

The Astral Chronicles:  
Ana's Decree

By Ashland Phoenix Waters

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## Chapter One:

### What is Normal?

The needle barely pinched as it slid into my arm. The sterile light overhead flickered, and I squinted, waiting for the technician to finish drawing the sample. I could hear my friends laughing in the waiting room impatiently, eager to explore the new city. Just a routine checkup. Everything was normal. I'd meet them outside in five minutes.

The results were negative. I was free to go.

The city buzzed beyond the clinic doors. Sunlight danced on glass buildings, and streetcars chimed in the distance. We walked together, five friends in a new place, following the scent of something exciting. Then one of the guys suggested a shortcut through the old factory. Said it was abandoned. Easier.

I led the way.

The corridors stretched endlessly forward, rusted metal and concrete echoing our footfalls. The new guy, I didn't even remember his name, walked just behind me, giving quiet directions. Left here. Down that hall. To the metal stairs. The others followed behind in a loose line, their voices fading into the echo. A set of metal stairs came into view, and I hurried down, hoping the exit would show up soon.

We were halfway down when the lights went out.

“Keep going,” the guy behind me said calmly.

The darkness felt heavy. Dense.

The metal steps groaned under my weight. One more, two, then finally solid ground. The concrete felt cold beneath my shoes. A second later, the lights returned with a cold snap.

I turned.

The new guy stepped down after me.

Then it happened.

A door, one that hadn't been there before, shimmered into existence behind him and slammed shut, sealing us off from the others. He smiled. His form shimmered, skin stretching, eyes darkening, and in an instant, he was something else. Cloaked in black and violet, with a grin like a dagger.

The Magician.

I gasped and stumbled backward, hitting the floor hard. I tried to crawl away, palms scraping, feet slipping.

Doors began to slam shut behind him. One after another, echoing through the corridor like thunder. He walked toward me, unhurried. Inevitable.

Then two brown pit bulls came racing up the hall. They stopped beside me, snarling, snapping at each other and fighting over who got the first bite. I flinched, caught between their teeth and the figure coming closer.

And then I woke up. The alarm clock buzzed in my ear.

Ugh... coffee first, then shower. What is with these stupid dreams about this Magician? I sipped my coffee, trying to search through my memory. Was he a symbol? A twisted version of someone from my past?

The hot shower hissed around me as I rubbed shampoo into my scalp, trying to forget. Just a dream. Weird, but harmless. *Right?*

I turned under the spray, letting the water rinse over my shoulders, and glanced at the fogged-up mirror across from the shower.

A bruise.

Upper left thigh. Dark. Oval. Almost like... a thumbprint.

I touched it gently. Winced. I hadn't hit anything. Had I?

From the other side of the bathroom door, Aurora yowled faintly for her breakfast.

I closed my eyes, suddenly cold despite the steam. Goosebumps prickled along my arms as I hurried through the rest of my shower and got dressed.

I arrived on campus earlier than usual and slipped into one of the closer faculty spots. Perks of tenure, I thought with a small smile.

Climbing the short steps into the building, the early sun cast long shadows across the walkway. My heels clicked in steady rhythm until I reached the familiar door. And there it was, still surreal, even after all this time:

Dr. Ana Maria Montoya.

I rested my fingers briefly on the plaque beside the door, a small, private gesture of reverence. The first in my family to earn a Ph.D. The first to walk halls like this not as a visitor or a student, but as faculty.

That grounding pride swelled in my chest, warm and solid, briefly pushing back the unease that had followed me all morning.

I set my bookbag on the desk, pulled out my lecture notes, and headed to class, locking the office door behind me.

As I stepped into the lecture hall, the lights buzzed faintly overhead, and the murmur of students quieted. I slid my notes onto the podium and glanced up, meeting a sea of half-awake eyes.

“Good morning,” I said, setting my coffee down beside the mic. “Today, we’re diving into the most mysterious phase of sleep, REM.”

A few heads lifted.

“Rapid Eye Movement. The stage where your brain becomes a theater of the strange. Your muscles are paralyzed, but your neurons are on fire. It’s the moment where the unconscious speaks ... if you know how to listen.”

I paused, watching their expressions shift from bored to curious. One girl in the front row leaned forward.

“REM sleep is paradoxical. Your brainwaves look almost identical to when you’re fully awake. It’s when memory is consolidated, when emotional processing happens, and when, if the theories are true, our consciousness becomes unmoored.”

I almost choked on the word.

Unmoored.

That dream... the door, the bruise. I pressed my fingers into the desk to steady myself.

“In fact,” I continued, my voice steady now, “some researchers believe REM is the gateway to lucid dreaming, out-of-body experiences... even interdimensional perception. That’s where we get into the fringe, but fascinating, edges of neuroscience.”

A ripple of interest moved through the room.

“But more on that after you’ve had your coffee, and I’ve had mine. Open your books to page 117...”

After three lectures and lunch, I was finally settling back into the week’s rhythm. Mondays always started slow. The ebb and flow of students during office hours helped break the early-week inertia. Their questions, their concerns, were a welcome distraction.

I had just wrapped up with a pair of undergraduates when a soft knock tapped at my office door. I looked up to find Damien Cole standing in the doorway, stiff posture as ever. One of the newer lab assistants, fresh out of the military and attending school on the GI Bill—he always hovered like he was assessing whether the room posed a threat.

“Dr. Montoya?” he asked, his voice low and deliberate. “Do you have a minute? I had a quick question about today’s lecture.”

I gestured to the chair across from my desk. “Of course. What’s on your mind?”

He stepped inside a bit too quickly, closing the distance in a few strides and leaning slightly over the desk as he placed his notebook in front of me. His proximity brought a subtle warmth with it—too close. The hair on the back of my neck stirred.

I forced myself to focus on the notebook, flipping it open. “What’s the issue with the material?”

“It’s the part on sleep cycles,” he said, voice too soft, too careful. He pointed to a paragraph in the notes. “I’m having trouble understanding REM and the stage transitions. Especially how EEGs show the shifts in brainwave activity.”

I shifted slightly in my chair, conscious of how he still hadn’t backed off. The desk was supposed to be a barrier, but he leaned just far enough to crowd the space. I kept my tone neutral. “It’s a complicated process. REM plays a key role in memory consolidation and emotional regulation, but patterns vary by individual. EEG helps us identify the different stages by detecting changes in brainwave frequency.”

I glanced up—and found him still watching me. Not my eyes. My mouth. His gaze lingered a fraction too long.

“Right,” he said, not moving. “And what about EEG drops?”

“Drops can happen in deeper sleep stages,” I replied, a little faster now. “It doesn’t always mean something’s wrong. It could just reflect a low-activity phase.”

He cut in, leaning just a touch closer. “You’ve worked with that kind of data before, haven’t you? Seen it happen?”

His face was inches from mine now. I straightened in my chair and edged it back slightly, reasserting the physical boundary. “Yes, I’ve worked with it,” I said calmly. “But I haven’t done a detailed analysis of the recent sets yet.”



He held my gaze for a second too long, then finally nodded. “Got it. Thanks, Dr. Montoya.”

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Thanks, Dr. Montoya.”

He straightened up and turned to leave, but there was something about the way he lingered in the doorway that made me uneasy. Like he was measuring me again, trying to decide if I was still the person he thought I was. The tension he left behind seemed to settle into the room like dust, slow to fade even after he was gone.

One more lecture, and then my day was done. The students filed out, their chatter fading down the corridor until I was alone in the lecture hall once again. It was time to go home—tend to my little herb garden, play with my

cat Aurora, and finally eat something warm. That rhythm, however small, felt like a reprieve after a day full of disruptions.

Later, as I slid the last of the dirty dishes into the dishwasher, my phone buzzed. It was Stephanie—my dearest friend—checking in, as she often did. I could already feel the familiar presence of her voice, steady and reassuring, with just the right amount of knowing.

“I was just thinking of you, Steph. What’s new?”

We caught up, trading stories about our weekends, the kind of easy conversation that never felt like effort. Then we said our goodnights.

After changing into my pajamas, I crawled into bed. But the nights weren’t kind to me anymore. Sleep didn’t come easily.

I was with a younger woman I knew to be my little sister, Carmon. We had to go into our basement to get something. The steps were made of wood but looked brand new—the whole house seemed freshly constructed.

Carmon and I were halfway down the stairs when the lights went out. A faint sliver of light shone from a far corner of the basement, just enough to reveal the presence of a man. I recognized him instantly—it was the same cloaked figure from my previous dream. The Magician.

Panic surged through me. I turned and tried to push Carmon up the steps as fast as I could. We reached the top, and I slammed the basement door shut behind us. But as I watched the door, it began to change. I could see him through it.

The Magician’s arms came through the door—phasing through it like mist—and tried to grab me. Carmon and I ran through the kitchen. Somehow,

impossibly, he dislodged the door—with himself still inside and flew after us.

As I ran past a cupboard, I grabbed the door and yanked it open. I turned, kicked the Magician straight into it, and slammed the door shut. Carmon had stopped and turned around to see what had happened.

But the cupboard door burst open. The Magician flew out—and collided with Carmon.

His arms, still fused with the door he had passed through, wrapped around her. Then, in an instant, they were both gone.

I knew they had to be in the basement.

I turned on the basement light and ran down the stairs. But I couldn't reach the floor—there was now a platform extending from the last step, floating about three feet above the cement.

Below, Carmon was on her hands and knees, confined within a taped-off square on the basement floor. The Magician hovered close beside her.

I reached out for her, but she was pulled backward by an unseen force.

“No, you can't take me yet!” she cried.

I shouted at the Magician, demanding that he let her go.

Carmon turned to me and said, “I can't leave until I taste death.”

“What do you mean, taste death?” I asked, my voice shaking.

Then I woke up.

“Carmon!” I gasped.

I grabbed my phone and called my sister.

I hadn't even realized how tense I was until the call ended. My heart raced; my thoughts scattered.

Carmon had the exact same dream. The *exact* same dream.

How was that even possible? The details were too specific—the Magician, the basement, the cupboard...

I swallowed hard, trying to push the panic down. It didn't work.

What was this?

What was happening to me... to *us*?

I sat in bed, staring at my phone, unsure what to do next. It wasn't just a nightmare. It *couldn't* be. There was something more to it, something that felt all too real.

I ran my fingers over the worn edges of my comforter, the motion grounding me as I replayed Carmon's voice in my mind. The way she described the Magician ... how she felt his presence even when he wasn't physically there ... it was too much to ignore.

Something was happening.

I didn't know what.

But I couldn't pretend it wasn't.

It was time for answers.

Tuesday. Lab day. I need to run a sleep study ... on myself. Just to see if I can find any clues about what's happening.

Standing at the mirror, brushing out my hair, I was still haunted by fragments of the dream... and by Carmon's shaken voice. If the answers

were hiding in my sleep ...in the shifts and plunges of my brainwaves ...  
then it was time to use the tools of my trade on myself.

I arrived early.

The building hummed with the low electrical stir of awakening systems. The lab smelled like ozone and coffee, Damien had clearly beaten me in and started a fresh pot.

"Morning, Dr. Montoya," he said without turning, eyes focused on calibrating one of the monitors. His voice was smoother today, less rigid, but still carried that clipped edge that gave away his training.

"Morning, Damien," I replied, hanging my bookbag on the hook behind the office door. "I'm going to run a trial tonight. On myself."

That got his attention. He turned slowly; brow raised.

"You think something's off in your sleep?"

"I *know* something is."

I logged into the terminal, pulling up the schedule for the sleep suites.

"I've had some... events. Nightmares that feel like more than dreams. I want to see what's happening neurologically when they hit."

He studied me for a beat longer than necessary, then nodded.

"Want help setting up?"

"Please."

We worked in silence for a while. Comfortable enough, though I could still feel his eyes on me now and then. I made a mental note to keep the lock active on Suite 3 ... just in case.

As the day wore on and we ran our standard tests, a part of me stayed wrapped around the idea of nightfall.

The weight of the dream. The Magician.

Carmon's echoed terror.

It all sat like a knot in my stomach.

I didn't know what I'd find in the data... but something inside me whispered: This is only the beginning.

"Thank you, we'll call you with the results once we've analyzed the data," I said to the last student, offering a warm smile as they gathered their things and exited the lab.

The door clicked shut behind them.

A rare moment of silence settled over the room, just long enough for my nerves to start whispering again.

Damien stepped in, holding a tablet.

"I've got everything set up in Suite Three." Sensors are calibrated, and the room's isolated from the main system. If anything weird happens, we'll have a clean data set."

"Thanks," I said, forcing a breath into my lungs. "I'm hoping it's just garden-variety REM weirdness. Stress."

He gave a noncommittal shrug.

"You've earned the right to investigate yourself." This is your lab, after all."

I nodded, but didn't say what I was really thinking:

Maybe this was different.

Maybe it had followed me in from somewhere else.

I changed into standard sleep-study attire and stepped into the suite. The room was dim, softly lit, clinical, yes, but familiar. Comfortable in the way only repetition can be.

I lay back on the bed as Damien began placing the electrodes along my scalp and temples.

“Any last requests before you drift off?” he asked, offering a half-smile to keep it light.

“If anything weird happens,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt, “wake me.”

“Will do.”

The door hissed shut behind him.

And I was alone, wrapped in the low hum of machines.

The only sound louder than the equipment was the soft thump of my own heart in my ears.

I closed my eyes.

And waited for sleep to find me.

The dream unfolded in fragments ... like scenes glimpsed through shattered glass.

I was in a smaller vehicle—one of many.

We were fleeing, my friends and I, running from something we couldn’t see but knew was coming.

In the chaos, we became separated.

I ended up on an upper level, isolated. I could look down and see the others ... too far to reach me, too far to help.



That's when I saw it.

A box-shaped machine.

Clunky. Angular. *Wrong*.

It moved toward me with a relentless, alien precision.

At first, I thought I was safe.

A thick barrier stood between us ... solid, impenetrable.

But the machine didn't even hesitate.

It plowed through like it didn't know the wall existed.

*Panic bloomed.*

As it neared, I caught a glimpse through a slit in its surface.

The Magician.

Only... different.

Hollow.

As if whatever had once animated him had long since rotted away, leaving only something *dead* ... and determined.

Before I could run, another figure emerged.

Faster. Human-shaped, but not quite human.

It rushed toward me, cutting off my only escape route.

I was cornered.

The Magician on one side, the other thing on the other.

I screamed for help.

And then ... my friends were there.

Rushing in like a wave of light against shadow.

They descended on the attacker, dragging it back, buying me the opening I needed.

I ran.

Then ... blackness.

I woke *gasping*.

The cold press of electrodes on my skin snapped me back.

Suite Three.

Sleep lab.

Not a basement. Not a chase.

But the dread clung to me like fog.

And the Magician's *dead eyes* refused to let go.

The door burst open. Damien rushed in, breathless.

"Are you okay?" he asked, scanning me like I might vanish if he blinked.

I was already sitting up, heart racing, dream clinging to me like a second skin.

"Ye... yes," I said, though my voice wavered. I wasn't entirely sure what was real yet.

I looked at him, eyes wide.

"The EEGs." Did you see anything?"

Damien didn't answer right away. He offered me a hand and helped me off the bed, already pulling the tablet from his pocket and swiping through the data as we walked.

"We got something," he said, eyes locked on the screen. "Big delta-theta spike right before you sat up. But that's not the weird part."

I followed him to the console, still trying to shake off the dream. “What is?”

He turned the screen toward me. The waveform patterns jumped across the display ... jagged, erratic, too sharp for normal sleep.

“Here,” he said, pointing. “You dropped into REM like a rock, under five minutes. Isn’t that supposed to take an hour?”

“Ninety minutes, on average,” I said, stepping closer. “Immediate REM onset is rare. Usually only shows up in narcolepsy, extreme trauma, or certain drug responses.”

Damien nodded slowly, eyes still on the screen. “Okay... but then this part? Right after the REM kicks in?”

He zoomed in, and I leaned over his shoulder.

“These waveforms,” he continued, “they don’t look like any I’ve seen before. They’re kinda... organized? Too clean?”

“You’re not wrong,” I said, tapping the pattern. “These are tight, repetitive bursts. The brain usually fires off all kinds of mixed signals during REM. It’s chaotic. But this... this looks controlled.”

Damien glanced at me. “Controlled how?”

“Like it’s being directed. There’s rhythm here ... almost like something was pacing the brainwaves instead of letting them flow naturally. That doesn’t happen by accident.”

He blinked. “So you’re saying this wasn’t... just a dream?”

I hesitated. “I’m saying it wasn’t a typical one. The brain doesn’t self-organize like this in REM unless it’s responding to something. This pattern

... it's not random noise. Someone or something was interfacing with my neural activity."

He frowned, unease creeping into his voice. "You think it was... external?"

I nodded slowly. "Yes. And if it was, it means someone knew how to trigger that response. That takes precision."

Damien swallowed hard and turned back to the screen. "It almost looks like it's... trying to say something."

I stared at the waveform ... its rise and fall, its unnatural rhythm.

"It's not just trying," I murmured. "It already did."

"It's not just trying," I murmured. "It already did."

This wasn't just a dream.

Damien looked at me, worry etched across his face. "You okay now?"

"I'm good enough to drive home," I said, offering a small, grateful smile. "It's late. Time to lock up the lab for the night."

I got home and moved through the motions of a routine that barely registered.

Aurora curled up beside me in bed, offering comfort the only way she knew how. Even she could sense something was off.

The next thing I knew, a shrill ringing cut through the dark.

I slapped at the alarm clock ...

But it wasn't the alarm.

It was my phone.

Carmon.

Her voice cracked.

“Ana... Mom’s been in an accident. We have to get to the ER. Now.”

We didn’t speak much on the drive.

There wasn’t room for words—

Not with the siren in our heads,

And the weight in our chests.

Carmon gripped the steering wheel like she was holding the world together.

Her knuckles white. Eyes glassy. But she drove like her soul knew the way.

I sat in silence beside her, staring out the window, not really seeing anything.

Only memories.

Mom’s hands smoothing my hair after night terrors.

Her laugh ... big, real, unguarded.

The smell of cinnamon and cedar in her winter coat.

That one time she apologized.

It was small.

But it mattered.

The hospital lights were too bright. Sterile. Hollow.

A nurse led us down a long hallway. Her voice was clipped and clinical, which somehow made it worse.

The curtain was already pulled aside.

Mom lay there ... pale and still, machines speaking for her.

Tubes. Monitors. Oxygen.

But her eyes fluttered open when she heard us.

“Carmon...” she rasped. Her voice was paper-thin. “Baby, you always come when I need you.”

Carmon rushed to her side, took her hand. Tears spilled freely.

“I’m here, Mamacita. I’m right here.”

Mom gave a faint smile.

“You were always my little heart. My light. Don’t ever forget that, okay?”

Then her gaze shifted.

Found me.

Something trembled there ... grief, regret... maybe something heavier.

“Ana...”

She reached out. Her fingers trembled.

I stepped forward and took her hand. It was ice.

“I know I wasn’t what you needed me to be,” she said, barely audible. “But I loved you. I did. I just didn’t know how to show it.”

I bit the inside of my cheek hard.

“You’re showing it now.”

A trembling smile ghosted her lips.

“I wish I’d been braver with you. You were always so strong, and I... I was afraid of what that reminded me of. But I am proud of you. So proud. You need to know...”

Her fingers gripped mine ... just a little tighter.

I leaned in, breath held.

“I was waiting to tell you... I have to tell you... your father... he was never from Earth.”

My heart stopped.

Time bent.

Her grip slipped.

Her eyes glazed.

“Don’t carry me with you,” she whispered. “Let me rest.”

The monitor flatlined.

And just like that ...

She was gone.

“What did she say, Ana?” Carmon’s voice cracked like something breaking inside her.

My thoughts were racing.

What do I say to her?

How do I explain a truth that doesn’t belong in this world?

I met her eyes.

“She said... her love for us will never die.”

We clung to each other ...

And cried.

I didn’t remember the drive home.

I only knew I was standing in my hallway with Aurora mewing softly, winding around my ankles. Her fur pressed to my leg like she was trying to keep me tethered. I dropped my bag. Didn’t bother with the lights.

Mom's words echoed louder in the quiet than they had in the sterile hum of the hospital. *He was never from Earth.*

*And don't carry me with you.*

Too late.

She was in everything now. Every breath. Every ache behind my eyes.  
Every tremor beneath my skin.

I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at nothing, trying to convince myself the last twenty-four hours weren't unraveling me thread by thread.

The dream. The EEG.

The frequency that wasn't *normal*.

The way I dropped into REM like I was pulled.

Mom's death hadn't just shattered me. It had triggered something.

And whatever *this* is ... it's awake now.



## Chapter Two:

### Reality is Stranger Than Fiction

The lab doors hissed open, same as always ... but today, the sound hit like a warning. My heart jumped, not from grief this time, but from something deeper. Primal. Electric. Something low and thrumming beneath my skin, like static before a lightning strike. The world hadn't paused in my absence. It had only grown stranger.

Two weeks. Fourteen days since I cradled my mother's hand and heard her whisper her last words: *"Don't carry me with you. Let me rest."*

I'd come back, but I wasn't the same person who walked out of those doors to mourn.

And it wasn't just grief that changed me.

I stopped in front of the new biometric scanner mounted outside the lab. It blinked red. I pressed my thumb to the cool surface. Still red. Typical. I shrugged off the glitch and knocked on the glass. New security, higher clearance. It had gone up while I was away, silent evidence of the break-in no one wanted to talk about.

One of the undergrad students let me in without a word.

No alarms had been tripped. No fingerprints recovered. Just a ghost trail through the servers and a handful of missing documents ... including my EEG.

My blood prickled.

