to draw a considerable number of their forces away,” he said, his gaze fixed on the holographic map displayed before us. “Over four weeks, dozens of people will contact the government, saying they want to turn me in. But here's the key: on the day we're to attack, about twenty-five

percent of them will choose that day to make the exchange.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. “Why that specific day?”

Alden leaned forward, his expression grave. “Because, knowing Unity, they’ll take every single one of them seriously. It’s partly protocol and partly because they’ll want a sizeable force on hand in case someone plans an ambush.”

The room fell into silence as we absorbed the intricacies of Alden’s plan. We knew it was a gamble, one that required careful orchestration and impeccable timing. If we played our cards right, it could divert a significant portion of Unity’s forces away from our target.

Draven, always the strategist, interjected with a thoughtful expression. “However, we need to make a delivery, or else they’ll start to suspect something. If we stage a real delivery, it will ensure that all the forces in the vicinity converge or focus on Alden, making it easier for us to execute our attack.”

I nodded, my mind racing as I considered the logistics of such a maneuver. “But we have to be careful,” I cautioned. “Any hint of suspicion, and they’ll tighten their security even further. We can’t afford to tip our hand too soon.”

Sebastian’s words hung in the air as we mulled over the intricacies of our plan. Lady’s illusions would indeed be a valuable asset in diverting Unity’s attention, but there was a more contentious issue at hand. Alden had

suggested that he turn himself in as part of the ploy, a proposition that had ignited a heated argument.

I couldn't fathom the thought of Alden willingly putting himself in Unity's clutches. The risks were too great, and the idea of him being imprisoned or worse filled me with dread. It was a risk I wasn't willing to take, and I made my stance clear, vehemently opposing his plan.

The room crackled with tension as Alden's proposal settled among us. Lady's illusions were a powerful asset and using them to create a diversion was a sound strategy. However, the crux of the issue lay in Alden's willingness to turn himself in as part of the plan. It was a notion that I vehemently opposed, and the argument ignited like a spark in dry tinder.

My voice cut through the air. "Alden, you can't seriously be considering this," I implored, my eyes locked onto his with unwavering determination. "Turning yourself in? It's too dangerous. We don't know what they might do to you, and we can't risk losing you."

Alden's expression remained resolute, his jaw set as he met my gaze head-on. "Amari, it's the only way to draw their attention away from the real plan," he argued, his voice unwavering. "We need them to believe I'm the target so we can execute the diversion successfully."

The urgency of the situation weighed heavily on me, and my frustration mounted. "But it's too risky, Alden. What if something goes wrong? What if they don't release you, or worse?"

Sebastian, sitting nearby, tried to mediate. “Let’s not dismiss the idea outright,” he suggested, his tone calm and measured. “We need a plan that can guarantee the safety of everyone involved. If we can find a way to minimize the risks...”

My patience was fraying, and I interrupted him with a sense of urgency. “Sebastian, you know as well as I do that Unity won’t treat him kindly. We’ve seen what they do to Paranormals. What will they do to him? I can’t accept this.”

Alden’s voice carried a note of frustration as he countered, “Amari, we’re running out of options. Unity is closing in on us, and if we don’t act soon, we might not have another chance. This is the best way to protect our team.”

Amidst the turmoil, a meek voice broke through the cacophony. A petite woman stepped forward, her presence unassuming yet filled with determination. She introduced herself as Jackie, a newcomer to our group.

Her arrival brought a momentary pause to our argument, and I regarded her with curiosity. It was clear she had a suggestion, and her timidity gave way to a quiet confidence as she spoke. “There’s a way to do it,” she said, her eyes darting between Alden and me.

I exchanged a glance with Alden, our unspoken question obvious: Could Jackie’s proposal offer a solution that would satisfy both of us? Unity’s relentless pursuit demanded unconventional strategies, and Maybe Jackie held the key to a compromise that would keep us all safe.

Sebastian, always the voice of reason, encouraged her to share her ideas. We gathered around, eager to hear her thoughts, and Jackie began to outline her plan with a sense of purpose that belied her initial meekness.

Jackie stepped forward, her voice soft but determined, capturing the attention of everyone in the room. She began, “I might have a way to make this work, but it won’t be easy.” Her eyes moved from face to face, gauging our reactions. “I have an ability that allows me to manipulate a person’s appearance at a microscopic level. I can change their cells and genetic makeup to match someone else’s, even Alden’s.”

Alden and I exchanged glances, a glimmer of hope emerging amidst our doubts. Her proposition held both promise and peril, and we were all aware of the stakes.

“But there’s a catch,” Jackie continued, her gaze shifting with uncertainty. “I’m not entirely sure if I can change them back. It’s a complex process, and there’s a risk that once the transformation is done reversing it might be impossible.”

her words settled over us like a heavy shroud. It was a dilemma with no easy answers, a choice between potential freedom and the moral quandary of altering someone’s life irrevocably.

Alden’s voice cut through the silence, his concern palpable. “What about the person we transform? We can’t just leave them like that.”

Jackie nodded solemnly, acknowledging the gravity of the situation. “I’ll do my best to reverse the changes, but

there are no guarantees. They'll be taking a significant risk.”