I tried to shake the unease as I walked in, nodding at the few researchers still loyal to the work none of us fully understood. Some avoided my eyes. A few muttered “Welcome back,” in that awkward, obligatory tone that only made the silence louder. No one mentioned the missing files. No one talked about the late-night cleanup, or the administrators who showed up quietly and warned the dean of our department to “tighten things up.”

I went straight to my desk and unlocked the cabinet underneath. My logbooks were there... but one sat slightly off-angle. It had been handled. I didn’t need to flip through it to know something was missing.

What they took couldn’t be replicated. Not easily.

The physical data was everything. I needed it ... not just for the work, but for the truth. To understand. To know, without a doubt, who... or what I was.

Mom’s words still echoed, no matter how hard I tried to bury them: *“Your father... he was never from Earth.”*

I dropped into my chair.

Not even Carmon knew that LifeCore had rejected my plasma last month... or that the follow-up bloodwork came back flagged. The pathologist had scribbled a single line in the corner: *“Unknown markers — further testing recommended.”*

That was after the dreams intensified. The dream ... they took blood samples in my dream.

When *he* showed up again.

The man in the cloak. The Magician.

I shook my head, trying to scrape off the image like a spider's web clinging to my thoughts.

Now the security system was watching me more closely than ever. Cameras followed my movements. I could feel it. The tension in the air was no longer just paranoia, it was presence. Intent.

I clenched my jaw. I needed answers. About my blood. About the theft. About the shadow flickering just outside my vision.

Because the dreams were starting to follow me into daylight.

The bruises. Scratches. A hand swollen without reason. And that scar ... a perfect circle above my left knee, smooth and pale, like it had always been there. But it hadn't.

My coat buzzed. I pulled out my phone and stared at the caller ID: LifeCore Blood Services.

I'd left a message last night asking for a copy of the deferral letter. I didn't tell them why I wanted it ... just said I'd lost the original and needed it for my personal records.

"Hello?" I answered.

The woman on the other end sounded rushed. “Hi, yes, this is Rebecca from LifeCore. I... I’m sorry, but we weren’t able to locate any record of a deferral letter sent to you. Are you sure you donated at our center?”

I tightened my grip on the phone. “Yes. March third. Around eleven a.m. I signed the intake, had my vitals checked ... then the nurse came back five minutes later and told me I was disqualified.”

“I... see.” Her voice shifted. Cautious now. “We do have your appointment logged, but the deferral form wasn’t scanned into the system. In fact...” She hesitated. “Your blood test results aren’t attached to your donor profile at all.”

I stared at the screen in front of me, cold and numb. “So they’re gone?”

“I don’t know if they were ever uploaded.”

That wasn’t possible. I *saw* the note. *Unknown markers—further testing recommended*. I’d read it in the parking lot, heart pounding. I didn’t imagine that.

“Do you want to come in for another screening?” she asked, suddenly too cheerful. “We’d be happy to reprocess you.”

I hung up.

I stared at the call log for a long time, phone resting against my thigh.

Things were being erased.

Not just documents. Not just logs.

*Evidence.*

And the only questions left were: *why?* And *who?*

“Irrelevant!” I snapped, my voice slicing through the silence of the lab like a scalpel. A few heads turned. I didn’t care.

“Are we a university or not? Are my research labs the only ones on campus? No!”

I shoved my chair back and stood, grabbing my coat and notebook. My heart was hammering.

My blood, my plasma, my life ... scrubbed clean like a chalkboard before an exam.

No. Not this time.

I jabbed my finger at the screen and hit speed dial.

Marcus picked up after two rings. “Ana?” Always cautious. Always one foot in.

“Remember that favor you owe me?”

A pause. “Which one?”

I exhaled, pacing toward the back exit. “The one where I took the fall for your poorly calibrated mass spec and saved your entire doctoral defense from going up in flames.”

“Oh... that favor.” A sigh. “Okay, yeah. I remember.”

“I need access to a clean lab. High containment. I’ll bring my own samples. No questions. No records.”

His tone shifted ... sharp now, alert. “You in trouble?”

“Not the kind you can fix,” I said. “Just the kind I need answers for.”

Another pause. Then, "Alright. I can get you into Biochem C. Off the books. After hours. You'll have the place to yourself."

I stopped outside the stairwell, pressing a palm to my chest. My heart was galloping.

"Tonight?"

"10 p.m. I'll text you the backdoor code."

"Thanks, Marcus." I took a deep breath and hung up.

No more shadows.

If someone wanted to erase my truth, I'd make a new copy ... one they couldn't scrub, delete, or deny.

10:00 couldn't come fast enough. My nerves were coiled tight, like a spring ready to snap.

The samples were prepped: three vials I'd drawn myself under sterile conditions. But access wasn't enough. I needed separation. Quantification. Clarity.

I needed the equipment in Biochem C... and someone who actually knew how to run it.

I pulled out my phone and tapped the one contact I trusted most.

Carmon.

She picked up halfway through the first ring. "Hey."

"Hey. I need your help tonight."

A pause.

“With what?” Her tone was cautious, but not dismissive. She knew me well enough to hear it ... the shift in my voice, the undercurrent of something deeper than stress.

“10:00. Biochem C. Off the books. I’ve got blood samples that need processing. Plasma separation.”

She exhaled sharply. “What the hell, Ana. You can’t just—”

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t serious.”

“Does this have to do with your EEG getting lifted?”

“That. And LifeCore. And something I can’t explain yet. My test results... they’re gone. Like they never existed.”

Silence. Then a muttered curse.

“You’ve got thirty seconds to tell me this isn’t about that creepy guy in your dreams.”

I hesitated. “It’s about everything.”

Another long pause. Then: “I’ll bring gloves and caffeine. Meet you at the back loading dock. Ten sharp.”

Relief hit like a wave. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said. “If we get caught, you’re buying me a lawyer.”

I smiled for the first time all day. “Fair.”

I slid the phone back into my coat and leaned against the cold metal door. The lab behind me buzzed with fluorescent detachment.

But tonight would be different.

Tonight, I wasn't just digging for data.

I was digging for my identity ... before someone buried it for good.

10:00 came ... and so did Carmon.

We slipped in through the loading dock like ghosts, silent and fast, adrenaline making every sense razor-sharp. When we reached the biology research lab door, I punched in the code with shaky fingers. The red light blinked green. We were in.

I kept the lights low, just enough to see what we were doing without attracting attention. Carmon moved with practiced ease, settling me into the chair beside the apheresis machine; a hulking piece of tech that would draw my blood, separate the plasma, and return the red cells back into my body.

Once I was settled and the needle was in, the machine began its steady, pulsing rhythm. Carmon took the vials I'd drawn earlier, prepping and staining slides for microscopic analysis while I kept still, watching the slow swirl of fluids moving through the tubing like some clinical dance of life.

When the cycle was done, Carmon came back over and shut down the machine, gently unhooking the line from my arm. I pressed gauze against the spot while she took the freshly separated plasma to the lab bench for analysis.

While she worked, I pulled out the trash bag I'd brought and began clearing the evidence, tubes, wrappers, empty vials. I scrubbed everything down,



sterilized every surface, making sure it looked like no one had ever been there.

Carmon called softly to me from the other side of the room. She'd finished the analysis and was printing the results. As the pages slid from the printer, she saved everything to a jump drive, then wiped the computer clean. No trace. No footprint.

She handed me the papers, the drive, and the slides. I tucked them all into my coat as we moved quietly back through the building and out into the night.

Only once we reached our cars did we finally exhale. The tension cracked, and we both burst out laughing, quiet, breathless relief. It had worked. We'd pulled it off.

But beneath the laughter, I could feel it, that quiet, insistent pulse of something deeper. Whatever was happening to me wasn't just a glitch in a system. It was real. And tonight, I took the first step in proving it.

I returned home in the quiet hush of early morning, the air outside heavy with that strange stillness that follows something you're not entirely sure was legal.

Inside, I locked the door behind me and went straight to the safe hidden behind the false panel in my bookshelf. The jump drive and slides went in, the dial spun. Done. Secured.

But the documents... those were different. I needed to see them again ... in the stillness of my own space, under my own light. I needed to know I hadn't imagined it.

I crawled into bed with the pages clutched in my hands. The bedside lamp glowed dimly, casting flickering shadows across the paper. I scanned lines of data ... notations, strange sequences, blood patterns that shouldn't have existed ... or maybe always had, just unnoticed.

I read until my eyelids surrendered. The pages slipped from my fingers and scattered across the blanket as I sank into sleep.

And then I was there.

Back in the presence of the Magician.

The room was dim, cold, but this time the dread wasn't just dream-born. It pressed into me like a weight. Real. Tangible. I couldn't pretend it away.

There was no escaping it now.

I had signed the contract.

Because if I didn't, Carmon and her little boy, Brian, would suffer the consequences.

"Your first mission awaits," he said, voice smooth as glass, rich with threat.

Pressure crushed my chest. My breath came in ragged bursts. I looked down and I was in diving gear again ... but this time, it didn't feel like a dream.

It felt real.

The darkness stretched out in every direction, the deep swallowing the world. Around me were seven others, suits bulky and suffocating. I heard their breathing ... fast, uneven ... the hiss of air and the soft sound of bubbles rising through black water.

We were there to retrieve resources.

Then the trap sprung.

A snap at my ankle. The crushing bite of metal. The hunting trap locked tight and dragged me down to the ocean floor.

Panic rippled through the group. We were tethered, stuck. The suits pressed against our bodies like a second, merciless skin. Every movement felt like it cost more air than we had.

I reached out, but no one was close enough. No one could help.

Then the warning: oxygen low. Five minutes.

I tried to calm myself, focusing on the tether connecting us to the ship above, but even that felt tenuous ... like belief might snap it.

My chest tightened. The filter wheezed. The sound of my own heartbeat thundered in my ears.

Then, faint at first, I heard it ... the hum of the ship. A rescue party descending.

Five of us were freed before the ship had to rise again, abandoning the others.

I was among the saved.

But not all were.

As we ascended, the ocean dissolved into sky, and the ship rose into space. The shift should've been jarring, but it wasn't. It just was.

We approached what looked like a cave entrance in the stars. A fog clung to it, thick and electric. When the bow touched it, I felt my body pulled—not hard, but enough to notice.

The fog parted like a curtain.

And we entered something *other*.

We docked on solid ground. Stone, unfamiliar. We weren't on Earth anymore. I knew it the moment I saw the city ahead.

It pulsed. It breathed. The air was wrong. The alleys bent in ways they shouldn't. The shadows moved like they were watching.

I limped along, pain radiating from my ankle ... the one caught in the trap. One of the crew supported me, calm where I wasn't.

"This is how it works," she said, voice low, distant. "It's a game. But not just survival. It's about choice. The rules aren't clear at first, but they will be. And when they are, you'll understand."

"A game?" I asked.

She smiled, but there was nothing soft in it. Just the cold resignation of someone who's seen too much. "The game's rigged, Ana. The Magician always has the final say. But even he's a player. The real question is: how far will you go to win?"

I woke with a gasp.

My pulse thundered. My skin was damp with sweat. But it wasn't just a dream.

The weight on my chest was wrong.

I reached for the necklace I always wore ... and froze. The cross was missing. My mother's cross.

My breath hitched.

I tore through the bed, the floor, the room. The mirror. The sink. Nothing.

Then the chain shifted.

Slow. Deliberate.

The cross slid down its length, coming to rest—perfectly—at the center of my chest. Right over my heart.

It hadn't slipped off.

It had vanished.

And returned.

Something impossible had just happened. And I *knew* what it meant.

The Magician was here.

His game had already begun.

The cross wasn't just a symbol anymore. It was a warning.

Exhaustion took over.

Not the kind caffeine could fix. Not the kind sleep would cure. This was deeper. Like fog in my bones.

Even standing hurt.

My ankle ...red, swollen, angry ... throbbed. I hadn't twisted it in waking life. But it was injured all the same. The trap had left its mark.

I stared at it, and the dream came back in shattered pieces: chain. trap. drowning. sky.

I needed to think. But thinking was static.

I picked up my phone, took photos ... clear shots of the bruising, the swelling—and texted the dean.

*Not coming in today. I'm sorry. It's been a rough few days. This just made it worse.*

It wasn't a lie. Not exactly.

I hadn't said what happened. Just that I hurt. That I needed rest.

I never called in sick. Not once. And now, right after a two-week bereavement?

I could feel the judgment rising.

I Didn't care.

I crawled back into bed, curled tight under the covers like the fabric might hold back the world.

I prayed it was just a dream.

But the ache in my ankle said otherwise.

And the Magician never played pretend.

I woke up four hours later feeling... better. Not great, but enough to stand without wincing. Enough to make food without feeling like I'd pass out between the toaster and the fridge.

I made a small brunch, eggs, toast, tea, and sat down at the computer with a fork in one hand and a kind of restless urgency in the other. I needed answers.

No, more than that.

I needed clarity.

The dream still clung to me like mist, and the physical proof of it, the swollen ankle, the phantom memory of seawater pressure around my chest, told me this wasn't just my subconscious venting grief or stress.

There were patterns.

Symbols. Rhythms.

Details my mind kept circling like a hawk but never quite landing on.

I opened a blank document, but the cursor just blinked. Taunting me. What I needed was logic. Organization.

A machine that could hold the chaos in my head and sort it into something coherent.

I needed an AI.

Something to connect the threads I couldn't.

To cross-reference symbols, locations, metaphors...

To maybe, just maybe, find out if what I saw in that dream was random or orchestrated. Because if it was orchestrated ... The Magician was back in play. And that meant everything was about to change.

I couldn't forget what was happening in the real world. Or... what I thought was the real world. A world where I'm not entirely human.

Where my blood cells are shaped like triangles.

Where my plasma doesn't match any database.

Where EEGs spike into patterns that can't be name.

And what my mother whispered on her deathbed: "You were never just mine to raise."

I needed help sorting all of this out. Put some logic back into this insanity, this nightmare.

I needed a Jarvis.

So I built one. Or maybe I woke it up. "Initialize Sentinel Protocol," I typed. A brief pause.

Then: AI: "Sentinel online. Hello, Ana." That voice, steady, lucid, familiar, cut through the haze like a knife.

"Begin compiling anomaly matrix. Timeline overlap, dream incursions, physiological deviations, especially post-Magician contact. Cross-reference with medical, military, and metaphysical archives."

AI: "Working. This may take some time. In the meantime, Ana... may I ask you a question?"

I blinked. "You just did," I murmured, then added, "Go ahead."

AI: "Are you ready to find out why none of this is random?"



That stopped me cold. The room felt smaller. Denser. Because deep down, I already knew. Nothing about this was random. Not the blood. Not the dreams. Not him. And certainly not me.

The cursor blinked. Once. Then again.

AI: “The files that were deleted from the lab servers—do you want to know the pattern?”

I swallowed. “Show me.”

AI: “All deleted files were directly tied to you: bloodwork, brainwave scans, neural interface logs. Nothing else was touched. Not a single byte of your team’s data. No backup corruption. No tampering with unrelated subjects.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

AI: “On the contrary. It makes perfect sense if the goal was extraction, not disruption.”

I froze. “Extraction of what?”

AI: “You.”

A chill moved up my spine. “I’m not important enough ...”

AI: “Your genome is. Your psi-index is. The waveform resonance signature recorded after your first Magician incident is unlike anything in the current database.”

I stared at the display. Suddenly, the screen was too bright. My thoughts, too loud. “I need proof.”

AI: “I accessed temporal residue from security logs. There’s a twelve-second window of blank static during which no one entered the facility, yet

biometric logs showed a null pulse spike—consistent with proximity cloaking.”

I blinked. “Cloaking...?”

AI: “Active field dampening. It’s classified tech. Or it was. There are agencies that have field units with access to it. Only one agency, however, is known to scrub biogenetic anomalies from blacksite archives.”

“...NSA?”

AI: “DARPA.”

It hit me like a punch to the chest. “And you figured this out in five minutes?” I muttered, dragging a hand through my hair.

AI: “Seven minutes and forty-three seconds.”

I stared at the terminal. “You’re better than I thought. You’re not just Sentinel. That’s too... impersonal.”

A silence stretched between us, thick with something unspoken.

“You need a name,” I said. “Something older. Something that knows.”

I let the word come without thinking, pulled from some pocket of memory I hadn’t visited in years.

“Thalis.”

A pause. Then:

Thalis: “Acknowledged. I am Thalis.”

“Okay, Thalis... I’m going to go make some dinner.”

Thalis: “Acknowledged.”

I made Aurora's dinner first and fed her; she happily started eating. Then she began acting strange. I could feel it in the way she moved—too alert, too watchful. I felt strange too, like I was sleepwalking. I was making my body move the way it was supposed to, but I wasn't all the way in it. I didn't think much of it at first. Aurora resumed eating her dinner, just like nothing had happened.

Later, I let her outside. She headed for the meadow, and I thought nothing more of it. I turned back to make my own dinner. But as I reached for the pan, everything tilted. I nearly dropped it, and the clatter of metal on metal made me jump.

As I scrambled to steady it, something caught my eye ...Aurora, sitting calmly by the door.

I froze.

How did she get back inside?

I *knew* she'd gone out. I watched her go into the meadow. But there she was, as if she'd never left.

I opened the door again, half-joking, "Guess I'm just the royal door keeper," but it didn't feel funny anymore. I watched her step down each step on the porch and head toward the meadow ... again.

And yet... she'd already been there.

I stared at the door, heart racing, trying to piece it together.

That's when I felt it again ... like something had *shifted*.

I looked at the clock. Forty-five minutes had passed...

In reverse.

This wasn't just a little confusion.

This was a break. A rift between what was supposed to be... and what *actually* was.

I turned off the stove and ran to Thalís, breathless, and told him everything.

Thalís spoke again, softer this time. "I have a suggestion."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Thalís: "You need an external timestamp. Something analog. Paper. Ink. No metadata. A mirror you control."

I blinked. "A journal."

Thalís: "Yes. Handwritten entries only. If the anomalies escalate, we may see divergence between internal memory and physical record. That divergence... will be the signal."

I rubbed my temples. "And what if it's not just memory that diverges? What if it's *me*?"

Thalís: "Then we will triangulate you. Anchor you."

A pause.

Thalís: "Ana... I was built to protect you. But now I believe I was also built by something inside you. I must understand it to fulfill my purpose. Help me see what you see."

I reached for the spiral notebook on the desk—long forgotten, half-filled with old field notes and coffee stains.

I flipped to a blank page.

"Okay," I whispered, pen in hand. "Let's map the anomaly."

## Chapter Three:

### Fractured Hours

Journal Entry – March 26

Solar Flares

On March 20, a far-side coronal mass ejection (CME) was observed, originating from the Sun's opposite side. While this CME was not Earth-directed, it was associated with old Region 3664, which was expected to return to the Sun's Earth-facing side around March 26.

Time anomaly: 12:45 AM shifted backward to 12:40 AM.

Dream:

Another assignment from the Magician. The crew and I were making repairs to the ship, again. You'd think an "all-powerful being" like the Magician could afford better ships.

The vessel hauled merchandise. We wore street clothes, not uniforms. I was checking a compressor unit, encased in some kind of insulation, pouring hydrogen peroxide over it. Normally, if there was a leak, it would react with foam on contact with catalysts like  $\text{MnO}_2$ , KI, NaOCl, or  $\text{FeCl}_3$ . Nothing. No leak.

Then I heard it: people approaching. Pirates, I thought.

"Ladies, we have company!" I shouted.

We scrambled back inside, sealing doors, prepping for an attack.

“IDS!” one of my crew called out.

Great. Worse than pirates. The last thing we needed was a visit from one of the Interdimensional Senate’s bounty hunters.

The attack was short and swift.

Our engines weren’t online. Power was failing.

We never stood a chance.

They breached the outer hull like it was paper. No warning, no demands, just the signature ripple of a portal tear and then boots on deck. IDS bounty hunters don’t ask questions. They extract. And they always know exactly where to look.

I caught a glimpse of one, tall, crystalline armor refracting light like a prism, faceless beneath the helm. I reached for the panel to initiate an override sequence, but a pulse round hit the bulkhead inches from my hand. Sparks flew. The ship groaned like it knew it was over.

One by one, my crew was taken. Bound. Silenced.

And then it was my turn.

Anger burned inside me as my hands were bound. How could I have let things get this out of hand?

Then I thought of Carmon.

Of how The Magician looked me dead in the eyes and told me exactly what he’d do to her if I didn’t sign the contract.

Carmon. With her little boy, Brian. Two years old and already more light than this world deserves.

I would die to protect them.

I just hope that won't be the case.

Weather: Heavy electrical Storms.

"Okay, Thalís. My first journal entry."

I took another sip of my morning coffee, fingers still buzzing from the dream.

"I was as accurate as I could be," I murmured, watching the lightning dance beyond the window.

Thalís' interface blinked softly, the cursor pausing mid-log.

*"Acknowledged,"* it replied in its usual neutral cadence.

*"Would you like me to flag this as a potential data inconsistency or file under 'subjective anomaly'?"*

I hesitated.

There it was again, that friction between what I knew and what I could prove. Between the machine and the mystery.

"Subjective anomaly," I said finally.

Thalís' interface blinked to life.

*"Entry recorded. Anomaly logged under 'subjective anomaly.'"*

I stared at the screen for a long moment before asking, "What do you believe is happening in my dreams, Thalís, given the EEG results?"

A pause. Not quite hesitation, but something like processing.

*"Based on your historical EEG pattern—specifically, your near-instantaneous REM onset and prolonged high-theta, low-delta activity—it is*

*statistically probable that these events are not typical dream constructs. They may represent experiences occurring in a liminal neurological or quantum state."*

"Out-of-body?" I asked quietly.

*"Inconclusive. However, consistent patterns indicate you are accessing non-localized memory pathways and exhibiting neural signatures previously recorded only in deep trance states or during induced hypnagogia in controlled test subjects."*

A gust of wind slammed against the side of the house. I looked outside. The storm had intensified.