In the days that followed, we grappled with the magnitude of the decision before us. Finding volunteers willing to undergo such a transformation was no small feat, and the ethical implications weighed heavily on our minds. But with Unity's relentless pursuit and surveillance, we had to consider every possible avenue to achieve our goals.

Alden turned to me, his expression of determination and uncertainty. “Amari, we don't have many options left. We need to act, or Unity will continue to tighten its grip on us.”

I met his gaze, understanding the gravity of the situation. It was a difficult decision, but time was running out, and we couldn't afford to remain passive. “You're right, Alden,” I replied. “Let's find the volunteers and make this plan work.”

Jackie's proposal had given us a glimmer of hope, a potential path forward. We were ready to do whatever it took to dismantle Unity's oppressive regime, even if it meant deciding with uncertain consequences.

The search for volunteers was a painstaking process. We needed individuals willing to take the risk to become temporary vessels for our mission. Many feared the potential consequences, but three days later, we were approached by Gary and Joan.

As we gathered in a dimly lit room, Jackie explained the procedure in more detail. “I’ll need a team of skilled external manipulators to assist me,” she began. “This transformation requires precision and expertise. We’ll be altering the very essence of a person’s identity.”

Alden and I exchanged glances once more, silently acknowledging our choices. We wonder if our actions will haunt us in the days to come.

Volunteers came forward, each one expressing their willingness to transform. They understood the risks and the uncertainty, but their determination mirrored our own. We couldn’t deny their courage.

With a team assembled, Jackie commenced the arduous process. Days turned into nights as we watched Jackie work tirelessly, her focus unwavering. Each transformation was delicate, and as the changes took place, we marveled at the sheer audacity of our plan.

The volunteers, brave souls willing to embrace what I hoped were temporary identity shifts, showed unwavering resolve. Their commitment to our cause shone through, a testament to the collective strength of our group.

But our actions lingered in the air, a constant reminder of the moral complexity we faced. As we moved forward, we grappled with questions that had no easy answers. What if we couldn’t reverse the transformations? What if we were forever altering lives for the sake of our mission?

Alden and I had many sleepless nights, our thoughts filled with doubts and uncertainties. It was a burden we carried, knowing that the decisions we made could have profound consequences.

One evening, as Jackie worked tirelessly to reverse one of the transformations, I approached Alden in the dimly lit room where we often found solace. He was hunched over, his brow furrowed in deep thought.

“Alden,” I began, my voice filled with our choices. “Do you ever wonder if we’re doing the right thing?”

He looked up at me, his eyes reflecting the turmoil within. “Every day, Amari,” he admitted. “We’re treading on morally uncertain ground. But we can’t let this oppression continue unchecked.”

I nodded, understanding the necessity of our actions. “We’re fighting for a future where Paranormals can live without fear,” I said. “But at what cost?”

Alden reached out and took my hand, his grip firm and reassuring. “We’ll carry the burden of our choices together,” he said. “And we’ll do everything in our power to make sure this sacrifice isn’t in vain.”

The five weeks leading up to our audacious plan felt like an eternity. It was a period marked by meticulous preparations, moral dilemmas, and uncertainty. Jackie worked tirelessly to transform the two volunteers, Gary and Joan, into exact copies of Alden and me. Their dedication to our cause was unwavering, even in the face of the inherent risks.

As Jackie labored to alter their very identities at a microscopic level, I found myself drawn to the volunteers. Spending time with them became a necessity, not just to shape their appearances, but also to instill in them the memories, habits, and behaviors that would allow them to pass convincingly as Alden and me.

The process was both fascinating and painful. Erasing parts of their own identities, making space for the memories and traits I implanted, felt like a profound violation. It weighed heavily on my conscience, knowing that I was altering their very essence for the sake of our mission.

Gary and Joan, however, approached the process with unwavering resolve. They saw their transformation as a sacrifice for the greater good, a means to an end that could secure a future for all Paranormals. Their courage and selflessness were humbling, a testament to the strength of our collective determination.

But the most heart-wrenching aspect of our plan was the knowledge that the bounty for Alden's capture would be sent to me, as they would be using my name and identity during the exchange. It was a stark reminder of the risks they were undertaking, and the grim reality that they might not survive if things went awry.

When the appointed day finally arrived, tensions ran high. The clone Amari, now a replica of myself, and the clone Alden, virtually indistinguishable from the real Alden, were ready to play their crucial roles in our

audacious plan. They would venture into the lion's den to collect the pardon and bounty while our other decoys engaged with Unity agents throughout the city.

I watched as the clones Amari and Alden departed, my heart heavy with both hope and trepidation. Our mission was in motion, a high-stakes gamble that could alter the course of our struggle against Unity. The sacrifices, the choices, and the moral complexities we faced were all part of the arduous path we had chosen.

As I waited for the outcomes of our diversions and the ultimate success or failure of our plan, I reflected on the courage and selflessness displayed by Gary and Joan. Their willingness to transform, to risk everything for the greater good, was a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

Now, as our plan unfolded, we could only hope our sacrifices would be worth it.

Chapter 28: Turning Point

The aftermath of our digital assault had thrown Unity into chaos. The emergency lights bathed the government facility in a creepy red glow as alarms blared throughout the complex. Unity's leaders were mobilizing their most loyal forces, determined to crush the rebellion that had dared to challenge their dominion.

As Alden and I hurried through the dimly lit corridors, the tension in the air was palpable. The taste of victory lingered on our tongues, but it was overshadowed by the looming threat of Unity's retaliation. The Bloodhounds, relentless in their pursuit, wouldn't rest until we were captured or eliminated.

Our team had split up to carry out various tasks, and our communication devices crackled with updates and reports. Draven's surveillance skills were crucial in keeping us one step ahead of the Bloodhounds. As Unity's forces regrouped, the pressure mounted on us to maintain the upper hand.

"Draven, any sign of them?" I whispered into my communicator, my voice tight with anxiety.

There was a brief pause, and then Draven's voice crackled to life. "They're closing in, Amari," he replied, the strain obvious in his tone. "The Bloodhounds are deploying energy signature trackers. We need to move quickly."

Alden and I exchanged a glance, our hearts pounding in our chests. The Bloodhounds were a formidable

adversary, armed with technology that could anticipate our every move. We needed to stay one step ahead if we were going to escape their clutches.

As we continued down the labyrinthine corridors, I thought of Ember. She was our reason for this fight, the driving force behind our determination. I had to survive. Not just for myself, but for her and the future we were fighting to create.

Suddenly, a group of Bloodhounds appeared at the end of the corridor, their uniforms marked with the insignia of Unity's elite task force. Their eyes glowed with a creepy intensity as they locked onto us, their weapons at the ready.

"Alden," I said, my voice low and urgent. "We need to find a way out, now."

He nodded, his eyes scanning our surroundings for any possible escape routes. But the Bloodhounds were closing in, their relentless pursuit driving us deeper into the heart of Unity's stronghold.

Alden and I dashed down a side corridor, our footsteps echoing in the enclosed space. The scent of stale air and metal filled our nostrils as we navigated the maze-like complex. The taste of victory was fleeting, replaced by the bitter tang of uncertainty.

The sound of gunfire echoed through the corridors as the Bloodhounds opened fire. Bullets whizzed past us, their deadly intent a constant reminder of the peril we faced.

We needed to find a way out. There had to be some way to evade our pursuers and regroup with our team.

“Amari, we can’t keep running,” Alden said, his voice filled with determination. “We need a plan.”

I nodded, my mind racing as I searched for a solution. Unity’s leaders would stop at nothing to protect their regime, and the Bloodhounds were closing in with every passing moment.

Suddenly, a voice crackled over our communicators, and it was Lady who spoke, her tone laced with urgency. “I’ve created a diversion,” she said. “The Bloodhounds are scattered, and their focus is divided. Find a way out while you can.”

The relief that flooded through me was short-lived. Lady’s illusions had bought us time, but the Bloodhounds were still a formidable threat. We needed a strategy, a way to outmaneuver them and escape Unity’s grasp.

As we continued down the labyrinthine corridors, the tension in the air was palpable. Every footstep echoed like a thunderclap, and the taste of victory was tainted by the looming threat of Unity’s retaliation. The Bloodhounds, unwavering in their pursuit, wouldn’t rest until we were captured or eliminated.

Unity’s forces were closing in, and we had to rely on Draven’s surveillance skills to stay ahead of the game. His voice crackled over the communicator, reporting on the Bloodhounds’ movements and tactics. The pressure

was mounting as we sought to maintain our advantage in this deadly cat-and-mouse game.

Alden and I shared a wordless understanding as we moved through the dimly lit corridors. Our mission was far from over, and our lives hung in balance. Ember's future, and that of all Paranormals, depended on our success.

Suddenly, the corridor ahead of us erupted in a blaze of gunfire. The Bloodhounds had found us, their weapons trained on our position. We dove for cover, the sound of bullets whizzing past us a grim reminder of the danger we faced.

"Alden," I panted, my heart racing as we huddled behind a stack of metal crates. "We need to find a way out of here, now."

He nodded, his eyes scanning our surroundings for any possible escape routes. But the Bloodhounds were relentless, closing in with deadly precision.

Draven's voice crackled over the communicator, a lifeline in our desperate situation. "I've screwed up their security systems," he reported a note of triumph in his tone. "I've made it appear as if you and Alden are in multiple locations on their monitors. It should buy you some time."

Relief washed over me as I heard Draven's update. His skills were our greatest asset, and his ability to deceive Unity's surveillance systems had given us a crucial advantage. But we couldn't afford to become complacent. The Bloodhounds were closing in, and we needed a plan.

Alden and I exchanged a determined glance, our minds racing to formulate a strategy. Unity's leaders were marshaling their forces, and the noose was tightening around us. We needed to outmaneuver the Bloodhounds and find a way to regroup with our team.

As we dashed down another corridor, the sound of Lady's voice filled our ears through the communicator. "I've created a diversion," she said, her tone urgent and tired. Today had been taxing on her powers. "The Bloodhounds are scattered, and their focus is divided. Find a way out while you can."

The knowledge that Lady had bought us time was a glimmer of hope in our desperate situation. But we couldn't afford to waste a single moment. The Bloodhounds were still a formidable threat, and our escape was far from assured.