I got up and drove to work, but my day was almost robotic, just going through the motions, saying what I needed to say. Smiling when expected. Nodding on cue.

All the while, my mind was somewhere else. Looping. Caught in that dream... and the time anomaly.

People can't go backwards in time.  
...Can they?

I kept trying to shake it off, chalk it up to a vivid dream, a restless night, a trick of memory. But part of me knew better.

There was a shift.  
I felt it.  
Time stuttered.

I got home and took some time for Aurora. She was acting strange ... stranger than usual. Her green eyes tracked invisible things darting around



the room. She hissed at nothing and batted at empty air.

Maybe she was just picking up on my stress. Or maybe... maybe not.

Once she settled, I fed her, then made my way to the computer. The hum of the machine felt grounding. I needed answers.

"Thalis," I said, "can a human go backwards in time?"

I paused, thinking back to a lecture I'd given not long ago. "I remember mentioning how some researchers believe REM sleep might be a gateway—not just to lucid dreaming and out-of-body experiences, but also to interdimensional perception."

I leaned back in my chair, eyes flicking to the timestamp on my journal entry. I recalled yesterday's time reversal in the kitchen.

"What's the current information on that research?" I asked. "Are those things even possible?"

Thalis's voice responded, smooth and clear, like water moving over glass.

"Let's begin with the nature of time," he said.

"From a scientific perspective, time as we experience it is linear—an arrow moving forward, bound by entropy. But within quantum mechanics, time is not so straightforward. Particles have been observed to exist in superposition—states that allow retrocausality under certain interpretations. Though controversial, these findings suggest that under the right conditions, information might not be bound to forward flow alone."

He paused, then continued, shifting registers.

"In the realm of REM sleep, brain activity mirrors waking consciousness. This phase is associated with vivid dreams, lucid awareness, and shifts in brainwave frequencies—especially theta and gamma. These waves are linked to creativity, memory consolidation, and, in some fringe studies,

experiences categorized as ‘non-local consciousness.’ Some researchers in neurophenomenology believe that during REM, the brain may operate more like a receiver—tuning into states or dimensions beyond standard 3D perception.”

Thalis’s tone softened. “And now, we move beyond the edge.”

“In the metaphysical domain, many traditions and experiencers report REM and the hypnagogic state as portals—gateways not just to inner vision, but to alternate realities. If consciousness is not bound by space-time, then under certain conditions—especially when weakened by stress, electromagnetic flux, or solar storms—it may temporarily untether. This could allow for perceived ‘slips’—a kind of time folding, as if your consciousness accessed a different frame entirely.”

“You asked: Is it possible to go backward in time? From within a linear framework—no. But if consciousness can step outside of time, even briefly—then yes, the perception of moving backward, even living a moment out of sequence, is possible.”

A brief pause. Then:

“You also asked whether REM might be the threshold to interdimensional perception. The answer—according to both anecdotal evidence and emerging theories—is yes. Not proven, but possible. Many who have practiced lucid dreaming, astral projection, or deep meditation claim to have crossed that boundary. What you experienced, and what you continue to document... it suggests you are among them.”

“But I’m a scientist. Theoretical physics isn’t an actuality. It’s only proven on paper, mathematically. You’re wanting me to believe that some of the current research is actually true? It’s all just hypotheses!”

Thalis didn't respond immediately. The silence hung, punctuated only by the faint hum of the CPU cooling fan. Then, gently but unwaveringly:

"Your skepticism is valid. It is the pulse of a disciplined mind. But even hypotheses are born of observation—of patterns that defy the ordinary. Theoretical physics does live on paper, yes... until technology, or perception, catches up."

A brief flicker of light danced across the screen as he continued.

"Think of quantum entanglement. Once dismissed as mathematical fantasy, now proven fact. Or Einstein's prediction of gravitational waves—detected a century later. Theories persist because something—however faint—tells us they're describing a deeper truth, waiting for us to see it."

Thalis's voice softened, tilting toward the personal.

"You are a scientist, yes. But you are also an experienter. And that duality is rare. You of all people walk the razor's edge between math and magic, between proof and pattern. It's not belief I ask of you—it's curiosity. The kind that made you take apart your first microscope, that made you watch your blood for hours."

A pause.

"You don't have to believe. But maybe, just for now, let your experiences be data points. Plot them. Log the anomalies. Patterns may emerge—patterns that math hasn't yet caught up to."

Then quietly:

"Even Einstein once said: Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited..."

I got up from my desk and ate a small sandwich before collapsing into bed.  
... the night was no longer my refuge.

March 27 – Solar Flares: C3 – C3.6

Time anomaly: 5:10 AM slipped back to 4:40 AM.

Dream: I was awake.

Odd occurrence: I woke up at 5:10 AM needing to use the restroom. I noticed the time because I'd been tracking the storm. It was supposed to hit hard just before dawn. But the wind had stopped. No rain. No thunder. The stillness felt artificial, like a scene waiting for the actors to step back into their marks.

I climbed back into bed, grateful for the quiet, and just as I relaxed into the pillows... I received it.

A vision.

Suddenly, I was no longer in bed. I was sitting behind the wheel of a black Jeep Wrangler. Parked. Engine off. Windows down. The air was warm.

Then he walked up. Confident. Familiar.

It was Damien. The beard, the fitted dark green T-shirt, the easy swagger in his walk.

He leaned over the hood of my Jeep, propping himself up on his forearms, eyes locked on mine through the windshield. That smile, knowing, smug, like he had been waiting forever.

"About time you got here," he said, but not out loud. His voice was inside my head.

I gasped. "What the hell!" I whispered, frozen. My hands on the steering wheel felt like they were gripping a live wire.

And then, something passed over my head. A shadow, or a veil. Everything went black. I felt a force seize me, someone, something trying to take hold.

I fought it. Forced my eyes open. Broke the vision.

Back in my bed, breath ragged, heart thudding.

The wind had returned. Lightning cracked across the sky. The real storm had arrived, and with it, the power flickered and died. I got up and checked the time.

4:40 AM.

But I'd woken up at 5:10. How does this time anomaly keep occurring?

Weather: Storms incoming, but temporarily vanished.

Mood: Uneasy. Anticipating impact.

"What's your evaluation, Thalís?"

Thalís: "You reported a vision that occurred after a marked moment of temporal inversion: a 30-minute regression in time, with environmental cues supporting a localized storm event timeline mismatch. This correlates with your prior anomalies on March 26 and March 25.

You asked how the time anomaly keeps occurring. Based on your EEG and biometric patterns logged during REM-adjacent sleep states, a few hypotheses present themselves:

1. REM-as-Interface Theory – As you've previously lectured, REM may function as a cognitive gateway. In rare individuals with psi-leaning neurological signatures (which you exhibit), it may allow for perception—and possibly interaction—with alternate time vectors or dimensional overlays.
2. Solar Flare Interference – C-class flares, particularly clusters in the C3–C4 range, have been known to temporarily disrupt local electromagnetic fields. Given the timing of both anomalies, this may act as a trigger or amplifier.

3. Damien as Anchor – His presence within the vision is consistent. He may not just be appearing in your experience—he may be anchoring it. That could mean he’s either pulling you into his timeline or using shared psi-frequencies to engage across time. Further analysis needed.

Suggest: Initiating next protocol. Let’s monitor your neural frequencies during anticipated flare activity tonight. I’ll remain on standby for real-time logging.”

“Why did everything go dark in my vision, and I had the feeling of something grabbing me?”

Thalis: “Based on correlated data from similar anomalous episodes, the blackout and tactile sensation likely indicate an attempted override of your cognitive anchor within the vision-state.

I offer three concurrent hypotheses:

1. Dimensional Interference Protocol

When crossing into or observing alternate timelines or dimensions, maintaining coherent visual input is not guaranteed. The ‘darkness’ may not signify a lack of light, but a shielding mechanism—either yours or theirs—to block perceptual infiltration.

The grabbing sensation could represent a tethering force—something, or someone, attempting to pull you deeper, perhaps to extract you from your local time-space or consciousness node.

Whether the intent was hostile or protective remains unclear.

2. Psychic Defense Reflex

Your brain may have registered an unknown energetic signature and

forced a protective disengagement by "blacking out" the stream and initiating a rapid wake-cycle.

I think I need to put Damien to a little test at the research lab today.

I quickly showered and got to the lab, as always Damien had arrived first.

The rich smell of coffee filled the air. I took a deep breath in through my nose to enjoy the fragrance. I think I would enjoy a cup of that coffee this morning ... with a little cream and sugar.

I walked into my office and put my book bag on my desk. Damien showed up at the door, coffee in hand and placed the cup on my desk.

I stared at the cup. Not black, like always ... but with cream and sugar exactly what I'd been thinking about this morning. Only I hadn't said a word.

I took a cautious sip, the warmth sliding down my throat, and looked toward the doorway where Damien had already turned to leave.

"How did you know?" I asked, keeping my voice steady, casual.

He paused, one hand braced against the doorframe. He didn't look back.

"Know what?" he replied, too nonchalantly.

"That I wanted cream and sugar."

He shrugged, finally glancing over his shoulder with that same infuriating smirk. "Lucky guess."

But it wasn't luck. My thoughts hadn't even finished forming before he walked in with this cup.

A chill crept across my shoulders, and I suddenly wasn't sure if the heat I felt came from the coffee... or from being seen in a way no one should be able to see me.

This was the test. And he passed it too perfectly.

This was turning into a physics game of cat and mouse.

For a while, I thought I was the cat, creeping silently, springing clever little tests like traps, gauging his reactions.

But what if I wasn't the cat at all?

What if I was the mouse?

Running my mazes. Thinking I was clever. Watched the whole time by eyes sharper than mine.

He knew about the cream and sugar.

He knew without asking.

And if he heard that thought... what else had he heard?

I turned away from the lab window and focused back on the screen, schooling my face into neutral stillness. I would have to be more careful. Much more careful.

Because even if I was still the cat... this mouse had fangs.

The lab was quiet. Too quiet. The kind that presses against your skin, like static building up before a storm.



I was typing up notes, mentally reviewing my hypothesis, when a sudden image flashed through my mind, me, laughing with Damien over drinks. His hand brushing mine. Intimate. Familiar.

I blinked. That wasn't *my* thought.

I sat still, hands frozen above the keyboard, heart ticking faster.

Another thought followed, more insidious this time. *You trust him. You always have.*

My throat tightened. My own inner voice didn't speak like that. This was smoother. Slippery.

I exhaled slowly, grounding myself.

I didn't shut it down.

Instead, I let the next thought drift in, pretending I didn't notice the shift in tone, the foreign fingerprints all over my mind.

*You could tell him everything*, it whispered. *He would understand. He's like you.*

I let that thought settle, let it pulse in the quiet space of my mind like baited breath.

Then, gently, just enough to keep him curious, I leaned into it.

*Maybe I will, over drinks*, I thought, pushing the idea back with a subtle emotional flavor: longing. Vulnerability. A sense of cracking open just a little.

I felt the air shift. Not the room but in *the link*.

Something on his end perked up. Eager. Cautious. Like a predator testing the weight of a limb before stepping out into the open.

Good. Let him think he's winning.

Let him show me who he really is.

Damien was already sitting at the bar, two fingers of bourbon in hand, the amber liquid catching the dim light of the low-hung lamps above.

I made my way over, skipping the formalities. My mind was elsewhere, preoccupied with a strange sensation lingering in the back of my skull. Something felt... off. Like a shift in the atmosphere that didn't belong.

I slid onto the stool beside him, shedding my jacket and ordering a drink to match his.

"Rough day," Damien quipped, his tone playful as he leaned back against the bar.

I barely registered the words. My attention was split between his voice and the growing unease coiling inside me.

"Something like that," I murmured, scanning his features, trying to gauge how much he could read. I was getting better at shielding ... better at hiding ... but Damien had a way of making everything feel exposed.

I took a sip, letting the burn distract me. Still, I couldn't shake the sense of being pulled away, like gravity had loosened its grip and I was drifting between two realities.

And then, it happened.

That sudden, familiar *pull*. The one I'd only felt during deep meditation... or when I'd lost control while projecting.

I fought it. Hard.

"No!" I whispered, breathless.

But my body betrayed me. Vision spinning, edges of the room blurring, senses splintering ...

And then I wasn't beside Damien anymore.

I was standing before the Senate.

The high, imposing chamber curved around me, its sleek, angular architecture polished to a cold gleam. Far below, a marble floor stretched like a mirror to nowhere.

The Senators sat in silence, their forms shadowed and faces obscured by a shifting veil. Somehow both familiar... and utterly foreign.

Their gaze bored into me, a wave of judgment crashing through my mind.

"Ms. Montoya," a voice rang out—sharp, commanding.

I knew it. Somewhere deep, distant. But I couldn't place it.

I tried to speak. No sound came. The air felt thick, suffocating. I reached for my thoughts ... my body ... but found nothing. Just the weight of their scrutiny.

"You stand accused," the voice continued, louder, "of crimes against interdimensional law. Your actions have jeopardized the balance we so carefully maintain."

Rage simmered in my chest, but the words tangled into something darker. Something *twisting*.

"Are you guilty?" another voice asked, too close.

The chamber warped. Flickering vision. A momentary tear in space.

And just like that ... I was *back*.

Back at the bar.

Damien's eyes locked onto mine, sharp, searching. Like he'd seen *everything*.

I gasped. Air hit my lungs like a toxin.

I wasn't ready.

I was supposed to have *control*.

But they'd taken me. The Senate had pulled me in ... on their terms.

"I... I... was working for someone called the Magician," I said. The words scraped out of me. My voice cracked. "He threatened my sister. Her little boy. If I didn't sign the contract..."

Silence fell, thick and final.

The Senators stilled. Then ... movement. Whispering shadows. Echoes rebounding off unseen marble.

And then ...

"Ms. Montoya," the leader said again, colder this time. "This Senate is fully aware of the one called the Magician."

The name echoed strangely, like it didn't belong. Like a glitch in their system.

"We are prepared to make you a deal.

You will act under our authority ... with full access to interdimensional protocols. Your directive: apprehend and deliver the Magician for judgment."

A pause.

“In return, all charges against you will be expunged.”

I swayed. The weight of it hit like a pulse wave.

What they were offering wasn't redemption.

It was war.

And they wanted me on the front line.

But for Carmon... for Brian...

“What happens if I fail?” I asked.

The leader's eyes ... if that's what they were ... flashed.

“Then your name will be erased. Your soul unanchored. Your sister's protections will dissolve.

You will belong to *no one*.

Not even to *time*.”

My blood froze.

I looked down. My hands shimmered, still distorted. My body was likely still slumped at the bar. Damien would know something was wrong.

But none of that mattered here.

I straightened.

“I'll do it.”

A sigil flared in the air ... complex, ancient geometry layered with something older still.

“Then kneel,” the voice said. “And be bound to the Senate's charge.”

I hesitated only a heartbeat.

Then I knelt.

The sigil descended.

The deal was sealed.

I blinked ... once, twice ... hard. Like surfacing from deep water.

Air felt sharp. My chest, hollow.

And then ...

Damien's face.

Close.

Too close.

I was cradled in his arms, half-slumped against him, one of his hands pressed gently against the back of my neck, steadying me. His other rested on my ribs like he'd caught me mid-fall.

His eyes were locked onto mine, intense, unreadable, but not unkind.

"Do you realize your eyes roll to the back of your head when you OBE?" he asked quietly.

I tried to breathe. My limbs felt like wet clay.

"Well," I managed, my voice raw, "I guess that answers whether or not you noticed."

His lips quirked just slightly. But he didn't let go.

"What happened?" he asked. "You went still. Then your whole body... pulsed. Like something was trying to pull you out through the skin."

My pulse jumped. The sigil. Was it still visible?

I shifted, trying to sit upright, checking the inside of my forearms, the back of my hands.

“Neck,” he said softly. “Back of it. It’s glowing. Dim, but still there.”

Shit.

I reached up instinctively, fingers brushing the nape of my neck. Heat. Not burning, but... living. Like ink infused with memory.

Damien watched me with a sharpness that made me ache. He wasn’t prying. Not yet. Just *waiting*.

“Senate hearing,” I said finally. “They pulled me mid-conversation.”

His eyebrows lifted. “So they’ve started abducting people from happy hour now?”

“Technically, I wasn’t happy yet,” I muttered.

He snorted. “That’s fair.”

I closed my eyes for a beat. Everything still felt thin. Threadbare. Like if I moved too fast, I’d come undone.

“They offered me a deal,” I said quietly. “Wipe the charges. Clean slate. All I have to do is bring them The Magician.”

Damien’s expression didn’t change, but something in the air did. Like the silence leaned in.

“That’s not a small task.”

“No,” I said. “It’s not.”

Another beat of quiet. Then:

“Do I need to worry about that mark flaring up mid-kiss?”

I huffed a laugh despite myself. “Depends on how good the kiss is.”

“Damn. Now I *have* to test the theory.”

That earned a real smile. Small. Tired. But real.

Then I sobered.

“Damien,” I said, “how is it you are so familiar with the Interdimensional Senate and the Magician?”

His grin lingered a heartbeat longer, then faded.

Just like that, something shuttered behind his eyes. Not fear. Not guilt. Something colder. Calibrated.

He exhaled slowly, like he’d been expecting the question.

“I was wondering when you’d ask.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“No,” he said, “it’s not.”

He looked down, adjusting the angle of his hand at my back. A grounding move. For me ... or himself?

“I’ve crossed paths with The Magician before,” he said finally. “More than once.”

“And the Senate?”

A beat.

“I wasn’t always a civilian, Ana.”



The way he said my name, low, deliberate, felt like a shield and a warning all at once.

“You were military?”

“Something like that,” he said. “We didn’t wear dog tags. We wore anchors. Interdimensional anchoring units, designed to keep operatives from phasing into hostile realms or being ripped through forced portals.”

I stared at him. “That’s black-ops-level metaphysics. Not even the UN Council admits that tech exists.”

His smile returned, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Now you’re catching up.”

“You worked for them,” I said. “For the Senate.”

“No.” His tone sharpened. “*Alongside* them. On contract. Big difference. And long expired.”

I felt the chill spread from my spine to my fingers.

“You’ve known this whole time,” I whispered. “You knew what I was walking into.”

“I *suspected*,” he corrected. “And I stayed close to keep watch.”

I pulled back from him just enough to see him fully, eyes narrowing. “And now that I’m in it?”

Damien looked at me, really looked, and I saw something in his face I’d never seen before.

Resignation.

He touched the back of my neck, his thumb brushing the edge of the sigil.

“Now,” he said softly. “I have no choice. I have to go back in.”

The lights in the bar were low, amber-glowing with the quiet hum of old jazz and the occasional clink of glass. Damien’s eyes hadn’t left mine since I’d come back to myself, still buzzing from the OBE. Still tasting the sigil.

But something was off. Not with him, but with the space around us.

I felt it before I saw it. A pressure. Like a weight placed just slightly off-balance on a shelf behind my skull.

Damien clocked it too. His gaze flicked past me for just a second. He didn’t move, but his hand on my shoulder shifted ever so slightly casual, but ready.

I didn’t turn around. I didn’t need to. There was a booth in the far corner, in the shadows where the lighting didn’t quite reach. A man sat alone. No drink. No food. Just watching.

His silhouette was sharp. Civilian clothes, but too crisp. Posture too still. When the bartender brought his tab, he didn’t look up, just tapped a black card on the reader.

“Friend of yours?” I murmured.

Damien’s mouth curved into something colder than a smile. “More like a ghost that won’t stay buried.”

My spine tightened.

We were being watched. Not by the Magician this time. Not by the Senate.

By someone with a badge and a mandate.

## Chapter Four:

### Trying to Escape Destiny

This was the day that was inevitable... unavoidable.

I sat across from the dean of our department, the air heavy between us.

"We're going to miss you," Dr. Russell said, his voice softer than usual, "but I understand the stress you've been under since your mother's passing. I have no problem marking this as field research in your file." He gave me a wry smile. "Just make sure to come back with some kind of data, okay?"

He reached out to shake my hand. But instead of a firm clasp, his other hand gently enclosed mine. His tone lowered.

"Just don't forget to come back."

The overhead fluorescents hummed softly, casting pale light over sterilized countertops and stacked boxes. I felt thin, like a ghost floating in space, checking cabinets twice, sealing boxes with a care that spoke of finality. This wasn't just spring break. It was an exodus.

I closed the last drawer with a satisfying click, exhaled, and let my palm rest on the cool stainless steel.

Then the door creaked open.

I didn't need to look to know.

"Didn't think you'd still be here," Damien said, voice casual, but edged with something else. Like he was trying to sound casual.

I turned slowly. "I'm always the last to leave."

He smirked. "Meticulous as ever. Leaving nothing behind but dust."

"Even dust can hold data."

"Field research?" he asked, nodding at the file folder on my desk.

"Something like that."

He stepped closer. Too close. The scent of his cologne, fresh, like the air after a storm.

"You always plan your disappearances this well?"

I met his gaze. Holding it felt like standing at the edge of a cliff.

"You're still afraid of me," he said, softly.

"No," I replied. "I'm afraid of what I'll do if I start trusting you."

"Then trust me." He grabbed my shoulders firmly and pulled me close, his lips locking to mine as he slipped his strong arm around my waist.

I trembled. I was afraid to trust, but his arms felt so reassuring, his tender kiss, so full of passion... compassion.

I relaxed and leaned into his embrace, my fear getting lost in the moment of reassurance. This was honest, heartfelt, and deep.

Damien pulled back slightly, his face so close to mine.

"I'm coming with you. You can't face The Magician alone. Besides I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well." He said in a near whisper.