The battle for Daruskov had plunged the city into chaos. The air was thick with the acrid scent of smoke and burning debris while the distant sound of alarms and gunfire reverberated through the streets. The city's skyline, once a symbol of unity and prosperity, now lay in ruins, its towering buildings reduced to skeletal frames.

Amidst the turmoil, our group of Paranormals pressed forward. The sun, obscured by thick clouds of smoke, cast a creepy, dim light upon the battlefield.

Sebastian, an empath with a calm demeanor and sharp green eyes, moved with us, ensuring our emotions remained steady amidst the chaos. His influence was like a calming wave, soothing our anxieties and fears.

Shifters, their forms shifting rapidly from human to animal and back, sprinted ahead. Two people seemed to enjoy themselves the most. Ava, who shifted into a tigress, her fur bristling with power, and Leo, a grey wolf who moved with predatory grace. The earthy scent of soil and the musk of animals clung to them as they shifted forms.

Elementals, with the power to manipulate the elements, conjured fire, water, and earth. Sarah, an elemental controlling water, created a shimmering barrier of liquid that shielded us from enemy fire. The sound of rushing water filled our ears as her powers surged. When it looked like she would falter, I raised a hand to help her. The power within me responded to the water, and we kept moving under the water shield.

Telekinetics hurled debris and vehicles with their minds, creating makeshift barricades and hurling projectiles at our adversaries. Jack, a telekinetic with short-cropped hair and intense brown eyes, focused on using his abilities to reshape the battlefield. The metallic clang of objects being manipulated echoed around us.

Unity's Bloodhounds, their footsteps heavy and deliberate, closed in on our position. They possessed energy-detection devices that tracked our unique paranormal signatures. Their scent was that of uniformity, a sterile and cold aura that hung around them.

The taste of tension and adrenaline coated our tongues as the battle unfolded. The clash of energies and the

impact of elemental attacks sent vibrations through the ground beneath us. The cacophony of gunfire, shouting, and the occasional explosion filled the air, assaulting our ears.

As we moved through the war-torn streets, the sight of destruction surrounded us. Buildings reduced to rubble, vehicles in flames, and remnants of shattered glass painted a grim picture of the city's turmoil. The dull gray of concrete was marred by scorch marks and craters.

Our senses were overwhelmed by the chaos and violence, yet we pressed forward with unwavering determination. Our mission, the memory of those who had suffered, and the hope for a better future fueled our resolve. In the heart of the battle, we fought for Daruskov's freedom, fully aware that the cost of victory could be steep.

The battle in District One unfolded before me like a vivid nightmare, a relentless symphony of chaos and conflict. The once-familiar streets were now a war zone, littered with the fallen, whose lives had been claimed in the name of our rebellion. Smoke and dust filled the air, choking the senses with the acrid scent of destruction.

I stood amidst the turmoil, my heart heavy with sorrow. The fallen comrades, their faces unrecognizable amid the chaos, were a stark reminder of the price of our defiance. These were the people who had believed in our cause. They were who had joined us on this perilous journey. Now, their lifeless forms lay as a testament to our mission's gravity.

Alden walked by my side, his expression mirroring the solemnity of the situation. With each step we took, our mission pressed down on us. The odds were stacked against us, but we couldn't falter. We had known the risks when we embarked on this mission, but seeing the casualties up close brought those risks into harsh focus.

We had orchestrated pocket attacks on several critical buildings and units in District One as part of our plan, aiming to weaken Unity's grip on the city. It was a necessary step, but it had come at a great cost. The deafening sounds of gunfire and the explosive blasts reverberated through the streets, while the desperate cries of combatants added to the grim soundtrack of war.

Alden's grip on my hand tightened, offering silent support as we moved forward. The odds were insurmountable, but we were driven by a shared determination to defy Unity's oppressive regime. As we pressed on, I made a silent promise to myself and to those who had fallen. Their sacrifices wouldn't be in vain, and their memories would fuel our unwavering resolve.

The battleground around us was a maelstrom of sensory overload. The deafening roars of explosions and the crackling of gunfire echoed through the air, assaulting my ears. The acrid stench of burning materials mixed with the metallic tang of spilled blood, created an overwhelming olfactory assault. Each breath was a reminder of the devastation that surrounded us.

The once-paved streets were now marred by rubble and debris, making each step treacherous. Smoke hung heavy

in the air, obscuring visibility and creating a creepy, almost surreal atmosphere. The battlefield was a cacophony of chaos, a far cry from the bustling streets and colorful festivals that had once defined Daruskov.

Amid the chaos, our fellow Paranormals unleashed their unique abilities in a fierce display of power. Shifters shifted and twisted, their forms contorting with the fluidity of combat. Elementals summoned torrents of fire and water, creating elemental battlegrounds that left destruction in their wake. Telekinetics hurled objects and debris with deadly precision, turning the environment into a weapon.

Alden and I fought as a team, our abilities complementing each other seamlessly. His training as a former government agent was obvious in his precise movements and tactical thinking. His agility and speed allowed him to evade bullets and counterattacks with deadly efficiency.

My abilities came into play as well. With intense focus, I reached out to seize control of the minds of our adversaries. Their eyes glazed over, and they fell to the ground one by one, their weapons slipping from their nerveless fingers. The room fell into creepy silence as the immediate threat was neutralized.

But even as we fought, the relentless onslaught of Unity's forces continued. The Bloodhounds, with their specialized training and paranormal-detection devices, proved to be formidable adversaries. They tracked energy signatures and anticipated our movements,

making it increasingly difficult to maintain the upper hand.

Unity's leadership, desperate to regain control of Daruskov, had resorted to increasingly aggressive tactics. The city had become a battleground, with clashes between Unity loyalists and the paranormals intensifying. The skyline was marred by plumes of smoke and the occasional explosion, a stark reminder of the fierce struggle unfolding below.

As Unity's forces closed in, the tension in the air became palpable. Our mission pressed upon us, and the stakes had never been higher. We were not just fighting for our freedom but for the freedom of all Paranormals in Daruskov.

Alden's voice crackled over our communication devices, his tone unwavering. "We can't let up now. Unity is on the defensive, but they won't give up without a fight. We need to press forward and continue disrupting their operations."

I nodded in agreement, my determination unwavering. The fallen comrades, the chaos, and the destruction were harsh reminders of the cost of our rebellion. But we couldn't falter now. We had come too far, and there was too much at stake.

As the relentless battle raged on in District One, Alden and I found ourselves retreating into the heart of Unity's stronghold—the imposing government building that stood at the center of the district. It was a formidable

structure with fortified gates that seemed impervious to any breach. But we had come too far to turn back now.

At the gates, we faced a formidable force of Unity's loyalists. Armed agents and Bloodhounds stood their ground, forming a daunting barrier that threatened to halt our advance. The tension was palpable as we assessed the odds before us. We were weary and battered, our abilities pushed to their limits, yet our determination burned brighter than ever.

Alden and I exchanged a determined glance, our unspoken understanding a testament to the trust we had forged through the trials of our mission. With a shared nod, we prepared to face the overwhelming odds. We couldn't afford to lose momentum now.

But just as we were about to engage the enemy, a ray of hope emerged from the chaos. A burst of blinding light illuminated the battlefield, drawing the attention of friend and foe alike. It was Ember, our daughter, glowing with an intensity that was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

There was an identity band around her arm. *That's a hundred million and our pardon.* I thought to myself.

Her unique abilities as an amplifier had evolved, and her presence seemed to electrify the very air around her. The Paranormals on our side, weary and battered from the relentless battle, were suddenly rejuvenated. Ember's power reached out to them, strengthening their abilities and their resolve.

The effect was instantaneous. Shifters transformed with newfound vitality, Elementals summoned elemental forces with unmatched power, and telekinetic manipulated objects with unprecedented precision. It was as if Ember's presence had ignited a spark of hope in their hearts, and they fought with renewed vigor.

I too, felt the surge of Ember's power coursing through us. It was an indescribable sensation, like a surge of energy that filled every fiber of our beings. We advanced with newfound strength and determination, our senses heightened, and our abilities sharper than ever.

Sebastian and Jackie arrived at our side, their expressions mirroring the astonishment and determination that we all felt. With Ember as our guiding light, we pressed on, facing the forces that blocked our path. Unity's agents and Bloodhounds were formidable, but they were no match for the combined strength of Paranormals who had found newfound purpose in Ember's presence.

With a collective effort, we overcame the barricade at the gates, and the imposing government building loomed before us. It was the Crown House—the heart of Unity's power in District One. We had come to seize control of this fortress and bring an end to Unity's reign of oppression.

Draven, from his remote location, worked tirelessly to shut down the building's systems. With each passing moment, our grip on the Crown House tightened, and Unity's control weakened. The alarms fell silent, and the

security systems were disabled, leaving us to navigate the darkened corridors and chambers.

Alden and I embarked on a duo mission, determined to neutralize any guards or agents who still posed a threat. Armed with our paranormal abilities and newfound strength, we moved with precision and stealth, eliminating any opposition that crossed our path.

The building itself seemed like a labyrinth, with its dimly lit halls and concealed chambers. Unity's loyalists fought fiercely to protect their stronghold, but they were no match for our determination and Ember's amplification. Room by room, corridor by corridor, we cleared the path toward our ultimate goal.

The journey through the Crown House was treacherous, each step fraught with danger and uncertainty. But we knew that the fate of Daruskov rested on our shoulders. We couldn't afford to falter now, not when we had come so close to victory.

Amidst the darkness and chaos, the memory of our fallen comrades spurred us on. We were fighting not just for ourselves but for the countless Paranormals who had suffered under Unity's oppressive regime. Their sacrifices were not in vain, and their memory fueled our determination.

As we moved deeper into the heart of the building, the tension in the air grew thicker. We could sense that the final confrontation was imminent. Unity's leaders wouldn't yield easily, and we were prepared to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

Ember's radiant presence continued to strengthen our resolve, her light guiding us through the darkness. With each passing moment, we drew closer to the culmination of our mission—to seize control of the Crown House and bring about the dawn of a new era for Daruskov.

As the dust settled within the Crown House, our group gathered in a makeshift command center, a room we had secured in the labyrinthine building. The exhilaration of our recent victory still coursed through our veins, but we knew that our mission was far from over. Unity's leaders were now our prisoners, held within the very heart of their regime.