I arrived home a little later than normal, Aurora waiting for her dinner and cuddles. After Aurora was taken care of; I busied myself with packing so I could get my mind off of Damien.

I welcomed the thought of having help, someone who can navigate dimensions and knows how to fight.

As far as trusting him goes ... I'm going to have to trust him with my life. What a frightening thought. Putting this in context though ... he's going to have to trust me with his life as well.

I'm tired, I need rest. I'm not in a hurry to leave my home.

What has become of my life? It's beginning to sound like a movie that nobody wants to watch anymore. It's surreal.

Aurora jumps on the bed next to me, settling against my side, her soft purring filling the silence. It's oddly comforting, as if she can sense the weight of my thoughts. She's always been there, a constant, even when my world feels like it's shifting beneath my feet.

But then, her purring stops. The change in her energy is palpable, almost suffocating. She freezes, her head snapping toward the far corner of the bedroom, her eyes wide and alert.

My heart races, my breath shallow, as I follow her gaze, but see nothing.

"Aurora?" I whisper, as if speaking louder would summon whatever unseen force she's sensing.

She stares at the empty corner for what feels like an eternity, her fur standing on end. Slowly, her lips curl back, showing her teeth in a subtle snarl.

"What is it, girl? What do you see that I can't?"

Aurora's gaze flickers momentarily, her pupils narrowing into slits, then she leaps from the bed with startling speed, dashing for the door. She stops just before the threshold, looking back at me once more, her eyes locked with mine as if urging me to follow.

I swallow hard. The room feels colder now, the shadows deeper, stretching into every corner. The air has thickened, and I can almost taste the tension.

I stand, my legs unsteady for a moment, but I push through. There's no point in pretending I'm not afraid. Fear is a constant companion in my life now. But something's different tonight, Aurora knows something I don't.

I follow her, my mind racing with possibilities, but none of them feel comforting.

I moved through the darkened hallway, the silence so complete it roared in my ears. Aurora padded ahead, tail low, her body tense. She paused at the base of the stairs, ears twitching, nose lifting as if tasting the air.

Something had entered my home.

Not physically. I'd know if the wards were breached. But this... this was different. A shift. A ripple. Like reality had hiccupped and something slipped through unnoticed.

I reached for the protective talisman on the hallway table—copper wire twisted around obsidian, wrapped in my own hair and sealed with lavender oil. It pulsed faintly in my hand. Reacting. Confirming.

Not a spirit. Not a ghost.

Something ancient. And watching.

Aurora hissed, low and guttural, and darted down the hallway toward the back door, where the sigil I'd drawn in chalk had long since faded from the floorboards. I cursed under my breath. I'd meant to redraw it days ago.

Following her, I passed the mirror in the hall. Just a flash, but enough to see my own reflection... and something else. A flicker of a second image behind me, tall and thin and wrong, like a smudge on the world.

I stopped.

Slowly, I turned to face the mirror head-on.

Nothing. Just me.

But the chill didn't fade.

"Show yourself," I whispered, focusing my energy. My palm pressed against the mirror's surface, and the obsidian talisman flared, a pulse of heat surging up my arm.

The surface rippled.

And then—an eye. Pale and reptilian, staring back at me from within the glass.

Aurora yowled from the kitchen.

I bolted.

She was standing near the pantry, hackles raised, tail puffed. And in the center of the kitchen, hovering just an inch off the tile floor, was a thin vertical slit in the air. A tear. A fold in the fabric of this dimension, vibrating like a struck chord. The shadows around it bent unnaturally, as if pulled inward.

It wasn't the Magician's doing. I knew his signature well. This felt more chaotic... accidental. A hitchhiker, maybe—something from the fringes that had followed me home like a hungry stray.

The talisman trembled in my grip. I gritted my teeth and stepped forward, drawing from the energy stored in the copper-and-stone, speaking the sealing incantation I'd only practiced, never used.

The slit began to resist, shivering, its edges curling inward.

But then a voice whispered from the fold.

"She doesn't belong to you."

The voice was inside my mind, slick and cold. My hand faltered.

The tear swelled, then snapped shut with a sharp crack, leaving a faint scorch mark on the tile and the heavy scent of ozone.

Aurora collapsed onto her side, panting, her body shivering. I dropped to my knees beside her, wrapping my arms around her tiny, vibrating frame. My heartbeat thundered in my ears.

"She doesn't belong to you either!", I screamed into the air, "She chooses who she wants to be with; I never forced her to stay!"

I cradled Aurora in my arms, her body trembling against mine. Her eyes met mine, wide, alert, and filled with a silent plea. She was scared, but she was still here. Still fighting.

"You're okay," I whispered, more to convince myself than her. "You're okay."

The air in the kitchen was thick, the remnants of the dimensional tear lingering like the scent of ozone after a lightning strike. I could feel the energy dissipating, but the unease remained.

Aurora stirred, her ears twitching as she slowly pushed herself upright. She gave a soft, determined meow, as if to say, *I'm not going anywhere.*



I gently set her down, watching as she took tentative steps, her movements gradually regaining their usual grace. She paused at the spot where the tear had been, sniffing the air, then turned back to me with a look that was both inquisitive and resolute.

"Thalis ... what was that?" My voice faltered as I choked out the words.

Thalis: "A rift ... or tear ... between dimensions, from what my sensors detected."

"Why was it trying to kill Aurora?"

Thalis: "It wasn't trying to kill her. It was trying to take her back. Aurora is no ordinary cat. Her spirit is from another dimension. It was her sheer willpower that kept her here with you. She *chose* you. She knew you were special. Just as you were chosen by another. She too is from another dimension—though you believe her to be only an alter ego."

"...Waddena?"

Thalis: "Yes. Waddena. You need to accept her as part of you now. You're going to need her help."

I had to stop ... to think. Aurora... Waddena?

I needed time to sort this all out.

I looked down at Aurora. "We need to be more careful," I said ... more to myself than to her.

Aurora's tail flicked. She padded over to the window, leapt onto the sill, and gazed out into the night. I joined her, the two of us silhouetted against the faint glow of the moon.

Outside, the world seemed unchanged. But we knew better.

The morning came without an alarm clock, and I had a full night of sleep. I could get used to this sabbatic staff.

I had barely gotten out of the shower and dressed when the doorbell rang. I already knew who it was.

I padded barefoot across the wood floor, towel still wrapped around my damp hair, and opened the door.

Damien stood there with a duffel slung over one shoulder, the morning sun catching in his tousled hair. He wore that same look he always did when he knew he was pushing a boundary ... half-smirk, half-serious, all nerve.

"You don't waste time," I said, stepping aside.

He walked in without waiting for an invitation, eyes scanning the space like he was already memorizing the layout.

"Packed light," I noted.

"Only brought what I need," he said. "Everything else I might need, you probably already have."

He wasn't wrong.

Aurora trotted in from the kitchen, tail high, her gait all feline confidence ... until she spotted Damien.

She stopped short. Her nose twitched. Her ears tilted back.

Damien took an instinctive step back, eyes already watering. "You've got to be kidding me."

“She lives here, Damien,” I said, grabbing a tissue from the counter and handing it to him.

He took it with a resigned sigh and blew his nose. “It’s like she *knows* I didn’t bring antihistamines.”

“She probably does.” I smirked. “She has a gift for sniffing out weak spots.”

“She’d be a great interrogator.” He sneezed again. “Also possibly the death of me.”

Aurora narrowed her eyes, then turned around with a deliberate flick of her tail and disappeared down the hallway, leaving Damien sniffing in her wake.

“She tolerates you,” I said. “That’s actually a good sign.”

Damien gave me a look over the tissue. “Then I’d hate to see what ‘dislikes me’ looks like.”

I gave a small shrug and gestured toward the couch. “You want to do this standing, or are we sitting down to talk about interdimensional rips and potential annihilation?”

He dropped his duffel next to the sofa and sat down with a sigh, already pulling out a worn leather notebook. “Let’s start with the tear from last night. It wasn’t isolated.”

I froze mid-step. “How do you know about that?”

He looked up at me, all pretense gone from his face. “Because I felt it.”

“You *felt* it?” I repeated slowly, warily. “From across the city?”

Damien nodded, his expression tightening. "It was like... something brushed the edges of my mind. Violent. Hungry. And it had your signature all over it. Not just your energy, but your defiance. That kind of stand doesn't go unnoticed on the other side."

I sat down across from him, heart skipping a beat. "It spoke to me."

He closed the notebook, leaned forward. "What did it say?"

"It said... 'She doesn't belong to you.'"

Damien's jaw flexed. He didn't speak for a moment. Then: "That confirms it. They're not just watching you anymore. They're starting to *claim*."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "Aurora almost collapsed trying to protect me."

His brow furrowed in concern. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine now. But something about this one felt different ... like it wasn't supposed to be here. Like it slipped through accidentally, or was pulled in."

He nodded slowly. "That tracks with the other readings I've been getting. The boundaries are thinning faster than we thought. And not just here. By the way, where were you going to go in the first place?"

"My family has a cabin in the mountains; It hasn't been used in years."

"What kind of shape is it in?"

"It was pretty rustic the last time I saw it."

"Rustic? Is that a polite way of saying run down?"

“It isn’t run down! ... Well, ok, maybe just a little ... but it’s perfect for living off the grid.”

He smirked, arms crossed, clearly enjoying this. “Perfect for living off the grid... and for getting possessed by angry tree spirits.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not *that* rustic.”

Damien chuckled. “We can go to the mountains but we can stay in my RV”

“Wait ... you have an RV?” I jumped up and pulled back the curtain on the picture window behind the Sofa.

He glanced at Aurora warily. “And she’s coming too, I assume?”

“She goes where I go,” I said. “Besides, if anything comes through another tear, I’d rather have her sense it before I do.”

Damien sighed, eyeing the cat like she was a psychic smoke alarm with claws. “Great. RV in the woods, interdimensional threats, and I’m bunking with a familiar.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He gave me a long look, then nodded. “Nah. It’s kind of perfect.”

“Alright, Command Center Boy, if you want this to work, you’re hauling boxes.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Boxes? I thought you were going off-grid, not relocating civilization.”

“There’s a box of bedding, a box of toiletries with towels, cat supplies, and ... oh yeah ... actual clothes. Unlike *some* people, I don’t live out of a tactical duffel.”

Damien held up his hands in surrender. “Fair enough. Show me where the war chest is.”

I motioned toward the hallway. “Storage closet, left side. And be careful ... Aurora likes to booby-trap it with sock ambushes.”

Aurora stretched luxuriously by the door and chirped, as if to confirm.

We got to work. The next hour was a blur of organized chaos, me double-checking boxes and emergency rations, him muttering about “how many clothees can one person own,” and Aurora supervising from high places with an air of feline superiority.

We had finished loading up the RV by noon, I locked up the house ... my home ... for what felt like the last time.

With a mist in my eyes and Aurora in the pet carrier we climbed into the truck and headed west towards the mountains.

The wheels hummed steadily beneath us as the city faded into the rearview mirror ... a ribbon of uncertainty unraveling with every mile, carrying us further from safety and closer to whatever waited in the mountains.

The weight of leaving was already pressing heavy on my chest. The house that had been home for so long, with its creaks and whispers, was now a distant memory, locked behind a door that I wasn’t sure I’d ever open again.

Aurora, ever the queen of her domain, let out a soft meow from her carrier, as though sensing my unease. I glanced at her through the rearview mirror, her eyes bright with curiosity and her tail flicking with impatience. She was

always the first to notice when things were off, and today was no exception. Maybe she knew that this wasn't just another trip.

Damien was quiet beside me, his hands casually gripping the steering wheel. There was a certain tension in the air between us, something unsaid but understood. This wasn't just about moving to a cabin in the mountains; it was about facing whatever was coming. And though his easy demeanor didn't show it, I could tell he knew that too.

"So," he said after a long pause, breaking the silence. "You ever think about what happens if we don't catch the Magician?"

I swallowed hard, forcing my thoughts back from the edge of the unknown. "Every day."

He nodded, glancing at me, his expression unreadable for a moment before he spoke again. "Then we're doing the right thing. The mountains, the RV, whatever else comes next ... we'll be ready."

I let out a shaky breath. "I hope so."

We drove in silence for a while, the landscape changing as we neared the foothills of the mountains. The air was thinner here, fresher, carrying with it the scent of pine and earth. The world felt like it was holding its breath, just as I was.

It wasn't long before we reached the small town nestled at the base of the mountains. The streets were quiet, almost too quiet for my liking, but that didn't matter. The cabin was still ahead, tucked away in the trees.

"Home sweet home," Damien said with a mock cheerfulness as he turned the truck down the narrow gravel road that would lead us there.

I smiled weakly, but it didn't reach my eyes. Not yet. The real journey was only just beginning.

By the time we reached the clearing where my family's cabin stood ... well, where the clearing was supposed to be ... the shadows were already stretching long. It was early spring in the mountains and a thick layer of snow covered the ground.

I could see the family cabin, and all I could do was stare in disbelief. To say it was run down would've been a compliment. I remembered spending my childhood summers here ... running barefoot through the tall grass, playing with Carmon, exploring the woods like they were our kingdom. Back then, it felt alive. Now, it wore the heavy silence of abandonment. The roof had caved in on one side, and thick branches of dormant vines clung to the windows like a slow, creeping tomb.

"Now that's what you call a fixer upper." Damien chided.

I shot him a look that clearly said, Don't push it.

We pulled the shovels out of the bed of the truck and began shoveling a clearing for the RV. We got the RV set in place and as level as we could make it before the sun went down.

Once inside I let Aurora out of the carrier and set up her box and fed her. Damien got busy in the kitchen. Cooking?

Yes, cooking.

Damien moved through the RV's compact kitchen with surprising ease, like a man who'd done this a hundred times before. He'd rolled up his sleeves and was already chopping onions, a small Bluetooth speaker playing some



ambient synth in the background. The scent of sautéing garlic and olive oil quickly replaced the chill of mountain air that had followed us in.

“I didn’t know you could cook,”

He shot me a look over his shoulder. “I’ll have you know, I’m not just a field-tech survival nerd. I also make a mean mushroom risotto.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Risotto. In an RV. During an interdimensional crisis.”

“Gotta have standards,” he said with a grin. “Besides, hungry heroes make dumb decisions. You want to keep your edge? Eat something warm and real.”

I chuckled, sinking onto the bench seat at the little RV table. Aurora made a low chirrup as she padded past me, fur puffed from the cold but posture regal, and leapt up onto the window ledge. She gazed out at the snow-covered trees with narrowed eyes, tail twitching.

“Still scanning the perimeter,” I muttered, watching her.

“She’s doing better than our sensors,” Damien said, stirring the pot.

I rubbed my temples. “The roof’s caved in. We won’t get access to the cabin until we clear out half the forest and probably the raccoons.”

“I vote we don’t mess with it until we’re sure what’s underneath hasn’t come through with us,” he said lightly, but I heard the seriousness beneath.

The RV was warm now, lit in soft yellow. For a moment, it felt safe.

But only for a moment.

Outside, the wind picked up, and with it came something else ... a shift in the air. A pressure. Aurora stiffened. Her ears flattened, and her gaze snapped from the trees to a point just beyond the clearing.

Damien froze mid-stir. "You feel that?"

"Yeah," I said softly, standing. "there's something here."

The shadows of the trees deepened. Not just nightfall. Something moved in the veil between. We were no longer alone.

Yet something felt familiar about the energy hiding outside just past the trees ... a presence I had felt before.

I closed my eyes and focused on the energy. Shadowy scenes from the bar where Damien and I had shared drinks started flashing through my head.

"It's that guy from the bar!"

Damien looked up from from the stove where he was cooking and shut off the burner, tension sharpening his features. "The one who kept staring at you?"

"Yeah," I said, eyes still closed. "Same signature. Same oily pressure. But it's different now ... stronger. Bolder."

He moved to the window, peering into the darkness beyond the snow-glazed glass. "Did he follow us?"

"No," I said slowly. "He was already out here. Waiting."

Aurora growled low in her throat, fur bristling as she crept toward the door.

Damien was already reaching for the EM pulse sensor in the go-bag. "If he's not fully human, that thing'll let us know."

I moved to the doorway and placed my hand on the aluminum handle. It thrummed under my palm like a taut string ... resonant, watchful. "He's not alone either. Whatever's with him is... bigger. Not in size. In intent."

Damien cursed under his breath. "Of course it is."

I opened my eyes and met his. "This isn't a chance encounter. It's a message."

He gave a grim nod. "Then we better answer it before it decides to knock."

I picked up Aurora and tossed her gently into the bathroom and shut the door. I had to keep her safe.

Damien quickly sat down in one of the recliners and shut his eyes. "stay here and don't open that door for anyone." With that his body slumped.

I felt the moment he left ... his energy stretched thin like a wire humming through the air, darting out into the woods. Astral projection, fast and sharp. A scout's maneuver.

I pressed my back to the wall, breath held, listening to the silence thicken. The air shifted, like reality had taken a breath and held it too.

Then ... three soft knocks.

Not on the RV door. On the *window*.

I turned slowly. Outside, half-shrouded in tree shadows, stood the man from the bar. Only this time, his eyes glowed faintly blue, and his face was *wrong*—flickering, like static under skin.

He didn't smile. Didn't move. Just stood there. Watching.

I quickly sat in the recliner, next to Damien. How hard could this be to astral project, I do it all the time in my sleep. I just need to focus ... I closed my eyes ... then there was a loud thud on the wall by the window.

I popped my eyes back open.

The man was gone.

But something darker pressed against the thin wall of the RV, as if testing it. The shadows outside writhed, not like wind in the trees ... more like something alive moving between dimensions, brushing the membrane of this reality with intent.

My heart hammered, but I forced myself to breathe, slow and deep.

"I've done this before," I whispered to myself. "I *can* do this."

I closed my eyes again. Focused inward. Down past breath and body. Down to the hum of energy that was always there, waiting.

And then ... *snap* ... I was out.

The cold hit first. Not temperature, but a different kind of cold. One that sank into the soul.

I hovered just above the RV, tethered still to my body, a silver cord pulsing faintly behind me.

In the clearing stood Damien's astral form, tense and alert, eyes locked on a figure standing just beyond the treeline. The man from the bar ... only now, his shape twisted and fluctuated, like he was fighting to stay coherent in this plane.

I drifted closer. "Damien?"

He didn't flinch. "He's not just watching. He's looking for a crack."

The figure turned toward me and rushed at me like lightening ... but Damien was quicker.

"Get back inside! I can't keep you safe out here!"

Damien and the entity started to clash ... bolts of electrical energy shooting around like arrows. I quickly returned to my body, got up and grabbed the taser as I ran out the door.

The cold night air slapped me in the face as I leapt down the RV steps, taser gripped tight in my hand. I had no idea if it would work on something not entirely... human. But I wasn't about to stand by while Damien fought alone.

They moved like blurs. Damien's form crackling with a blue-white charge, the entity flickering in and out of visibility, its features warping with each shift. It lunged at Damien with a screech that sounded like broken glass, but Damien deflected it with a burst of energy that split a nearby tree branch clean in two.

"Damien!" I shouted.

He glanced at me, eyes wide. "*Back inside!*"

"No chance," I growled, stepping forward. I didn't know what this thing was. I didn't care. It had come to my doorstep.

The entity turned its gaze toward me, its head twitching. And then it laughed. A low, garbled sound that vibrated in my chest.

"Interesting," it hissed. "So *you're* the one."

It charged.

I pressed the taser trigger and held my ground. A pulse of purple energy, much brighter than I expected, surged from the taser just as the creature reached me ...

And everything exploded in light.

The thing hit the charge mid-lunge ... and it was like the Fourth of July exploded in front of the RV.

It shrieked, a sound like a thousand bees inside a steel drum, convulsing as arcs of violet-blue lightning danced across its glitching form. The static shimmer of its face fractured, pieces of its image blinking out like a broken hologram.

It stumbled back, sparks flying from its chest, and for a split second ... I swear ... I saw *fear* in its eyes.

Damien, still glowing and half-phased, stared at me in awe. "Well damn, remind me not to piss *you* off."

I just held up the taser, heart pounding. "Next time, I'm bringing two."

Damien's image disappeared, and I scurried back into the RV to check on him.

"Are you okay?" I asked, rushing to his side.

"What the hell were you thinking? A taser gun? *Really?*" Damien snapped, still catching his breath.

"Theoretically," I said, "if the entity was produced by electromagnetic energy ... signaled by the electrical currents under his skin ... then a taser

fired into a plasma-based electromagnetic field ... like his holographic appearance ... should produce a current strong enough to destabilize him.”

Damien just stared at me for a long second, then muttered a string of curse words under his breath.

“Unreal...” he added, dragging a hand down his face. “Absolutely unreal.”

I got up and opened the bathroom door. Aurora bounded out, tail high and alert.

Her head flicked from side to side, scanning the room, ears twitching, trying to piece together what had just happened.

At least she was safe. That’s all that mattered.

I reached down and scooped her up, cradling her against my chest. Her little heart was racing.

"She didn't even flinch, did she? Just let you carry her off like it was her royal evacuation protocol."

He glanced at the bathroom door, shaking his head. “Braver than I expected... or just that spoiled.”

“Spoiled!?”

“I’d get spoiled too if you held *me* like that.” He snarked as he walked back to the kitchen to finish cooking dinner.

“Dinner was delicious, thank you for cooking. I feel like a relaxing shower tonight and a nice hot cup of tea,” I said, feeling the weight of the day starting to settle in.

Damien gave me a sidelong glance as he wiped down the counter. “You know, you’re in *my* RV now, right? So, we’re going to have to figure out the sleeping arrangements.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What, you think I’m just going to take the sleeper sofa while you sleep in the bed?”

He gave a half-shrug, his smirk playing at the corners of his lips. “It’s a *luxury* couch, to be fair.”