Alden stood before a bank of communication equipment, his determined gaze fixed on the task at hand. He was about to send a message that would resonate throughout Daruskov. A message that would change the course of our world's history.

I watched him, my heart filled with admiration and concern. His resolve was unshakable, his commitment to the cause unwavering. But with great power came great responsibility, and our people's hopes rested on his shoulders.

Draven's fingers danced across the control panel, and the room was bathed in the soft glow of multiple screens. He took a deep breath, his voice steady and unwavering as he began to speak.

“Paranormals of Daruskov,” Alden's voice echoed with authority and conviction, “today, you stand on the precipice of change. For too long, Unity has oppressed

you, hunted you, and forced you into the shadows. But today, we have taken a significant step toward reclaiming your freedom.”

I could hear the urgency in his words, the passion that fueled his message. Alden continued, his voice resonating with power, “Unity’s leaders are now within our grasp, held within the very heart of their regime. They will answer for their crimes, and justice will be served. But this is not just about retribution. It’s about forging a new future for all of us.”

His words hung in the air, and I could sense the collective hope and determination that swelled within our group. This was a pivotal moment, a turning point in our struggle for freedom.

Alden’s gaze shifted to the screens before him, each one displaying the broadcast’s reach across Daruskov. “I call on all Paranormals to emerge from the shadows, to join our fight for a better world. Unity’s oppression will not stand, and together, we can dismantle the walls that have kept you imprisoned.”

The room seemed to vibrate with the energy of his words, and I felt a swell of pride for the man I loved. Alden wasn’t just a leader. He was a beacon of hope for our people.

But Alden’s message didn’t stop at addressing Paranormals alone. “To our sympathizers, to those who have seen the injustice and stood with us in solidarity, your support is invaluable. Together, we can create a

society where all are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their abilities.”

As he spoke, I knew that our fight was not just about physical battles. It was about changing hearts and minds, about breaking the cycle of fear and discrimination that had plagued our world for far too long.

Alden’s voice grew even more resolute as he turned his attention to Unity’s leaders. “To those who have oppressed us, who have ruled with an iron fist, know that your time of reckoning has come. You will be held within the Crown House until the people deem it right to let you go. Your era of tyranny is over. This is your last reckoning.”

The room was silent, his words sinking in. Unity’s leaders were now prisoners, and the power had shifted from their grasp to ours. It was a moment of triumph, a testament to our resilience and determination.

As Alden concluded his broadcast, there was a palpable sense of unity in the room. Our fight was far from over, and the challenges ahead were daunting. But with our newfound strength, our unwavering resolve, and the support of our people, we were ready to face whatever lay ahead.

I stepped forward, placing a hand on Alden’s shoulder, and he turned to me with a weary but determined smile. We had come a long way, and our journey was far from finished. But together, we would shape a better future for Daruskov, one where all Paranormals could live free from oppression and fear.

Chapter 29: Madame Farlowe

As the conflict continued to unfold both inside and outside the Crown House, the situation in Daruskov became increasingly volatile. Unity's once-unified front began to crack, and the divisions within the government deepened.

Inside the Crown House, I sat across from the trapped leaders, my patience wearing thin as our negotiations seemed to reach an impasse. The room was cold and dimly lit, a stark contrast to the chaos that raged outside. The Unity officials remained obstinate, refusing to entertain the idea of a truce or an end to the persecution of Paranormals.

Sebastian and I had spent hours trying to reason with them, laying out the atrocities committed by Unity, the suffering of our people, and the opportunity for a new beginning. However, it seemed that the remnants of Unity's leadership were not ready to concede defeat. Their stubbornness only fueled my frustration.

Outside the Crown House, the reports that reached me were more promising. Whispers of defections from within Unity's ranks had begun to spread like wildfire. It seemed that the revelations of Unity's dark secrets were having a profound impact, shaking the loyalty of soldiers and eroding public support.

News of these defections gave us a glimmer of hope, a ray of light amid our struggles. It was an opportunity we couldn't afford to ignore. As reports continued to pour

in, detailing Unity officials who had abandoned their posts and joined our cause, a sense of unity began to emerge among our people.

I knew that we had to seize this moment, to turn the tide of public opinion firmly against Unity and its oppressive regime. Together with Sebastian, we organized meetings with the defectors, providing them with a haven within the Crown House. It was here that we listened to their stories, learned of the government's darkest secrets, and witnessed the inner workings of Unity from those who had once been a part of it.

Their testimonies were damning, revealing the depths of corruption, cruelty, and manipulation that had plagued Unity for generations. Their revelations were a powerful catalyst for change, and they galvanized our resolve to bring an end to the tyranny that had gripped Daruskov for far too long.

In those meetings, I saw the faces of individuals who had once served Unity, but who had now chosen to stand with us. Their reasons varied—some were driven by guilt for their past actions, while others sought redemption and a chance to make amends. But what united them all was a shared belief in our cause and a determination to right the wrongs they had once perpetuated.

The Paranormals, with their unique abilities, skillfully persuaded the defectors to join our ranks. Together, we formed a united front against Unity's remaining loyalists.

It was a fragile alliance, born out of necessity and fueled by the desire for justice and freedom.

As the news of these defections spread throughout Daruskov, it had a cascading effect. The public's perception of Unity continued to shift, and the government's grip on power continued to weaken. Unity's remaining loyalists found themselves increasingly isolated, facing not only our rebellion but also internal dissent and public condemnation.

There is something about chaos, it spreads rapidly. Without control of their systems, Unity's hold on Daruskov quickly crumbled and more and more people joined the chaos-making. They were not all on our side, but their actions helped us keep the government away for a minute or a day longer, and for that we were grateful.

Within Crown House, Unity's leaders remained unyielding, their refusal to cooperate a stubborn display of loyalty to a regime that had ruled Daruskov with an iron fist for generations. As I sat across from the high-ranking officials, my eyes flitted from one stern face to another, searching for any sign of change.

Alden, who was by my side, had his eyes fixed on the door, a mixture of anticipation and anxiety etched across his face. He had been distant throughout the meeting, lost in his thoughts. I knew that he carried a heavy burden— his family's legacy and the choices he had made to oppose Unity.

Suddenly, the door creaked open, and a woman entered the room, her presence immediately drawing our

attention. She had an air of authority, her posture commanding respect. Her eyes, though weary, held a steely determination.

It took me a moment to realize who she was—Alden’s mother. Madame Farlowe.

Alden’s mother, a woman who had once held a prominent position within Unity, now stood before us, her expression a mixture of scorn and disbelief. Her eyes locked onto her son, and I could see the disappointment etched across her features.

“Is this what you’ve become, Alden?” she sneered, her voice dripping with contempt. “A traitor to your kind, siding with these...people?”

Alden’s jaw clenched, but he remained resolute. “I’m fighting for Amari and our future, Mother,” he replied, his voice firm. “This oppression has gone on for far too long. I can’t stand by and be a part of it any longer.”

His mother’s gaze shifted to me, and she studied Ember, the glowing baby sleeping in my arms. Her eyes widened, and for a moment, a hint of vulnerability crept into her expression. I could see the conflict raging within her, the turmoil of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Is that...?” she began, her voice wavering as she gestured toward Ember.

Alden nodded solemnly. “Yes, Mother. This is my daughter, Ember.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she crossed the room toward us, her footsteps hesitant and uncertain. She

reached out a trembling hand to touch Ember's tiny fingers, her gaze never leaving her granddaughter. "She looks like my father."

Oh, so that's who my daughter resembles, I thought to myself. You carry a nightlight for nine months only for the child to turn out to physically resemble a great-grandfather that even you had never met. The same man that had caused the death of or even killed her grandparents. Children are funny.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. The walls of animosity that had separated mother and son began to crumble, replaced by a profound sense of connection and shared humanity.

And then, to our surprise, Alden's mother did something none of us had expected. She embraced her son, wrapping her arms around him in a tight, tearful hug. The room fell silent, the moment sinking in.

Alden's mother had made her choice. She had chosen to defect to our side, to stand against the very government she had served all her life. You don't become Madame in Unity's government without giving your life over to Unity. It was a powerful testament to the changing tides within Daruskov, as more and more individuals began to question Unity's oppressive rule.

As they held each other, Mother and Son, I felt a glimmer of hope. Unity was losing its grip on Daruskov, and even those who had once been its staunch supporters were beginning to see the truth. Our fight for justice and freedom was gaining momentum, and with each

defection, each revelation, we moved one step closer to a brighter future—a future where paranormals like Ember could live without fear, and where families could be reunited, no matter how divided they had once been.

The morning sun cast long shadows across the battlefield as our forces gathered, resolute and determined. The air was tense with anticipation, a palpable sense of destiny in the making. This was the moment we had all been preparing for, the final clash that would determine the fate of Daruskov.

Unity's forces, their faces contorted with grim determination, formed a formidable line of defense. They were armed with the latest technology and paranormal enhancements, their abilities honed through years of service to the oppressive regime. But we had something they didn't—unity.

Alden and I stood at the forefront, my powers combining in a dazzling display of raw energy. I could feel the crackle of electricity in the air as I reached out with my psychic abilities, scanning the minds of our adversaries.

The battle began with a deafening roar as the first shots were fired. Energy beams crisscrossed the battlefield, illuminating the dark sky with streaks of vibrant colors. Elemental attacks collided with psychic defenses, creating shockwaves that rippled through the air.

The ground beneath us shook as powerful tremors rocked the battlefield. Alden summoned walls of earth to shield our allies from enemy fire while I used my abilities

to disable Unity's soldiers, their minds overwhelmed by confusion and disarray.

Amid the chaos, I could hear the shouts and cries of our comrades, the clang of metal against metal, and the crackling of energy bursts. The acrid scent of smoke and burning debris filled the air, stinging my nostrils and adding to the sensory overload.

Our team fought valiantly, each member unleashing their unique abilities in a symphony of destruction. Shifters transformed into fierce creatures, while elementals manipulated fire, water, and air to devastating effect. Jackie's powers of transformation allowed her to shift between forms, providing versatility on the battlefield.