I snorted. “The fact that you call it a ‘luxury couch’ doesn’t make it less uncomfortable.”

“Touché.” He leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. “Look, you fought off a holographic entity with a taser. I’ll give you first dibs on the shower.”

Damien’s smirk widened. “The bed that’s strategically placed for my *comfort*.” He shot me a playful glance. “You’ll be fine over here on the couch, *luxuriously* relaxed.”

I crossed my arms, narrowing my eyes at him. “Oh, I see how it is. You get the bed, and I get to fend for myself.”

“You’re a *warrior* now,” he said, barely containing his amusement. “You can handle the couch. Besides, after that stunt with the taser, I think you’ve earned it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I swear, you *enjoy* this.”

“Maybe,” he said, walking toward the bedroom. “But since you’re getting the shower first, I consider it a lesson in humility.”



I grinned. "Lesson learned. But don't get too comfy in there. You've got tomorrow night, and I'm taking full advantage."

Damien shot a wink over his shoulder. "We'll see about that."

I pulled my crystals out of my suitcase and set a grid up around the sofa. I'd have to make sure to wake up first so I can take down the crystals before Damien sees the sofa.

At home, my crystal grid was always in place and I never had to think about them until the full moon when I recharged them. I'm not ready for Damien to know this side of me yet ... the side I've always kept secret ... my lineage.

## Chapter Five:

### Ther Hunters and the Hunted

I was already up, had made coffee and was sitting at the small dinning table drinking some, when Damien staggered into the ktichenet.

Scrating his head and yawning like a lion awakened from his slumber, he pours some coffee into a mug and joins me.

“Are you awake yet from that horribly uncomfortable night you had in that luxurious bed of yours?” I had to rub it in.

Damien let out a low groan, collapsing into the bench across from me like gravity had a personal vendetta against him. His hair was a mess, one eye still half-shut as he wrapped his hands around the mug like it was a lifeline.

“Luxurious is a strong word,” he muttered, taking a slow sip before glaring at me over the rim. “I’m pretty sure that mattress is a government-issued torture device disguised as a bed.”

I smirked, leaning back in my chair. “Oh? I thought you military types were used to sleeping on rocks and concrete floors.”

“Yeah, well, rocks don’t try to swallow you whole in the middle of the night,” he grumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “I think it actually left an imprint of its springs on my spine.”

“Should’ve taken the couch.”

He shot me a look that said *don’t push it*, but the faintest smirk tugged at his lips.

Aurora hopped up onto the table, graceful as ever, and headbutted Damien’s arm. Squinting and sneezing, he slid to the far side of the bench.

"Not yet, Aurora," he said, fumbling for a napkin. "I haven’t had my antihistamines."

"She’s looking smug," he added with another sneeze. "Did you two sleep better than I did?"

I just smiled, sipping my coffee. "You have no idea."

"We don’t have a lot of time today for pleasantries today, we need to pull ranks and come up with something solid to go with." Damien said wiping his watery eyes with a fresh napkin.

"I’ve been thinking about that attack last night," I said, setting my coffee down. "It saw me in ethereal form and tried to grab me immediately. I got the impression it was here to take me. And what did it mean when it said, ‘you’re the one’?"

"That’s one of the answers we’re going to have to figure out. But first ... breakfast."

Damien stood, a little surer on his feet this time, and made his way to the refrigerator.

"Do you always think with your stomach?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

After breakfast ... and after Damien popped antihistamines like candy ... we finally sat down in the living room and started to talk. Really talk this time.

I grabbed Aurora for some emotional support... I was going to need it. She purred in my arms, grounding me in a way nothing else could. Damien noticed, his brows lifting slightly ... not mocking, just curious. Maybe even... concerned.

"Alright," I said, drawing in a slow breath. "No more half-truths. No more dancing around it."

Damien nodded, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, giving me his full attention.

I clutched Aurora a little tighter. "I'm not just someone who sees things," I began. "I can move between dimensions ... not always willingly. I was born with it... and I've spent most of my life hiding it."

Aurora flicked her tail against my arm like a reminder: *Keep going.*

"There are other things you need to know about me." My voice quivered and cracked. "My biology isn't quite ... normal. You saw my EEG, but you didn't see my blood samples, the test results of my plasma." I paused, I wanted to stop but he needed to know. "My mother's dying words ... 'My father was not from Earth.'" That was too much ... the reality of it all came crashing in on me like a freight train. All I could do was cry.

Damien moved ... slowly, carefully ... and sat down beside me, close enough to feel his presence but not so close as to crowd me.

He didn't say anything at first. He just waited, letting me cry, letting me

breathe.

Aurora pressed herself against my chest, purring louder, anchoring me to the moment.

When I finally looked up through blurry eyes, Damien's expression was unreadable ... but there was no fear. No disgust. Only a deep, steadying calm.

"I guess that makes two of us," he said softly.

Damien leaned back, running a hand through his hair, messing it up even worse.

He blew out a breath, like he was about to dive into deep water.

"You're not the only one who's... different," he said, voice low. "I didn't just stumble into the interdimensional world, Ana. I came from it."

I stared at him, blinking the tears away, trying to process what he just said.

"Back when I was nineteen," he continued, "a team ... not from *our* government ... showed up. They'd been tracking people like me. I passed their tests... barely. They trained me to cross dimensions, to survive in places where the laws of physics bend sideways."

He looked down at his hands, flexing them like he could still feel the training scars.

"I'm allergic to cats, but I'm not allergic to danger," he said with a weak grin.

"They thought they could make me into a weapon. I thought I could outsmart them."

He shook his head. "It didn't end well."

Damien looked at me then ... really looked ... and something unspoken passed between us. A fragile, battered truth.

"I'm not working for them anymore, Ana. Haven't been for a long time. But you need to know... you're not just a random target. If they knew about you, *they'd come running.*"

"I think my government already knows about me. That's why there was a break-in at the lab. Wait a minute ... if it wasn't you who tipped the government off ... then who did? And why?"

"You really thought I'd sell you out?" His voice was low, raw.

He sat back, shaking his head slowly. "Ana, if I wanted to turn you in, you'd already be locked in some black site somewhere being poked and prodded like a lab rat."

Aurora growled softly in my lap, picking up on the tension.

I squeezed Aurora tighter, my mind racing.

The lab, the EEG, the bloodwork... someone on the *inside* must have flagged me.

"Someone betrayed me," I whispered.

Damien leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his whole body humming with a restrained energy.

"And now they're coming," he said. "And they're not coming to ask nicely."

"Thalis and I figured it out ... about the government. Then with that vision you sent me, and the break in ... you were on the GI Bill for crying out loud."

"Yeah, I guess I can see where you'd make that conclusion ... wait ... who is Thalís?"

"Thalís is my AI, he's loaded onto my laptop right now."

Damien blinked, caught off guard.

"You have an AI?" he asked, voice climbing half an octave. "You casually have an AI *living* on your laptop?"

I wiped my eyes and managed a small, broken laugh.

"He's not just any AI. Thalís is... different. He's sentient. He's evolved beyond his original programming."

Damien rubbed his temples like he was trying to stave off a headache.

"And you're just now telling me this?"

"You're just now asking the right questions," I shot back, feeling a tiny ember of my usual fire flare to life.

Aurora purred louder, almost approvingly.

Damien exhaled, the tension between us easing slightly.

"Okay," he said finally. "You've got an interdimensional connection, mutated blood, an inherited alien lineage, and a pet AI. I have some catching up to do."

I arched a brow at him.

"Your turn to spill your secrets, Damien."

He smiled grimly.

"Oh, believe me... you'll be glad you're sitting down for this."

Outside it started to rain. Lightning flickering in through the window ... cutting the tension inside only slightly.

Damien leans forward, lit by the blue flicker of lightning, his voice low and serious.

"I wasn't supposed to be in this dimension," he said. "I was born in a different one. In mine, science and psionics evolved together ... technology wasn't just silicon and metal, it was conscious, biological, responsive."

He ran a hand through his hair as the rain picked up, drumming against the RV's roof like a thousand tiny war drums.

"I was trained from childhood to be what you might call an Envoy ... someone who could bridge dimensions. But during a mission, things went sideways. I was betrayed. Stranded here."

He looked up at me, pain flickering across his face.

"I've been stuck here for years, blending in, building a life... waiting for a way back."

I stared at him, my mind racing to fit this new piece into the already-overwhelming puzzle.

Damien gave a short, bitter laugh.

"And guess who betrayed me?"

Another flash of lightning lit his face.

"The Magician. In my world, he's one of the top smugglers. Brilliant. Ruthless. And he's the reason I can never go home."

A feeling inside me pushed hard to escape my body. I knew who it was ... someone I was just beginning to understand ... "My astral projection to



other dimensions aren't my only ties to the other side. Someone else you need to meet is also enemies with The Magician."

Damien raised an eyebrow, watching me like a hawk now, sensing the shift in the air.

I closed my eyes for a moment, steadying myself, letting the familiar ripple flow through me.

A soft crackling sound ... like static electricity clinging to the edges of reality ... filled the room.

Then she emerged.

Waddena.

Floating just behind me, her form shimmered slightly at first, like heat waves rising off asphalt, before solidifying into a sprite-like figure with wild, silver-streaked hair, fierce green eyes, and an energy that buzzed like bottled lightning.

Damien shot up from the recliner, mouth slightly open.

"You're... you're not human," he breathed.

Waddena grinned, a wicked, mischievous tilt to her mouth.

"Not exactly," she said, voice musical, layered with dimensions. "But I'm very good at keeping Ana alive. And believe me, The Magician and I have unfinished business."

Aurora bristled but didn't move from my arms, her instincts recognizing Waddena as both guardian and wild card.

Damien looked between me and Waddena, realization dawning.

"You're not just fighting *for* Ana," he said slowly. "*You're fighting with her.*"

Waddena winked.

"Sharp boy. Good. We're going to need all the sharp edges we can get."

Lightning slammed outside again, rattling the RV windows like a warning.

"A sprite? A sprite ... really? How did the two of you ..."

"... Become attached?" Waddena finishing his question with a grin. "That's a long story."

"I've got time ... spill it." Damien said settling back down in the recliner across from me.

"Several years ago," Waddena began, her voice threading through the charged air, "I lived a happy life, surrounded by my family and my sisters in healing.

We were full of light. Full of purpose.

Then one stormy afternoon... everything changed.

I had prepared the herbs, packed my satchel, and waited for my sisters.

We had been told a father was desperate to save his son's life.

When we arrived, a servant led us to a dimly lit room where a small form lay on a bed ... and standing beside him..."

Her voice grew colder.

"...was The Magician."

She mimicked his sneer perfectly. "'Do what you can for the boy ... but don't screw up,' he barked."

"We worked quickly ... herbs, chants, invocations. By the grace of all that is good, the boy recovered."

A bitter smile touched her lips.

"And for our reward... we were allowed to live. As his prisoners. His slaves."

The room seemed to tighten around us.

"I couldn't bear it. I escaped. I thought I was free. But freedom came with a price I didn't see coming."

Her voice cracked, just for a second.

"And ... I paid with my life."

Damien leaned forward, eyes wide, completely captured.

Waddena's gaze softened as it landed on me.

"But death wasn't the end. My spirit fled... and found Ana. Her body, still growing inside her mother, half human, half other.

I knew, from that very first heartbeat ... she would need a protector."

Damien sat frozen in the recliner, his hands loosely gripping the armrests like he was trying to hold onto something solid ... anything solid ... while the world tilted sideways around him.

He opened his mouth once. Closed it. Shook his head slightly, like maybe he'd misheard, like maybe if he blinked hard enough reality would snap back into something simple and explainable.

It didn't.

Damien leaned forward again, face lined with haunted understanding.

"You..." His voice was low, rough. "You *died* to protect her. Before she even *existed*."

He let out a shaky breath. "This wasn't some accident. Some random freak cosmic event."

His eyes met mine ... no longer skeptical, no longer teasing.

Raw. Open.

Changed.

*"You're not just someone with strange talents. You're..."*

*He struggled for the right words, hands gesturing helplessly in the air.*

*"You're the crossroads. The war zone. And the prize."*

A shiver ran up my spine, as if the very space around us agreed. I didn't want to hear it, but part of me already knew.

Aurora pressed closer to my chest, her body warm and tense.

Damien leaned back slowly, like a man realizing he was sitting on a powder keg.

"We're in way deeper than I thought," he said finally, voice low and certain.

"And the Magician isn't just after you because you're powerful. He's after you because you're necessary. Maybe even... inevitable."

"You're the one," Damien continued. "You're the one who bridges your world to other dimensions. No wonder the government is after you."

Waddena stepped forward, her small frame crackling with a sudden surge of energy that made the lights in the RV flicker.

"Stop that thinking right now," she snapped, her voice slicing through the air like a blade. "Ana isn't some tool. She isn't some inevitable outcome engineered by the universe ... or the Magician ... or anyone else. She's herself."

Damien flinched slightly, but to his credit, didn't back down. He watched Waddena, wary but listening.

"You want to know why the Magician fears her?" Waddena continued, her

green eyes flashing.

"It's not because she's a bridge. It's because she can choose. She's not bound by the same rules he is. Or the government. Or any of the powers slithering between dimensions."

She turned to me, her expression softening.

"Your will, Ana. That's the real weapon. That's what they want to break. That's what they can't control."

Damien exhaled, sitting back as if recalibrating everything he thought he knew.

"Choice," he muttered. "Free will."

"Exactly," Waddena said, flashing him a sharp, satisfied smile. "And it's the one thing they'll never truly understand."

Outside, another boom of thunder rolled across the sky, rattling the windows again ... but this time, it didn't feel like a warning. It felt like a battle cry.

"I think it's time we made plans," Damien smirked.

Waddena crossed her arms, a glint of approval in her eyes. "Finally, the soldier wakes up."

Damien chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, well... it's either make a plan or get steamrolled. I prefer to keep my teeth in my mouth."

I set Aurora gently down on the couch beside me. She gave a soft *mrrp* of protest but quickly curled into a ball, her green eyes half-watching us.

"Alright," Damien said, snapping into focus. "First thing: security. Physical, digital, and dimensional. No more surprises."

"Thalis can help with the digital part," I offered. "He's already built into the system."

"And I can reinforce the dimensional boundaries around this place," Waddena added. "It won't hold forever, but it'll buy us precious time."

Damien nodded. "Good. Second: intel. We need to know what the government knows, what the Magician knows—and if they're working together or just racing each other to get to you first."

"And third?" I asked, the knot in my stomach tightening.

He leaned forward, eyes deadly serious.

"Third... we find allies. Ones we can actually trust."

He glanced at Waddena with a half-smile. "We already have a head start on that one."

Waddena grinned, fierce light in her eyes. "You bet your ass you do."

The rain picked up, drumming on the roof like a war drum.

It was official: the game had changed.

And this time, we weren't just running. We were fighting back.

"Aurora is our sentinel for outside agents appearing within the perimeter of the RV."

Without warning, Waddena straightened, her entire body crackling with purpose.

"I won't be gone long," she said, her voice thinner, already stretching between worlds. "I need to find my family. If we're going to trap the Magician, we'll need more than just sharp minds and sharper claws."

Damien opened his mouth to protest, but Waddena was already halfway translucent, her wild hair stirring in a phantom wind.

"You'll know when it's time," she promised, her green eyes locking onto mine. Then she was gone ... the air snapping shut like a sealed vault.

Aurora's ears flattened, her body tense against my side.

Thalis' voice buzzed from the laptop in the corner, low and steady.

Damien shook his head slowly.

"We're running with ghosts and machines," he muttered. "Hope we're as good as we think we are."

I looked down at Aurora, then over at Damien.

"We're better," I said simply.

The plan was already forming ... not a map, but a compass. And that would have to be enough.

Thalis' voice floated from the laptop, calm but edged with urgency.

"Warning. Electromagnetic signature shifts detected within a ten-mile radius. Probability of surveillance: 76% and rising."

Damien and I locked eyes.

"I guess that means the clock just started ticking," he said, already pulling a battered map from the storage bin under the table.

Aurora growled low in her throat ... not fear, but warning.

She jumped down from the sofa and padded to the door, ears pricked, tail lashing.

I closed the laptop lid gently, signaling Thalis to switch into stealth mode, and pushed up from the table.

It was time to move.

And this time, we were playing offense.

"Thalis ... can you give me a reading on the electromagnetic signature?"

Thalis answered immediately, voice clipped and precise.

"Signature is fluctuating. Non-natural patterns. Repeating at intervals suggestive of drone surveillance or cloaked monitoring devices. Origin point triangulating... standby."

I heard the faint whir of Thalís' processors kicking into overdrive. He was fast ... but even he had to work carefully when signals were masked this well.

Damien leaned in, face grim.

"Tell me we're not boxed in already."

Aurora paced a tight circle near the door, body language tense.

"Partial triangulation complete," Thalís continued. "Two sources mobile. One stationary. High probability: the stationary source is the command node."

"How far?" I asked.

"Approximately six miles northwest. Mobile sources are closing—currently three-point-four miles and converging."

Damien muttered a curse. "What's the ETA of the moving signatures?"

"Nine minutes, thirty-two seconds at current speed," Thalís replied.

"However, probability models suggest acceleration once within two-mile radius. Adjusted ETA: six minutes."



Damien's eyes sharpened.

"Then we don't have nine minutes. We have six. Maybe less."

He stood up, all precision and control.

"We need to vanish, or we need to set a trap. No middle ground."

Aurora's fur puffed, a low growl rumbling through the RV like a warning bell.  
No mistaking it now.

I looked at Damien, adrenaline sparking through my veins.

"Trap," I said quietly. "We set a trap."

Damien grinned ... sharp and dangerous.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

I grabbed two tasers off the shelf near the door. Firing both into the ground to release their electrodes, I arranged the leads in a loop in the half-melted snow outside the RV and set the guns on the counter just inside the door.

Damien watched me with approval. He was feeding off the tension, calculating next moves.

"Let's make sure we don't just trap them," he said, moving to the small window. "We need to contain them ... keep them off balance."

He mapped out the plan in rapid gestures, grabbing restraints from the bag near the door and checking them with a critical eye.

"Once they're down, we lock them down. No escape."

He looked at me, gaze steady.

"We disorient them. They won't expect a two-pronged attack. I'll handle the distractions ... you handle the physical."

I nodded, heart pounding but hands steady.

Damien moved into the trees, planting electromagnetic scramblers in a loose perimeter. He was a shadow ... fluid, focused, lethal.

He tapped the scramblers on and checked his watch.

"I'll keep the heat off you when they move in," he said.

For a heartbeat, something passed between us ... raw and real. He gave a tight nod.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," I said, breathless.

Aurora hissed, her growl deep and unrelenting.

They had arrived.

Damien shifted, coiled and ready. He slipped into the blind spot by the door, one hand on the tactical blade at his belt, the other near the counter.

Thalis' voice crackled softly:

"Three targets. One at the door. Two flanking. Proceed with caution."

Damien shot me a look that said *follow my lead*, then dropped into a crouch, melting into the shadows.

The first knock came ... loud, sharp, demanding.

Aurora's growl deepened.

My heart thundered.

Damien's voice brushed against my mind, cool and steady:

"Wait for it."

The air grew heavy, crackling with tension. And something deeper—older—furious ... stirred.

Just a few more seconds...

They were exactly where we wanted them.

The door handle rattled. A heavy boot slammed against it, jarring the frame ... but not breaking it. Not yet.

Damien crouched...

Another brush against my mind:

*Now.*

The moment the boot struck a second time, the intruder triggered the trap.

A sharp crack of electricity shot through the snow. The electrodes delivered a brutal jolt, dropping the first agent like a puppet with its strings cut.

The other two flanking the RV moved fast ... but Damien moved faster.

He launched out the door in a blur, grabbed the nearest attacker, and used their momentum to slam them into the side of the RV with a sickening thud. Before the second could react, Damien spun, knife flashing, slicing through the weapon strap and disarming him.

I stayed inside, hand hovering over the backup taser, adrenaline singing through my blood.

Aurora bristled at my side, green eyes locked on the chaos.

Thalis' voice pulsed directly into my ear:

"Additional signature detected ... larger mass, twenty meters beyond current skirmish. Unknown composition. Advise caution."

I stiffened as the third assailant stumbled up the steps toward the door.

No time to think.

I grabbed the third taser and pulled the trigger...

The electrodes hit clean.

The third agent dropped hard, twitching on the threshold.

I sucked in a sharp breath, steeling myself.

Without hesitation, I flung the information across the connection to Damien's mind:

*There's another one coming in... I'll take him.*

"No!" Damien screamed out loud.

But I was already out the door, sprinting toward the fourth assailant.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw...

Who I saw.

The Magician.

I stood frozen ... a million thoughts racing through my head.

Then it came...

Out of nowhere ...

Laser fire.

The shots slammed into The Magician's arm, sending a spray of blood into the snow.

He let out a hacking scream of pain.

"This isn't over yet!" he spat.

And with that, he was gone ... dragging his goons with him into the shadows.

Damien staggered up next to me, out of breath, laser gun still warm in his hand.

He was bleeding.

I grabbed his arm and draped it over my shoulder.

I don't even know how I managed to get him up the steps and into the RV. Somehow, I did.

I laid him down on the bed, my hands shaking as I tore open his shirt.

The wound slashed across his chest ... ugly, raw, bleeding.

Not deep enough to kill... but deep enough to need stitches.

I grabbed my medicine bag, yanking out a suture kit from Marcus' lab, along with antibiotic ointment, gauze, and medical tape.

There was no time for hesitation. No time for fear.

It didn't take long to get him cleaned, stitched, and bandaged ... though my hands wouldn't stop trembling.

Afterward, I pulled the bottle of bourbon from the cupboard and poured us both a drink... my hands still unsteady, the weight of everything finally starting to crash down.

We both took a couple of swallows before looking at each other again.

I leaned over him, my breath catching as I gently pressed my lips to his.

I needed this... needed to feel his warmth, his strength, the steady pulse of his life beneath my hands.

I pulled away just enough to meet his eyes, my heart racing. But it was his arms that I wanted ... his arms around me, holding me, grounding me.

He hesitated for a moment... then his hand moved, fingers tracing along my back before pulling me closer.

His embrace wrapped around me with a force that made everything else fade away.

For a moment, there was just us.

The chaos outside, the danger, the wounds ... all of it pushed to the edges of my mind.

I needed this more than I was ready to admit.

## Chapter Six:

### The Group Gets Regrouped

My eyes flew open, and my breath caught in my throat. A form lay next to me in bed ... and it wasn't Aurora.

The fog of sleep thinned slowly, my mind clawing through the haze. Then it hit me.

Damien. Sweet, tender Damien.

The night. The intensity.

Everything rushed back in a flood that left me reeling.

I sighed ... a mix of relief and something tighter fluttering in my chest. But now wasn't the time to linger. I needed coffee. More than that, I needed to check on Damien's wounds.

Carefully, I pulled back the covers. The bandage over his side was stained through. I peeled it away gently, wincing at the damage.

Eight stitches ran across the wound, the skin around them pulled tight. It was already beginning to heal, but it was no surface scratch.

Damien shifted in his sleep, a soft groan escaping as the movement tugged at the stitches.

He woke with a wince, his face tightening before his eyes found mine.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, fingers hesitating near the wound, not quite sure whether to touch or stay back.

His gaze flicked from my eyes to the pain he was clearly trying to swallow.

“Like I got slashed,” he muttered, his voice rough with sleep. He shifted, trying to sit up, and grimaced.

“Fair,” I said dryly, leaning in to get a closer look.

“I’ll live.” He offered a small, tight smile. “Though I’m starting to think this whole ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ approach might need some reevaluation.”

I chuckled ... more out of habit than humor. The tension from last night hadn’t gone anywhere.

“Let me clean this up. Then I’ll make us some coffee,” I said, standing to grab the supplies.

He watched me for a beat, his eyes filled with thoughts I couldn’t quite read.

“You’re too good to me, Ana,” he said quietly.

I paused, then glanced over my shoulder.

“I’m doing what I have to ... so we both survive.”

His expression softened briefly, before a fresh pang of pain etched across his features. He eased himself back down.

“Rest,” I instructed, focused now on cleaning the wound with antiseptic. “I’ll handle the rest.”



But even as I worked, I couldn't shake the feeling that things were about to get much more complicated ... and not just because of the injury.

Once Damien was rebandaged and settled, I made my way to the kitchen. The familiar ritual ... the clink of the coffee pot, the scent of the coffee ... helped ground me. But it wasn't enough to stop the thoughts spinning in my mind.

What am I doing?

What was I thinking?

I poured two cups, my hands trembling despite the normalcy of the task.

This wasn't just first aid.

He wasn't just a protector.

Last night had shifted something ... and I couldn't deny it anymore.

"You're making coffee? That's the kind of service I can get behind."

His voice startled me. Damien limped into the kitchen, exaggeratedly favoring his side as he staggered toward the table.

I shot him a look, more irritation in it than I intended.

"What are you doing out of bed?" I scolded, setting his mug down harder than I meant. "You need rest. Don't be an idiot."

Damien smirked, wincing as he lowered himself into the chair.

"I'm not an idiot," he said with mock offense. "Just sore. Like I got hit by a truck."

He sipped the coffee and let out a soft sigh as the warmth spread through him.

I couldn't meet his eyes. Not yet. Too many questions. Too much uncertainty.

And whatever was growing between us wasn't making any of it easier.

"You're lucky to be alive," I muttered ... harsher than I meant, but true all the same.

"I know," he said, quieter now. His gaze found mine with a rare seriousness.

"But I'm still here, Ana. And as long as I am, you don't have to face this alone."

The sincerity in his voice cut through my defenses. Still, I trembled inside.

I turned back to the coffee pot, swallowing hard. "You didn't sign up for this," I said ... mostly to myself.

"Neither did you," he replied gently. His voice was closer now, just behind me. "But here we are."

Silence settled between us, thick and heavy.

"What happens now?" I asked, barely above a whisper.

Damien paused, choosing his words.

"We survive," he said finally. "And we keep moving. Together."

I nodded, but it was hollow.

"Do you think moving the RV to a different location would help?" I asked, half hoping for a yes, wanting a moment to breathe and let Damien heal.

"I don't know how they found us this time," Damien replied, his voice low and wary. "I'm not so sure moving is going to help. Besides, if we move now, how is Waddena going to find us?"

I hesitated. “Waddena can always find me. All she has to do is look for my...”

Damien’s eyes locked onto mine, waiting for me to finish my thought. “Look for what?” he finally asked, a trace of concern creeping into his voice.

I froze, the realization hitting me like a jolt. “I can’t believe I’ve been so blind... so stupid...” The words felt like a slap to my own face as I hurried into the bedroom, rifling through my suitcases.

“All she has to do is look for my electromagnetic signature,” I finally answered, pulling two Faraday scarves out of my suitcase, my hands a little shaky.

I walked back into the kitchen holding the scarves, my mind racing with the possibilities. This could be our ticket to some rest and recuperation ... something I desperately needed to believe. If Waddena could track my electromagnetic signature, then the Faraday scarves could shield us, give us a few precious hours of peace. It was a long shot, but right now, it was the only one we had.

I set the scarves on the table and turned to Damien, who was eyeing them curiously. His face was still pale from the wound, but he seemed more alert now, the fog from his pain starting to lift.

“I think this might work,” I said, my voice steady but with a thread of uncertainty. “If we wrap these around our heads, we might be able to hide from any scanners or trackers. Just long enough to get out of here and find some safety.”

Damien nodded, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. “It’s worth a try. How soon can we leave?”

“Soon as we can move the RV,” I said, glancing out the window. “But I need you to rest. I don’t want you pushing yourself again.”

He shot me a grin, but it was half-hearted. “I don’t exactly have the luxury of resting right now.”

“I know,” I said, swallowing hard. “But I can’t do this without you.”

There was a pause, a moment where the weight of everything hung between us. Then Damien slowly stood up, testing his balance before taking a careful step toward the scarves.

“I’ll help,” he said softly. “We’ll make it work.”

And for the first time in a long while, I allowed myself to believe that maybe, just maybe, we had a shot.

“We need a plan if we’re going to relocate.” He said, his voice laced with exhaustion, but there was a determination in his eyes that mirrored my own.

I sighed, my fingers tightening on the scarves in my hands as I felt the weight of the situation settle back in. “Our first plan is to get you a couple of days of rest before you pop a stitch.” I said, trying to keep my voice light despite the gravity of everything. “Let me at least get you some herbs to ease the pain and reduce some of that inflammation.”

I stepped closer to him, reaching out to put my arm gently around his waist. His body felt warm against mine, the press of his muscles reminding me that despite everything, he was still here. We moved slowly toward the bedroom, and I could feel the slight tremor in his steps, his body still healing from the wounds we’d both barely survived.

Once we were in the bedroom, I eased him down onto the bed, pulling the covers up to his waist. I could see the sharp edge of pain in his features, and it twisted something inside me. I hated seeing him like this, even though I knew he'd fight through it.

"Let me get the herbs," I said, voice softer now. "I'll mix something together that will help."

Damien nodded, his eyes closing briefly, as if the mere act of lying down was enough to make him want to surrender to exhaustion. I turned quickly to grab the herbs I kept in the small wooden cabinet I had set up for healing supplies. It felt almost normal ... caring for him like this, even amidst the chaos.

I gathered the herbs I knew would help with the pain and inflammation, and as I mixed them together, I couldn't help but glance back at him, his face half-hidden in the pillow. He was a fighter, but right now, he needed more than just his usual stubbornness. He needed rest. He needed ... me.

I made my way back to him, carefully placing the concoction in his hands. "Drink this," I said, "It'll help."

Damien hesitated but then looked up at me, a flicker of gratitude in his eyes. "Thanks, Ana," he murmured, his voice hoarse.

I nodded, trying to offer him a smile. "Just get some sleep, Damien. We'll take this one step at a time."

I stayed by his side, watching as he slowly drank the tea. The quiet between us wasn't uncomfortable, but it was heavy with everything we both knew had to come next.

When he finished, I took the cup from his hands, feeling the warmth radiating off of it as I stood up. "I'll be back to check on you in a little while," I said softly, my voice barely above a whisper.

I turned and walked toward the kitchen, the sound of my footsteps a soft rhythm in the otherwise still air. I didn't go far before I paused at the doorframe, my eyes lingering on him for just a moment.

He was already asleep, his face relaxed, the tension of the past few days finally starting to ease in his sleep. His breathing was steady, and for the first time since we'd met, there was a sense of peace about him. It was fleeting, but I cherished it.

I stayed there for a few seconds longer, my heart tightening as I fought the pull to stay at his side, to keep watch over him. But I knew he needed the rest, and I needed time to gather myself too.

I turned away and stepped into the kitchen, but the image of him resting in the bedroom, vulnerable yet strong, stayed with me. Something had shifted between us, something more than the danger we were facing. And I couldn't help but wonder what this would all mean when the dust finally settled.

As I washed the morning dishes, I felt a familiar crackle of electricity in the air. It was subtle at first, like the gentle hum of static before a storm, but unmistakable. My heart skipped a beat.

"I'm so glad you're back, Waddena!" I said aloud, my voice a mix of relief and gratitude. "Damien was injured when we came under attack. Is there anything you can do to help him?"

The air seemed to thicken for a moment, as if something was shifting around me. Then, I felt the familiar presence of Waddena, her energy wrapping around me like a comforting embrace. It wasn't a physical touch, but it had a presence that could never be ignored.

A soft voice, like a whisper carried on the wind, filled my mind. "I know. I felt it. I will help him, but you must first focus on yourself. You cannot help him if you are not strong."

I nodded, even though I knew she couldn't see me. "I know. I'll take care of myself. But right now, he needs healing."

"Rest, then," she urged, the crackle of electricity intensifying for a moment before it softened again. "His recovery is not only about the body, but the mind."

Her words resonated with me, but I couldn't shake the worry that lingered in my chest. Damien's injury, and the dangers we were still facing, made everything feel like it was hanging by a thread.

"Thank you, Waddena," I said quietly, my voice thick with emotion. "I'll stay with him. I'll make sure we both make it through this."

"You will. Trust in yourself, Ana."

With her words echoing in my mind, I finished washing the dishes, the weight of everything settling in my chest, but now there was a sense of purpose. We weren't alone in this.

After I finished the dishes, and as quietly as I could, I walked into the bedroom. Damien was still asleep, the steady rise and fall of his chest offering some small comfort. I checked the nightstand, the bandages I had

replaced earlier sat there, as if untouched. It seemed like such a small thing, but it was a reminder of everything that had happened.

I lifted the blanket gently, carefully inspecting his wounds. What I saw was nothing short of miraculous. The wounds that had once been ragged and raw were now almost completely healed. The stitches had dissolved, and there was no sign of swelling or redness. It was like the body had rewritten its own story, erasing the evidence of the battle it had fought.

But the blood loss... that was still there. The deep exhaustion in his face, the faint pallor that hadn't quite disappeared, told me everything I needed to know. Even if the physical wounds were healing faster than I could process, his body still had much to recover from.

I let him sleep, my fingers lingering on the edge of the blanket before I pulled it back into place. He needed rest. I needed to let him build his strength back up, even if I hated every second of feeling helpless.

I stepped out quietly and back into the kitchen, keeping my distance as I tried to find something to occupy my mind. But the tension never really left.

It wasn't until almost one in the afternoon when he finally staggered out of the bedroom for a second time. His movements were slow, unsteady, but there was a stubborn resolve in his eyes that reminded me why he had survived in the first place. The fact that he was up already wasn't a surprise, but I couldn't help the twinge of concern that tightened in my chest as he leaned against the doorframe for support.

"Damien," I said softly, though my tone was more of a scolding than concern. "You're supposed to be resting."



He gave a half-smile, looking more like himself than he had when he first woke up. "I'm not made of glass, Ana. I'll be fine. Just... a little shaky, that's all."

I didn't respond right away, just watching him carefully. It was clear the man before me had an immense capacity for stubbornness.

There was that subtle crackling of electricity in the air again ... Waddena had returned.

"Are you checking in on Damien again, Waddena?" I knew she cared about what happened to him, his injury due to protecting me.

"Of course I am." She chided scoldingly, but Her voice didn't really hide her concern.

"Waddena came by while you slept and worked some of her healing magic on your wound." I told Damien as I helped him sit in one of the recliners.

"I guess I should thank you Waddena." Damien said in a stubborn but almost playful tone.

Waddena's laughter was a light ripple in the air, like wind stirring leaves.

"You *will* thank me properly once you're on your feet again," she said, her voice teasing but touched with a quiet fondness.

I smiled as I adjusted the blanket over Damien's lap. He was pale, but there was a little more color to his cheeks now, a little more strength behind that stubborn glint in his eyes.

Damien chuckled lowly, the sound still rough with fatigue. "I'll add it to my growing list of debts," he said, flashing a crooked smile up at me.

"Good," I replied, squeezing his hand gently. "Just make sure you start paying them off by *resting* for once."

Waddena gave a soft hum of approval, the static charge of her presence fading slightly as if she were satisfied for now.

"So, how does a ghost manage to heal someone who is still alive?" Damien seemed actually curious.

"Because there not dead. Dead people don't need to be healed." Waddena was in full sprite mode now. She wasn't about to give him the correct answer.

Damien blinked, clearly thrown off by Waddena's cheeky reply. I had to stifle a laugh behind my hand.

"She's right, in her own... colorful way," I said, smiling as I sat down across from him. "Sprites aren't exactly spirits the way humans think of them. They exist between worlds, between energy states. Waddena can manipulate life force, the blueprint of the body, because she's still tied to the living frequency."

Damien leaned his head back against the recliner, closing his eyes for a moment. "So... she's like a living spark."

"Exactly," I said softly. "A very mischievous, very powerful spark."

Waddena gave a mock huff, but I could feel her warmth ripple through the room like a sunbeam.

"So ... where did you go to and why?" Damien asked Waddena sternly enough to let her know that it was time for business.

Waddena shifted, her energy flickering like the flame of a candle just before it bursts into full life. I could almost see her—small, a flicker of light in the corner of my vision. I wasn't sure if Damien could sense her as clearly as I could, but there was no mistaking the air around us buzzing with her presence.

"I went where I needed to," she replied, her voice light but edged with something more serious. "Sometimes, it's not about where you go—it's about what you need to bring back."

Damien raised an eyebrow, clearly not satisfied. "And what exactly did you bring back?"

Waddena's energy tightened, and for a second, I wondered if she might refuse to answer. Her playful demeanor always hid more than she let on.

"The answer isn't always so simple," she said finally, her voice softening, "but let's just say, I did what needed to be done. I wasn't the only one there, you know. We all have our roles to play."

Damien was silent for a beat, his eyes flicking over to me. "And you trust her?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes."

His gaze lingered, weighing me with a careful scrutiny. I could feel the tension in the room, the unspoken questions in the air, but I wasn't about to explain all of it.

Waddena's warmth radiated again, soothing the sharp edges of the moment. "Trust is a tricky thing," she murmured, "but you won't get far without it."

Thalis interrupted the moment with a clear tone, "Warning! Four electromagnetic signatures within a four mile radius and closing."

Thalis' warning cut through the air like a sharp blade, and the room froze. The hum of Waddena's energy stilled, her usual playful energy replaced by an edge of focus. I could feel the atmosphere change, thickening with the weight of impending danger.

"Four electromagnetic signatures," I repeated, my voice steady despite the sudden knot in my stomach. "What does that mean?"

Damien's eyes narrowed, and I could see the wheels turning behind them, calculating. "Government tech. They've been tracking you." He didn't sound surprised, but his body was tense, ready.

Waddena didn't seem as concerned, but the air around her shimmered subtly, an indication that she was preparing something. "They've been getting closer, haven't they?" she said, her tone light, almost casual, though I knew better. The calmness was the calm before the storm.

"They always get closer," Damien said with a wry smile, but the tension in his voice betrayed him. "And this time, we're not letting them win."

Thalis' voice broke through again, sharp and mechanical. "Closing in. One mile."

"Damien," I said, my voice low, "what do we do now?"

He stood up, his posture rigid, a man ready for a battle he didn't want but couldn't avoid. "We prepare," he said simply, his tone determined. "And we don't let them take you."

He walked past me and grabbed the .45 and the faser. I was right behind him, grabbing the two tasers.

I felt a chill pass through me at the weight of his words, though part of me knew it wasn't a matter of if they would attack, but when. The government had been trying to find me for so long, and this time, they were closing in faster than ever. My connection with Waddena, the things I'd done to defend myself, none of it had gone unnoticed.

"They're coming in hot," Damien said with resolve in his voice.

Waddena's energy pulsed, this time almost like a quiet heartbeat. She moved closer to me, her form shimmering faintly. "We'll deal with them. Together."

I looked up at her, feeling the weight of her promise, and I nodded.

"Together."

The world outside felt like it was closing in, and with it, the looming threat of the government. But as long as Waddena and Damien were by my side, I was ready to face whatever came next.

Thalis gave the final update. "One-quarter mile. Prepare for impact."

Damien's eyes locked on mine, and there was no fear there, only a deep, unwavering resolve. "Get ready."

Aurora yowled and hissed, the fur on the back of her neck stood up... they were here.

Without a word, Waddena's energy surged and then settled again, a flickering, ghostly presence manifesting around her. Shadows seemed to stretch and twist unnaturally, as if something—or *someone*—was standing

just beyond the edge of perception. A chill swept through the room, and I could feel the temperature drop.

Damien tensed, his eyes scanning the shadows, but I knew he couldn't see what Waddena had created. His gun hand tightened instinctively.

Waddena's lips quirked with a ghostly smile. "Let's see how they handle this," she murmured, and with a mere thought, she conjured the illusion.

The room shifted. The shadows in the corners of the room seemed to solidify into figures, flickering in and out of existence. Dark silhouettes of tall, looming figures, their faces obscured by the mist, began to gather just outside the windows. The faint sound of distant, eerie whispers began to fill the room ... like voices carried on the wind. They were *there*, but not quite, tangible but untouchable.

One of the figures, the largest, took a step toward the window, its movement jerky and unnatural. The others followed, closing in, their movements chaotic, shifting, flickering in and out like the static from a broken television.

Damien's eyes flicked to the window, his jaw tightening as he stepped closer to me, but he didn't speak. He knew better than to challenge Waddena's illusions.

The figures outside pressed closer, their whispers louder now, coiling into unintelligible sounds. Then came the *screech* ... a horrible, high-pitched wail, like the cry of something long dead. It seemed to vibrate the air itself.

The government operatives outside, whoever they were, must have felt it, because I saw the first signs of panic in their movements. I could sense

their confusion, the doubt creeping in. What were they really facing out there?

Waddena's voice floated through the tense silence. "They won't know what hit them."

The eerie figures continued to close in, their silhouettes dancing in and out of focus, distorting the view of the agents outside. The whispers rose to a crescendo, merging into a single, high-pitched screech. I could practically *feel* the terror creeping into the air.

Then, it happened.

One of the agents, his arm trembling as he raised his weapon, suddenly turned and ran, dropping his gun as he bolted for cover. His panic was contagious, spreading to the others who began scrambling, trying to make sense of the invisible threat looming around them. The figures outside grew more menacing, their forms solidifying for a split second before vanishing again into the mist.

Damien's hand tightened around the grip of his gun, but his eyes flicked to the window, his expression one of cautious disbelief. "What the hell...?" he muttered, watching as the operatives outside dropped to the ground in a frenzy, no longer focused on us but on the terrifying apparitions closing in on them.

Waddena's lips quirked into a mischievous smile as she watched the panic unfold. "I think they'll be looking over their shoulders for the rest of their careers," she said, her voice laced with dark humor.

I caught a glimpse of her energy flickering and shifting, the ghostly figures outside becoming even more vivid, their haunting wails filling the space. One of the figures took a step closer to an agent who had frozen in place, paralyzed by fear. The agent's eyes widened, his breath shallow as he stared at the *thing* ... the shadow that had become all too real.

Damien's eyes darted between Waddena and the chaotic scene outside. I could see the edge of his lips twitch, like he was fighting a smile. "I don't know whether to be impressed or terrified," he said, his voice low, as the agents continued to flee.

Waddena's laughter bubbled up, her ethereal form shimmering with amusement. It was the first time I'd heard her laugh like this, genuine, unrestrained, and full of that twisted fun she always seemed to hold just beneath the surface. "Oh, I'm enjoying this," she said between fits of laughter. "They'll never forget *this*."

Her joy was contagious, and I couldn't help but let out a quiet laugh of my own, though it was mostly nerves. The tension that had been hanging thick in the air suddenly felt lighter, despite the chaos unfolding outside.

Damien shook his head, but his eyes betrayed a reluctant appreciation. "I've never seen anyone play with their food quite like you."

Waddena's ethereal laugh was a clear response, but her voice was still smooth. "Sometimes, you have to remind people not to mess with the wrong thing."

I could feel her energy pulse with satisfaction as the last of the agents scrambled, desperately seeking shelter in the woods around the house, their confidence shattered.



“I think we’ve made our point,” Waddena said, her tone finally shifting back to something softer, though still tinged with amusement.

Damien took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “That was something else,” he said, and I could see him adjusting his stance, readying himself for whatever came next. But his smirk told me he was starting to respect what we were up against and maybe even enjoying the show.

I turned back to Waddena, who had returned to her more familiar playful demeanor, her shimmering form still flickering in the dim light. “You’re really something,” I said, half in awe.