The Bloodhounds, Unity's elite task force, posed a formidable challenge. Their paranormal-detection devices allowed them to track energy signatures and anticipate our movements. We had to rely on our teamwork and coordination to outmaneuver them, each member covering the others' weaknesses.

Draven, our surveillance expert, remained hidden in the shadows, his digital clones infiltrating Unity's ranks. He fed us crucial information, enabling us to stay one step ahead of our adversaries. His digital manipulations disrupted enemy communication, sowing confusion among their ranks.

As the battle raged on, the casualties mounted on both sides. Bodies lay strewn across the battlefield, a grim

testament to the price of freedom. Yet, our determination remained unshaken, our spirits unwavering.

In the chaos, we pushed forward, our goal clear—confront Unity’s leaders and bring them to justice. We fought our way through the remaining loyalists, Ember’s amplifying powers boosting us.

Unity’s leaders, cornered and desperate, put up a fierce resistance. Their abilities were formidable, but their crimes weighed heavily on their conscience. We accused them of atrocities, of the suffering they had inflicted upon our people.

The climax of the battle approached, and the fate of Daruskov hung in the balance. Unity’s leadership was incapacitated or captured, and their loyalists scattered and demoralized. Victory was within our grasp, and the realization that we had succeeded in liberating our world from tyranny filled us with an overwhelming sense of triumph. There was one grizzly task to be performed, and thankfully, Alden spared me it.

We couldn’t afford to let any of the government officials who weren’t on our side go free, unfortunately, that was every one of them except Alden’s home. Alden and Sebastian took them away and returned later, their eyes hollow. My heart broke a little for them. it was one thing to kill in battle, it was another to murder a group of people, a large group simply because it was the expedient thing to do.

As the dust settled and the sun’s first rays illuminated the battlefield, we stood victorious. The sacrifices had

been great, but the price of freedom was never small. Daruskov was free at last, and a new era had dawned, one filled with hope and the promise of a better future.

Back in the heart of Daruskov, the Crown House stood as a symbol of our newfound freedom. The battle had raged on, but we had emerged victorious, and the time had come to declare our independence from the oppressive grip of Unity.

Alden and I stood before a camera, the world on our shoulders. We had prepared for this moment, knowing that our words would shape the destiny of our nation. With a deep breath, I began to speak, my voice carrying the resonance of my persuasive powers.

“Daruskov, my fellow citizens, and all those who stand with us,” I began, my words carefully chosen for maximum impact. “Today, we stand on the precipice of a new era. For too long, we have endured the tyranny of Unity, the oppression of a regime that sought to control and subjugate us.”

Alden stood by my side, his presence reinforcing the unity of our cause. His steadfast gaze and unyielding determination mirrored my own.

“Our struggle has been one of hardship and sacrifice,” I continued. “But it has also been a testament to the indomitable spirit of our people. We have fought with unwavering resolve, and today, we reap the fruits of our labor.”

As I spoke, the camera captured our images, transmitting our message to the world. Our words

carried with them history, the collective hopes and dreams of all those who had suffered under Unity's rule.

"We declare, here and now, that Daruskov is an independent nation," I proclaimed, my voice ringing with conviction. "No longer shall we be shackled by the chains of oppression. No longer shall our people live in fear."

Alden's eyes never left mine as he nodded in agreement, his silent support a testament to our shared vision.

"We extend a hand of friendship to all Paranormals, to all those who have been persecuted and oppressed," I continued. "In Daruskov, you will find sanctuary and freedom. Our borders are open to you, and together, we shall build a future where all are equal and free."

The broadcast carried our message far and wide, transcending borders and boundaries. As I spoke, I could feel the power of my persuasive abilities resonating through the words, reaching the hearts and minds of those who listened.

The day came to an end with the successful transmission of our message to the world. Draven was bringing Daruskov back online little by little, but he was doing it slowly and carefully to avoid being forced out.

Chapter 30: Epilogue

We gathered in one of the breakfast rooms in the Crown House, the soft glow of Ember's light casting a warm and comforting light from her crib. It was a week after the tumultuous events that had unfolded. On the television screen, Unity's world leaders had come together, their faces determined and their intentions clear.

They labeled our fight for independence as an act of terrorism. They promised a quick and brutal response, vowing to retake Daruskov by any means necessary.

their words hung in the air, a stark reminder of the challenges that lay ahead. Unity's leaders were not willing to let go of their control without a fight, and they had the resources and determination to back up their threats.

Ruby voiced the question that was on all our minds. "What are we going to do?"

I sighed, my gaze never leaving the television screen. "We'll fight," I said, my voice resolute, "I'm not giving up this freedom." Not now, never.

Alden stood beside me, his hand finding mine in a silent gesture of support. Ember slept peacefully, unaware of the storm that loomed on the horizon.

About Seraphina Wilderose

Greetings, kindred spirits ;)

It's Seraphina, your literary enchantress, here to whisk you away on a journey through the realms of love. In the daylight, I may be the keeper of quiet contemplations, but beneath the moon's tender glow, I am the alchemist of ardor, crafting tales that ignite the soul. Join me in a dance of words, where love is the melody, and each sentence is a step towards an unforgettable romance.

If you liked this book, please look forward for the next books of the "Fated Love Series" and leave your honest opinion by clicking [HERE](#) – Thank You!