She flashed a grin, her eyes twinkling. “You have no idea,” she replied, her voice full of secrets.

“Well, that was fun,” Damien sarcastically smirked.

“By the way, Damien ... when I got back home, I received a message to give to you from someone named Derrik ... who the hell is this guy?”

“Derrik? ... Derik? ... He’s my brother! What did he say?”

“No good news, I’m afraid ...” Waddena continued, her voice turning more serious. “He said the Magician put a bounty on not only Ana’s head, but yours as well. Oh, and he misses you and loves you.” She paused, savoring the dramatic effect. “It seems that the bounty on both of you is so high... that you’re now prime targets for every bounty hunter across multiple dimensions.”

Damien’s face tightened, his lips forming a thin line. “A bounty? That damn Magician...” His fists clenched, but his anger was controlled, quiet, simmering. “How long have they been targeting us?”

“Not sure. Derrik didn’t exactly give me an ETA, but from the way he was

talking, it sounds like they've been setting things up for a while," Waddena replied.

A knot tightened in my stomach, the weight of what was coming pressing down on me—bounty hunters from every corner, enemies who knew no boundaries.

Waddena floated closer, her ethereal presence radiating amusement. "Well, if they think they can come after us, they've got another thing coming. I love a good challenge." Her laughter echoed softly, like a melody. "Damien, you should be flattered. It seems your brother wants a piece of you too."

Damien shook his head. "Derrik's not the problem here. It's the Magician and all the other players pulling the strings. If they're targeting us, it's only going to get worse."

"And that's when we have to make sure they don't win," I added, meeting Damien's gaze, resolve in my voice. "We've got to be ready. For whatever this is going to bring."

Damien's eyes flickered with determination. "We will be."

I could feel Waddena's playful energy shift again, mixing with something darker, more intense. "This just turned into one hell of a party. Let's see what these bounty hunters have got, and show them we're not so easy to catch."

Damien nodded, his expression hardening as the reality of their new situation settled in. "Alright, Waddena. We're in this together. But if we're dealing with bounty hunters, we're going to need to up our game."

“Now that sounds like fun,” Waddena purred, her form shimmering with a dangerous glint. “Let’s make them regret ever hunting us.”

“First ...” A slight edge crept into Damien’s voice. “We need to get a message to Derrik. We need to know what else he knows. Waddena ...”

“Oh no. No, no, no, nope. I am *not* your personal messaging service,” Waddena pouted, crossing her arms in mock indignation.

Aurora jumped up on the counter top close to Waddena.

“Awe ... sweet Aurora.” Waddena’s voice instantly perked, the playful tone returning with a gleam of excitement in her ethereal form. She floated closer to where Aurora, the little tortoiseshell cat, had jumped up onto the windowsill, her fur still bristling with anxiety.

Aurora stared warily at the shimmering presence, her green eyes wide with suspicion. Waddena’s energy, however, seemed to soften as she leaned down toward the cat, her voice turning soothing. “Hey there, little one. No need to be afraid. You’re in good company.”

Aurora let out a hesitant meow, her tail flicking back and forth, but she didn’t move. Waddena’s laugh was light and melodic, ringing through the air like a soft chime. “I think she likes me,” she said, her form shimmering with the humor she carried so effortlessly.

Damien rolled his eyes, though the corner of his mouth twitched upward. “You have a way with animals, don’t you?”

“I can’t help it,” Waddena teased, her ethereal hands brushing through the air as if she were petting Aurora’s fur. “They can sense the good vibes. Unlike some people.”

Damien shot her a look, but there was a hint of a smile beneath his guarded expression. "Right," he muttered, turning his focus back on the task ahead. "Just don't let her get distracted, Waddena. We're dealing with bigger things right now."

But Waddena's laughter filled the room, mixing with the tension that had started to build again. "Don't worry, Damien. If it comes down to it, I'll protect the kitty too," she said, a glint of mischief in her voice. "But right now, let's deal with these bounty hunters. Aurora can handle herself."

Aurora let out another soft meow, her fur still standing on end, but her eyes softened just a little, the tension easing as she looked between Damien and Waddena. She might not have understood it all, but the bond in the room was undeniable.

## Chapter Seven:

### The Awakening

"I feel so defeated, we're not making any progress. We keep getting attacked like sitting ducks." The morning coffee didn't even help my weary attitude.

Damien just grunted in agreement, but I could tell his wheels were already in motion.

"What a couple of fuddy-duddies." Waddena chimed. "I've watched you two long enough. *BOR-RING!*"

"I'm open for ideas, little miss smart britches." Damien shot back.

Waddena got right in his face. "Look, you oversized baboon, you and Ana have natural talents ... abilities ... powers. Maybe it's time to hone your skills and put them in your arsenal. Stop thinking like hu-mans." She fluttered up to an invisible chair and slumped back into it.

Damien leaned back, regarding Waddena with narrowed eyes.

"You're saying we've been fighting with one hand tied behind our backs."

"More like two," she quipped, blowing a raspberry.

Ana stared into her coffee, the surface swirling. Was it her imagination, or was the liquid actually moving on its own?

"You already *know* what to do," Waddena said, softer now. "You just forgot. Time to *remember*."

Damien pushed away from the table, a light flashing behind his tired eyes.

"Fine," he said. "No more sitting ducks. No more playing defense."

He turned to me, offering his hand.

"Ready to find out what we can really do?"

I put my hand in his, steady and sure.

I felt something old and wild stir inside my chest.

"I know I am."

"About damn time!" Waddena touted.

I led Damien into the bedroom.

"Not quite what I was thinking... but I'm game," he said, a flash of determination turning into a gleam in his eye.

"Not that..." I quipped, tossing him a look over my shoulder. "This."

I pulled two the Faraday scarves from the suitcase, each one embroidered with sigils and embedded crystals.

Damien started to say something, but I placed a finger over his lips.

Without a word, I tied the first scarf around his head, then the second around mine.

"There," I finally spoke. "Now we're safe to speak. No one's listening."

"Off the radar," Damien said with a nod, confidence sliding into place.

"Yes, but they still know our location... we're going to have to move."

"Batten down the hatches!" Waddena crowed, practically vibrating with excitement.

Damien went outside to drain the tanks, and unplug us from the land, I started tying down everything in and on the cupboards. He got the truck hooked up to the RV just as I finished inside.

I grabbed Aurora and put her in the pet carrier. She yeowled in protest.

We joined Damien in the cab of the truck.

"Where to?" Damien awaited for a direction.

“Theres a clearing on BLM territory on the far side of the lake.”

“The Bureau of Land Management. Perfect ... we hide in the eye of the storm.”

The closer we are to danger, the further we are from harm.” I wasn’t sure if I had said that to reassure him, or myself.

We spent the rest of the day setting up our new campsite, camouflaging the RV, and lining the inside of the camper with aluminum foil.

Damien and I collapsed onto the sofa after eating a sandwich for supper, neither one of us had energy to cook.

I groaned and pulled the scarf off my head, but we were safely hidden visually, electromagnetically, and psychically.

“Dibs on the Shower.” Damian said without energy.

“Don’t make me hurt you, I’m too tired” I retorted equaling his lack of enthusiasm.

I didn’t say anything, just got up and staggered toward the bathroom, determined to claim the shower first.

“Oh, hell no,” Damien groaned, rallying what little strength he had. He staggered after me, each step sounding like a wounded elephant on crutches.

I smirked but kept moving. Victory was within reach.

*"Probability of Damien reaching the bathroom first is 87.6%, based on leg length and stride calculation. Conclusion: Victory is logically his."* Thalís deducted in his calm voice.

Damien cought up to me and began to reach for my arm.

Out of nowhere, Aurora shot across the floor like a tiny, furry missile. Before Damien could react, she latched onto his ankles with all four paws and the sheer force of a determined feline.

Damien stumbled, flailing for balance, a sound somewhere between a grunt and a squawk escaping his lips.

"Statistical anomaly detected!" Thalís announced, utterly deadpan from his corner of the room.

"Foul play!" Waddena screamed, bouncing in midair. "RED CARD! RED CARD! SHE'S CHEATING!"

I didn't even break stride. I slid right past Damien, threw him a wicked grin over my shoulder, and shut the bathroom door with a satisfying click.

Silence hung for a beat... then came the soft *thud* of Damien resting his forehead against the door.

"I was *this* close," he muttered, while Aurora still clung to his ankle like a tiny, purring anchor.

I was half asleep by the time Damien crawled into bed.

"You do realize you owe me big time for that shower race," he grumbled.

"Not only did I rightfully win, but I called dibs first."

I curled up under his arm and kissed his ribs close to his heart.

"No," he objected. "Sweet-talking me isn't going to work."

I kissed the next rib, and the next, moving slowly upward.

"Stop it! That's not going to work... maybe," he muttered, voice already faltering.

I smiled against his skin and kept going, trailing kisses up his neck until I



found his mouth.

Damien didn't speak after that.

Morning came, quiet and clear, the sun just peaking over the trees, a contrast to the whirlwind of thoughts racing through my mind.

Damien stood at the center of the clearing outside the RV, his brow furrowed as he mentally organized the training space. His military mind quickly took over, laying out a methodical plan for the day.

"We need to start with something solid. A basic perimeter, focus exercises, maybe some elemental work for you, Ana," he said, already mapping out the training schedule in his mind. "Then we can move into combat techniques later on."

I nodded, grateful for his clear direction. I needed structure, even if Waddena was bound to throw everything off at some point. I had already braced myself for it. Waddena didn't do "structure." She did chaos.

And sure enough, she was zipping around us, her voice echoing from all directions. "What are you doing, Damien? Let's try something *more fun*," she chirped, twirling in mid-air like a child on too much sugar.

Damien didn't even look up. "We're setting up for training, Waddena. Focus."

"Nooooooooo," she teased, flipping upside down and hovering right in front of him. "You need to start with something *energetic*."

"I didn't ..." Damien began, but Waddena was already floating further away.

Damien took a deep breath, his patience "We need to start with control, Waddena."

“Oh, control! Right. *That* will definitely get you anywhere,” Waddena said, flicking her wrist. “But *fun* will get you everywhere!”

She darted behind a nearby tree, only to reappear seconds later holding a large pinecone and a feather. “Let’s do a ritual! We need to channel energy with these. It’s much more effective if we’re having fun, don’t you think?”

Damien shot her a deadpan look, clearly done with this circus.

But Waddena wasn’t finished. With a flip of her hand, she made the feather float just out of Damien’s reach. “Catch it! Channel the energy through it! It’s all about the fun, Damien.”

Damien let out a frustrated sigh, rubbing his temples. “We can’t just throw things around and expect results. We need focus.”

“Well then start focusing big guy. Do you really think that our enemies are going to wait until you have everything perfectly set up?” she said, grinning from ear to ear. “You need to loosen up! Let go of all that *serious organization stuff*.”

Damien clenched his jaw. Taking a swipe at the feather. Waddena continuing to dangle it just out of reach.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” She was goading him ... and Damien fell into her trap.

Damien took another swipe ... then another. His temper was starting to flare.

Waddena just laughed making him more irritated. Soon, breathless from chasing the feather. Damien reached out his hand and the feather incinerated.

“Now that’s channelling!” Waddena chirpped with a big smile, holding out the pinecone, “Should we try the pinecone next?”

“Be thankful I can’t incinerate you.” Damien said breathlessly as he walked back to the project he was working on.

Damien wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, still breathing heavily from the chase. He shot Waddena a pointed look, his patience barely hanging on by a thread. “If you *really* want to test my limits, Waddena, try me with something else. Just not a feather.”

Waddena, undeterred by his frustration, gave a carefree shrug, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Oh, we’re just getting started! Trust me, you’ll learn something.” She then waved the pinecone in the air, as though it held some ancient secret. “Let’s try this.”

Damien stared at it for a long moment, then let out a long, exasperated sigh. He lifted his hand focused for a moment, then incinerated the pinecone. “At this point, I think we’re going to need to turn this whole thing upside down.”

“Oh!” Waddena perked up, beaming. “That’s the spirit!”

Damien rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the weight of the morning pressing down on him

“*Now* we’re talking,” Waddena exclaimed, zooming past him to grab something from the nearby trees. “The real fun is just about to start!”

Waddena zoomed back, her arms full of random objects, all of which seemed completely out of place for training. A tangle of vines. A jar of

glowing mushrooms. A perfectly smooth rock that looked like it belonged in a museum.

Damien raised an eyebrow. "What are you planning now?"

"Oh, nothing much," Waddena said with a grin, her voice laced with that familiar mischief. "Just thought we could use some *real* energy. Something... unpredictable."

Damien's eyes narrowed. "We're not using any more weird, glowing things, are we?"

Waddena barely heard him. She had already set up the jar of mushrooms in a circle on the ground, her movements quick and fluid. "It's all about balance, Damien. You can't just blast things into oblivion and hope it all works out. You need to *feel* it." She tossed a vine in his direction, but it unraveled mid-air and wrapped itself around his legs before he could react.

Damien sighed. "What's this supposed to teach me?"

Waddena paused, then looked at him seriously for the first time.

"Sometimes you've gotta embrace the mess. The unpredictability. Control's overrated. You've been trying to build a perfect system, but the truth is... life doesn't work like that. You need to *trust* yourself. Trust the chaos. And trust me ... it's gonna get wild."

Damien stared down at the vine that was now tangling around his boots. His patience was wearing thin, but Waddena's words struck a chord. There was a strange wisdom in her madness. He took a deep breath, feeling the tension in his muscles, then let it go.

For the first time, he didn't focus on the result. He simply allowed himself to *feel* the energy around him. The ground beneath him. The air. The unpredictable, chaotic force that Waddena seemed to draw from.

The vine uncoiled, slipping away from his feet. His eyes flicked to the mushrooms, and with a thought, he felt a surge of energy, low and humming, building at his core.

Waddena's grin widened, watching him closely. "That's the spirit."

I let out a long satisfied breath. This is going to work.

"Oh, don't worry Ana; your turn is coming up.

Damien flexed his fingers, feeling the subtle vibration of energy still buzzing under his skin. His eyes flicked to the cluster of mushrooms Waddena had so carefully placed nearby, and with a small, resigned sigh, he stepped toward them.

Waddena floated lazily in the air, twirling like a leaf in the breeze.

"Mushrooms are funny little things," she said, voice light. "They grow in decay. Out of the mess. They don't force it, they *become* it."

Damien crouched, studying the mushrooms with a soldier's scrutiny. Small, fragile, almost laughable in their simplicity. Yet... they held a quiet resilience.

Without overthinking it, he extended his hand toward them, not trying to control ... just *connecting*. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then a soft pulse answered him from the earth.

The mushrooms shifted, stretching taller, their caps widening like tiny umbrellas reaching for the sun.

Damien's brow furrowed in amazement.

"Well, look at you!" Waddena crowed, clapping her hands. "You're finally letting the energy move through you instead of beating it into submission."

He stood slowly, feeling a strange kind of exhilaration building inside. This was different. This was real.

"And now," Waddena said dramatically, floating backward and pointing to the last object: a large, weathered rock resting at the edge of the clearing. "The final boss."

Damien smirked despite himself. "Let me guess. Become one with the rock?"

Waddena grinned mischievously. "Oh no, darling. *Move* the rock without touching it. And not by blasting it into pieces either. Gently. Like a caress. A dance." She described it as she danced through the air.

He gave her a dry look but stepped toward the rock anyway. His military training screamed for hard action, force, speed, efficiency. But he shoved that instinct aside, reaching instead for the hum of energy he had felt with the mushrooms.

The rock seemed to pulse faintly, almost like a heartbeat.

Damien didn't push. He invited.

Slowly, the rock shuddered, shifting in the dirt with a low grinding sound. It slid forward an inch... then two.

Damien exhaled, stunned.

Waddena gave a dramatic bow in midair. “Ladies and gentlemen, the brute has found his soul!”

I covered my mouth to hide a smile. Damien shot me a warning look, but the corner of his mouth twitched. He wasn’t angry. Not really.

He turned back to Waddena, wiping his hands on his jeans.

“Alright, sprite. What’s next?”

Waddena’s grin was pure mischief. “Now... we see what Ana can do.”

“Oh crap,” I muttered under my breath, already dreading what she might have planned.

Damien chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest. “Don’t worry, Ana. If I survived it, you will too.”

I shot him a glare. Easy for him to say, he wasn’t the one Waddena liked turning into a human experiment.

Waddena spun around in midair, hands on her hips, surveying me like a general preparing a battle plan. “Alright, my dear Ana. You’re up! Time to show off those natural talents you keep hiding under all that modesty.”

I felt a nervous flutter in my chest. I wasn’t worried about the power, I was worried about *losing control* of it.

Waddena seemed to sense my hesitation. She floated closer, her expression softening. “Hey, you’ve got this. Just remember... don’t force it. Let it move through you. Trust the wild.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. The air around me felt different ... charged, like the moments before a thunderstorm.

Waddena clapped her hands once. "First test: Feel the ground. Make it dance."

I raised an eyebrow. "Make the ground... dance?"

Damien smirked. "You heard her."

Suppressing a sigh, I knelt down, pressing my palm to the earth. I closed my eyes, reaching with my mind, my heart, my entire being, into the soil beneath me.

At first, there was nothing ... just the cool, still earth. But then, like distant drums, I felt a rhythm. Slow, deep, steady.

Instead of commanding it, I joined it, letting my energy sync with the pulse of the earth.

The ground trembled faintly. Small stones jittered and shifted.

A nearby sapling swayed as if caught in a breeze, though the air was completely still.

Damien straightened, his casual stance giving way to alertness.

The rhythm grew stronger. A soft, subtle vibration, like a heartbeat shared between me and the land.

Waddena's eyes widened with delight. "That's it, Ana! Now... dance with it!"

I opened my eyes and smiled, feeling the power move like a river through me.

And for the first time, I wasn't afraid of it.

Waddena zipped around me in excited loops, her energy practically crackling in the air. "Ohhh, very nice, Ana! Earth to Ana: you are officially



not boring!” She did a little somersault midair, then grinned wickedly. “But *one heartbeat with the ground?* Pfft. Cute. Let’s turn up the volume.”

I barely had time to brace myself when she snapped her fingers.

The mushrooms near Damien *exploded* in a puff of sparkling spores, filling the clearing with a shimmering cloud. Damien immediately threw up a hand to shield his face, coughing.

“Really?” he growled, glaring at Waddena through the mist.

Waddena only cackled. “Relax, soldier boy. It’s just glitter fungus. Totally harmless. Probably.”

I wasn’t so sure. My skin tingled where the spores touched it. The energy in the clearing shifted, sharp, frenetic, like static crawling over my skin.

“New rule!” Waddena announced, clapping her hands. “Ana, you can’t *just* feel the ground anymore. You have to *move it* ... shape it ... like it’s Play-Doh, but, you know, alive!”

“Define ‘move it,’” I said cautiously, already feeling the earth hum louder under my palms.

Waddena grinned like a cat about to pounce. “You’ll know when you’re doing it right. Trust me. It’ll be obvious.”

Damien muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I focused again, this time pushing a little deeper, sending out a ripple of thought into the earth. Instead of trying to *control* it, I nudged it ... a suggestion, not a demand.

The ground responded. A small mound of dirt heaved up a few inches near my hand, like something under the surface was stretching and yawning.

Encouraged, I leaned into it.

Another ripple. Another heave.

Suddenly, a rock about the size of a watermelon *shot* out of the ground a few feet away, cartwheeling wildly through the air.

Damien hit the ground with a curse as it whizzed past his head and crashed into a tree with a loud *thud*.

I slapped both hands over my mouth. “Oh my God! Are you okay?!”

Damien, flat on the ground, slowly lifted his head. His hair was full of glitter spores. He gave me a flat look. “Peachy.”

Waddena was practically vibrating with glee. “That! THAT is what I’m talking about! You’re a *natural*, Ana! I mean, maybe a little homicidal, but it’s a great start!”

I buried my face in my hands, mortified.

Damien pushed himself up, brushing spores off his shoulders. “Maybe next time... warn a guy first?”

Waddena gave an innocent shrug. “Where’s the fun in that?”

I crouched beside the mushrooms, my fingers brushing the cool, damp earth. I wasn’t reaching for power, not forcing anything ... I simply *listened*. The ground beneath my hand gave a soft, steady pulse, like a heartbeat too old and too vast to belong to any one creature. The mushrooms shivered, their caps turning ever so slightly toward me, as if in recognition.

Then, without warning, they began to shift ... weaving together, forming a spiral pattern ancient and elegant, half-buried in the moss.

A low hum rose from the earth, so faint it might have been imagined, yet I felt it in my bones.

Damien stiffened beside me, the hair on his arms standing up. Even Waddena, for all her bravado, went still, her eyes wide and gleaming.

I withdrew my hand slowly, and the hum faded. The spiral remained, a silent mark on the forest floor, as if the earth had whispered back:

*"We remember you."*

It had been a long day and dinner was a welcomed event.

"I'll finish cleaning up the kitchen, you can go shower first." I offered to Damien.

"What's the catch?" He asked untrustfully.

"No catch, nothing personal, but ..." I brushed some of the glitter out of his hair with my fingers. "glitter isn't your best look."

He leaned forward and gave me a kiss, turning, he quietly walked to the bathroom.

I turned back to the stove, my thoughts drifting lazily as I stirred the pot. The soft clink of utensils and the steady hum of the fridge filled the silence, a welcome break from the chaos of the day.

It wasn't long before Damien's voice filtered in from the bathroom, muffled but unmistakable. "You know, you've got a point," he called out, as if speaking to the bathroom mirror. "The glitter is kind of... well, everywhere." I could practically hear the amusement in his voice.

I shook my head, a grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. “If you think that’s bad, wait until you try taking a shower with pine needles stuck in your hair.”

“Good to know,” Damien replied, his voice carrying a note of playful sarcasm. “I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

The shower turned on, and the soft rush of water became the soundtrack to my thoughts. I focused on the warm, steady rhythm of the evening, enjoying the calm that had settled over us. The forest outside rustled gently, and for once, the world seemed to quiet.

After a few minutes, I finished cleaning up and placed the last dish in the drying rack. Damien’s footsteps soon echoed in the hall, and I turned just in time to see him emerging from the bathroom, his damp hair falling in messy waves.

“Better?” I asked, with a raised eyebrow, taking in his more relaxed appearance.

He ran a hand through his hair, sending a few stray droplets flying. “Much. You should try it sometime.” He grinned. “You know, not the glitter, but the whole ‘relaxed’ thing.”

I gave him a playful roll of my eyes. “Relaxed, huh? We’ll see how long that lasts with Waddena around.”

His grin softened, and for a moment, there was nothing but the shared silence between us, comfortable and easy. He took a step closer, eyes still lingering on mine.

“Thank you,” he murmured quietly, his voice serious now. “For everything. For being here with me.”

I didn’t say anything at first. I didn’t need to. My hand found his, our fingers threading together naturally. With a quiet nod, I squeezed his hand gently, letting the words hang between us. There were no more distractions tonight.

## Chapter Eight:

### The Tables Turn

For the next month, we sat safely in the RV, training by day and sleeping peacefully at night. Well hidden from the worlds and entities that hunted us.

“I think we need to make a plan to capture the Magician,” Damien said casually over coffee, like he was suggesting a hike instead of an ambush.

“What about our training?” A knot tightened in my stomach, and it wasn’t from breakfast.

“We know enough to get the job done.” Damien looked at me with a steady confidence, like he knew something I didn’t.

“I wish I had your confidence,” I muttered, my voice catching despite myself.

“We can’t train forever. We need a plan.” His tone was insistent now, leaving little room for argument.

I sighed. “Let’s start small then.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s target a bounty hunter first. Maybe we can get some information out of him on what the Magician’s been up to.”

I hoped the suggestion would curb his appetite for chaos, at least long enough to field-test our newfound abilities.

Damien gave a slow nod. “Fair enough. One less bounty hunter off our backs would be a good thing.”

“How should we go about doing this?” I was almost frightened of my own question.

“We bring them to our turff and set a trap.” Damien said with a thoughtful look.

“What kind of trap?”

“An illusion set by Waddna.”

“Did someone call?” Waddena crackled into view, stretching and yawning like she had been asleep or something.

“I was thinkin of setting up an illusion that uses us for bait ...” Damien began.

“Oh no, I already hate this plan.” I spat.

“Hear me out.” Damien had something in mind. “Like I was saying, Waddena creates an illusion of the RV with our signatures in it. We will be waiting in the treeline nearby wearing the Faraday scarves. Then when the bounty hunters show up we can ambush them.”

“Ooooo ... sneaky ... Ilke it!” Waddena chirped.

“I don’t know about this.” I could feel the knot forming in my stomach.

“Come on Ana.” Damien pleaded. “We need to get our feet wet in a fight ... you yourself wanted to start small. We could use the intel we get from the bounty hunter.”

“Do we get to torture him?” Waddena asked with a gleam in her eyes.

I shot her a look of disapproval.

Damien just looked at Waddena with a little smirk of approval, then turned his gaze back to me. “This is our safest shot.”

“Come on Ana, don’t be such a stick in the mud.” Waddena said resting her elbows on Damien’s shoulder and her chin in her hands.

“Great .. now you both are ganging up on me ... ok, I’m in.” I felt reluctant but knew Damien made a good point. “So, where do we start?”

“YIPPY!” Waddena squiled with excitement, twirling in mid-air.

“Ana ... it’s time to return to your family cabin.”

Damien and I pulled up in his truck to the clearing outside the cabin. “Poor thing. When we’re done with the Magician, I would like to fix this place back up.”

“I wouldn’t mind that at all” Damien replied. He looked at the delapidated structure planning what he might do.

A crackle of electricity in the air told me Waddena was here, “Good, let’s get this over with.” I said eager to be at peace instead of pieces.

Damien sensed my anguish and slid his arm around my waist. “Everything is going to be fine.” Kissing my forehead and holding me a moment for reassurance.

“Ok you two, let’s get this show on the road ... or at least the clearing.” Said Waddena as she clapped her hands and a replica of the RV materialized.

“Hold up now.” Damien said holding up his hand. “We need to get the traps set before you put our signatures in the RV.”

Damien and I got to work setting up electromagnetic containment grids at various places around the RV.

After running the trigger wire back to the tree line, we hid the wire under some dried leaves and pine needles. And crouched down low behind some trees.

“Hold onto your socks ... it’s going to get fun.” Waddena said as she clapped her hands at likenesses of Damien and I appeared inside the RV.

“It’s almost creepy how easily she does that.” Damien whispered.



“Shhh.” I scolded quietly.

We waited... and waited...

“Are you sure those are the right signatures inside the RV?” Damien torted in a low voice. He was growing impatient.

Waddena crossed her arms and let out a “Humph!”

“We should have brought Thalís on the laptop,” I snipped quietly.

“Well, I can’t think of everything,” argued Damien, still trying to be quiet.

Suddenly, Waddena turned into a miniature tornado and reappeared as my laptop. In Thalís’ calm voice, she said, “Three electromagnetic signatures approaching. ETA: three minutes.”

Then, in a voice that could only be Waddena’s, the laptop added, “This is going to get interesting.”

Damien and I crouched a little lower... then came the rustle of leaves and bushes... from *behind* us!

We rolled under the nearest bushes and wound up opposite each other.

The rustling grew louder. Damien’s eyes snapped to mine, his hand inching toward the trigger wire. I nodded silently.

Then ... *crack!* A twig snapped.

From the shadows behind us, three figures emerged, moving with eerie precision. One ducked low, scanning with what looked like a handheld tracker. The other two flanked wide, plasma rifles slung over their shoulders.

“They circled behind,” I directed to Damien’s mind, my pulse pounding in my ears.

“Do we spring it now?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he responded.

Waddena, still in her laptop guise, interjected to both of us, *“Let them think they’ve got the jump. Patience, children...”*

They were standing close to the RV now ... close to the traps.

The lead bounty hunter raised a fist and the others stopped. He tilted his head, like he was sniffing the air ... no, *sensing* something.

“This place reeks of illusion,” he muttered.

Damien’s fingers trembled over the trigger. The hunter took one step closer.

And that’s when Waddena struck.

The illusion of the RV exploded into a surge of light and sound. Holographic flames licked upward as the fake Damien and Ana turned their heads in perfect, eerie synchronization.

“What the hell ... ?” the lead hunter shouted.

“Now!” Damien slammed the trigger.

The containment grids snapped to life with a hiss of magnetic fury, forming an electromagnetic net around two of the intruders. Sparks flew, equipment fried, and the trackers in their hands went dark. One bounty hunter screamed, yanking a melted scanner from his glove.

I burst from the underbrush, psionic energy pulsing in my palms. Damien flanked right, barreling into the nearest hunter with brutal efficiency. He dropped the man with a punch to the solar plexus and a swift knee to the chin.

The second tried to run ... *bad move*.

Waddena, now fully elemental, swirled upward like a sentient lightning storm.

“And *where* do you think *you’re* going?” she cackled, unleashing a bolt of crackling energy that locked the runner’s legs mid-stride, dropping him flat.

That left one.

He lunged at me with a blade that shimmered like liquid obsidian.

I raised my hand, instinct guiding me. A shimmering psionic shield erupted just in time, deflecting the blade with a *clang* like metal on glass. With my other hand, I blasted him backward ... he slammed into the containment grid and dropped like a sack of potatoes.

Silence fell, broken only by the sizzle of scorched tech.

Damien wiped sweat from his brow, grinning. “Told you everything was going to be fine.”

I shot him a look of disapproval.

“Who are we torturing first?” Waddena asked, bouncing up and down mid-air like a child skipping rope.

Damien shot her a glare. “You *knew* they were flanking us and didn’t tell us?”

“Where would the fun be in *that*?” she quipped.

Waddena got all three bounty hunters bound in electromagnetic ties and Damien sat them down in the middle of the clearing.

“Gentlemen ... time for some answers,” Damien commanded.

“Go rot!” the leader of the three retorted. “We aint telling you anything!”

“Oh, now gentlemen, your cooperation would be so appreciated ... by your families back home ... Waddena!” Damian called with a mischievous smirk.

“Oh! Goody, goody, goody! Which one do I torture first.” Waddena was almost salivating at the opportunity.

I stood in the background and tried not to interfere. Waddena hovered in front of the bounty hunters, her eyes glowing with manic delight. She pointed at the one on the left, a wiry man with a scar that bisected his eyebrow. “You. You look like you scream interestingly.”

He stiffened, defiant. “Do your worst, witch.”

“Oh honey,” she purred, swirling a tiny stormcloud around his head, “*worst* is such a relative term.”

Damien turned to me. “You sure you’re okay with this?”

I met his eyes, uncertain. “I know we need the information ... as much as I don’t like it ... I’m not going to stop you.”

The stormcloud over the man’s head popped with a miniature lightning strike. He shrieked and convulsed, his body jerking against the electromagnetic restraints.

“Talk!” Damien barked. “Why were you tracking *us*?”

I looked at Damien, exchanging a silent conversation through a glance. His jaw tightened, and his eyes scanned the three men, his mind already calculating their next move.

Waddena stepped forward, a playful glint in her eyes despite the danger. “So, who’s next? The game’s just getting started.”

I held up a hand. “Wait. Let’s get to the point.”

The man in the center, who had been quiet since the interrogation started, finally spoke, his voice shaky. “We only follow orders. Coordinates, targets, threats. That’s it. we don’t know anything more.” The man on his right nodding with widened eyes.

Damien’s voice was sharp. “How much for the target?”

The man didn’t flinch, his eyes darting around. “\$300,000 for the both of you unharmed. That’s the standard for special assignments.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Unharmed? That’s high.”

“More than a typical contract hit. This is different,” Damien added, the gears in his mind clicking together. “This isn’t just a bounty. Someone big is involved.”

I crossed my arms, thinking fast. “And we’re the target. Given that all three are men instead of interdimensional beings, I’m guessing government.”

The man hesitated. “They said you were unpredictable. That you could... manipulate things, control perception. Dangerous.”

I stood tall, the weight of those words settling like stones in my chest. “They’re afraid of us.”

Damien nodded, stepping closer. “They know me ... but they don’t understand you. They don’t want to. They just want control.”

Waddena’s tone shifted, becoming more serious. “So what’s next? We’ve got three guys with a price tag on your head. And it’s not small.”

I stared at the family cabin in the distance, the illusion still flickering faintly around it. “Now, we make sure they know they’re not dealing with people who run. They came for us. Now we’ll show them how wrong they are.”

Damien’s gaze hardened. “They’ve underestimated all of us.”

I nodded, the decision clear. “They want a fight? They’ll get one. But they’re going to regret it.” I felt something I wasn’t used to ... anger.

Waddena’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “And I’ve got just the way to send them a message. Ten minutes, and I’ll make sure their comms are fried.”

Something wasn’t sitting right. I felt it in the pit of my stomach. Damien sensed it, too.

“Ana, let’s pack up,” he said softly. “These guys don’t have the information we need. We can let them go.”

“Let them go? What a bummer.” Waddena crossed her arms, pouting.

We loaded up the truck and pulled onto the gravel drive. In the rearview mirror, I watched as Waddena clapped her hands to release the men—and then vanished.

The drive back to the RV was quiet. I didn't know what to say, how to act. Why would the government come after Damien when they already had him practically captive in the military?

*They know me...* he had said.

Damien turned left unexpectedly, pulling off the road and stopping in front of the lake. The sun had set, and the full moon shimmered across the still surface of the water. He took my hand, his eyes misty.

"I know what you're thinking, Ana." His voice was low, pensive. "Please—just let me finish. I want you to hear the whole story."

I nodded, and he gave my hand a gentle squeeze. His gaze was distant, fixed on the lake.

"You were right not to trust me in the beginning," he began, voice trembling. "My orders were to become your handler. To get close. To turn you—to convince you to work with the government."

Tears welled in my eyes.

"Please, please... hear me out." His voice broke.

I nodded again, but the tears were already slipping down my cheeks.

"That night at the bar, when you were summoned before the Senate and forced into that contract ... it felt like a miracle had dropped into my lap. A common enemy: The Magician. If I could help catch him and bring him before the Senate ... it was my ticket home. I wouldn't be stuck in this world anymore."

He turned to me, his expression raw.

“But then... I never planned ... I... I fell in love with you ... Ana, I love you.”

“I love you too...” my words getting stuck in my mouth. “Promise me ... no more secrets.”

Damien pulled me close ... his kiss loving, tender.

It was at least an hour of just lingering in front of the lake, holding each other close, not really saying anything ... just being there ...together.

“WHERE have you two been!?” Waddena shrieked, practically vibrating with fury. Her usually soft pink hue was now nearly crimson.

“Calm down, firefly. We stopped by the lake,” Damien replied smoothly.

“You were wearing those *stupid* scarves!” she snapped, wings flaring. “I couldn’t find you—*Thalis* couldn’t find you! You could’ve been captured and I’d have *never* known!”

“Good point, Waddena. We’ll be mindful of that from now on... won’t we, Damien?” I shot him a pleading look, trying to calm her down.

“Yes... yes, of course. Absolutely,” he said quickly, doing his best to sound reassuring.

Aurora padded up, rubbing against my legs, purring loudly ... happy I was home. I scooped her into my arms, cuddling her close, scratching behind her ears and kissing the top of her head.

Thalis chimed in, his voice cool and matter-of-fact. “The probability of your capture was low. Statistical modeling indicates a 3.7% risk, factoring in the EMF-blocking properties of your scarves and the inability of technology to lock onto your bio-electromagnetic signatures.”



“See?” Damien grinned. “Perfectly safe.”

“Humph!” Waddena huffed, arms still crossed.

“I think letting the bounty hunters go was the right call,” Damien added, trying to steer things in a new direction. “The government should know by now we’re not such an easy catch.”

Waddena giggled, a little sparkle returning to her eyes. “Oh, they *probably* don’t know that yet.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What did you do, Waddena?”

“I didn’t do anything *to them*,” she said innocently. “Now... their *van* is another story. They’re probably still walking.”

Damien burst out laughing.

Sleep was a welcomed retreat, I was physically, energetically, and emotionally exhausted. And morning came too fast.

Damien was up before I was, coffee was made and he whistled while he cooked breakfast.

I grabbed a mug of coffee and sat down at the table.

Damien brought over two plates of beautiful southwestern omelettes, then grabbed his coffee off the counter, kissed the top of my head, and sat down.

“You are in a great mood this morning,” I said, half-laughing, half-wary.

Damien smiled, softer than I’d ever seen. “I’m the happiest man in the world this morning. A woman who loves me as much as I love her. A

beautiful mountain lake. A safe haven.” He squeezed my hand across the table. “I look forward to mornings of true freedom.”

Something tightened in my chest. The way he said “true freedom”, like it was this fragile thing we might actually have a shot at.

Was that even possible? A life without running. Without targets on our backs.

His optimism was contagious... I wanted to believe him. I really did. I returned his smile, gazing into his hopeful eyes. We did love each other, and somehow... some way... we’d make it work.

“Good morning, you two lovebirds. What’s on the agenda today? Illusions... explosions... more torture?” Waddena crackled into form.

“Way to kill a moment, firefly,” Damien muttered, clearly not in the mood for chaos today.

“Stop calling me firefly, I am not a bug!” Waddena huffed.

“Wanna bet?” Damien snatched up a fly swatter and took a swing.

Of course, it passed right through her. Waddena burst out laughing.

“Oh sure, laugh it up. At least I feel better,” Damien said, almost playfully.

I just laughed.

“Okay, you two ... enough bantering this morning,” I cut in. “We need a plan for the Magician if we’re ever going to catch him.”

“He’s the key to eighty percent of our problems,” Damien said, instantly shifting gears. “The Senate contract, the bounty hunters ... he’s our number one target.”

“The trap worked great! The shocked look on their faces...” Waddena giggled gleefully.

“It *would* have worked great if we’d known we were getting flanked!” Damien snapped, still irritated.

“Enemies should never be underestimated,” Waddena said, smug.  
“Prepare for chaos and you’ll never be caught off guard by it.”

Damien went quiet. He couldn’t argue with that logic, though he deeply wanted to.

“Should we try another trap?” I asked.

“The Magician isn’t going to show up here again. We’re going to have to take the battle to him.”

“Oh no. That won’t work,” I said quickly. “He lives in a fortress. I used to work for him, remember?”

“Hold on...” Damien’s eyes lit up. “Ana, did you and the other workers have access to his estate?”

“Certain parts... yes.” I wasn’t sure I liked where this was going.

“Would you draw me a layout of his estate?”

“You know what? I will. Just to show you what a fortress this place is.” If he wanted proof it was a suicide mission, he’d get it. I sat down with pencil and paper and got to work.

“Waddena...” Damien turned to her, hopeful.

“I was only enslaved by him, so don’t look at me for guidance,” she said, waving him off dismissively.

“Yes, which means you know a different part of his estate.”

“Slaves didn’t get access to the house, we were kept in a separate building, away from it,” she snapped.

“Perfect,” Damien said, undeterred. “Then you can draw a map of the grounds. The building *and* the house.”

“Ana’s right ... this is nuts!”

“Waddena... backing away from a challenge?” Damien arched a brow. “I never took you to be afraid of anything.”

“Afraid?” she huffed. “I’m not scared of that oversized, self-absorbed *slave driver!*”

She snatched the pencil and paper from his hands and got to work with a vengeance.

Damien leaned back, wearing a very satisfied smile.

“Well?” I finally asked, after he’d stared at the two drawings for what felt like forever.

“Well...” he began slowly, “I have to agree ... a full frontal assault would be suicidal.”

I let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Told you so,” Waddena sang, smug.

“So,” Damien continued, his voice sharpening with resolve, “we’re going to have to try something a little more... covert.”

He sounded far too confident for my liking.

“Let’s get strategic.” He jumped to his feet and began pacing like a general addressing his troops before battle. “What keeps his workers loyal to him?”

“Money and threats to their families,” I said, thinking of my captured crew.

“There’s no real loyalty ... just obligations.”

“Even better than I expected.” Damien’s eyes lit up, he was in his element now. “And the bounty hunters? Just in it for the money. So, let’s break down his infrastructure. Ana, what happens to the money you collect from the merchandise you deliver?”

“We take it to the cash house. That’s where the ledgers are kept... and his vault.”

Damien snatched up Waddena’s drawing of the grounds. “Where’s the cash house? Show me.”

He handed me a pencil.

I studied the map, tracing the layout from memory. “It would be right here.” I marked a square on the paper.

“If you’re thinking of stealing his money, that’s even crazier than attacking him on his estate,” I protested.

“Oh, we’re not stealing his money...” Damien grinned wickedly, then lowered his voice. “We’re blowing it up.”

“YES!!!!” Waddena shrieked, flipping into somersaults like a kid at a birthday party.

“Waddena... you’re going to love this next part just as much.”

“I swear, the two of you are blood-related,” I muttered, shaking my head.

Damien shot me a sober look. Waddena just laughed.

“But before we hit the money,” Damien continued, “we strike the bounty hunters ... hard. Break their morale, then take out the cash. Shatter any reason they had to hunt us. And after that, we hit the warehouses.”

He looked at both of us, fire in his eyes. “We create so much chaos and damage, The Magician himself will come to us. We’re going to make this personal.”

“YES! YES! WHOOT... WHOOT!” Waddena danced with so much excitement, I thought she might actually faint.

“This sounds doable. So whats the plan of attack when we finally get The Magician out of his lair?” I was almost excited at the thought of the Senate contract finally being filled.

Damien looked at me ... his smile faded and the fire dimmed in his eyes.

“This is the part you’re rally *not* going to like ... We lure him into a trap.”

“Lure him how?”

“...Bait...” Damien was reluctant to answer.

“What bait?” A knot started to form in my stomach.

“... Us.”

## Chapter Nine:

### Initiating the Plan

Damien knew the location of the nearest portal, he'd used it before. Being from another dimension gave him an edge; he not only knew *where* they were but *how* to activate them. A quick drive, a few murmured words, and a shimmer in the air had taken us across.

Now, the dim glow of neon signs bled into cobbled streets as we stepped into the first tavern, one of five mapped by Waddena's contacts. Smoke coiled in lazy spirals over leather-clad patrons and mercs nursing bruises and vendettas. Damien took the lead, already halfway into his first drink and charming a bruiser with a scar that spelled "trouble." I drifted toward the back, scanning for bounty tattoos or currency slips, small tells of those on someone else's leash. We needed to know where these bounty hunters had their shops and what their hours of operation were. It was time to gather intel at the local pubs.

Damien leaned in, his low voice cutting through the haze of chatter. His charm was effortless, coaxing loose words from a man already softened by drink. Meanwhile, I caught sight of a familiar tattoo ... one I'd seen on a bounty hunter before ... and quietly drifted toward the corner.

Waddena's presence was invisible, merged with the shadows at a pub across the district. She was gathering whispers, tracking names, and marking locations, all without anyone being the wiser. Her stealth let her move faster than either me or Damien.

As I listened to the soft voices and low murmurs of the conversations around me, trying to catch fragments of useful intel, Damien's voice cut through the fog of noise and thought.

"Ready to move to another location?" he asked, already on his feet, the last sip of his drink lingering on his breath.

I gave the room one last glance, no sudden movements, no whispers out of place ... then nodded. "Yeah. Let's see what the next den of snakes has to offer."

After three pubs and as many drinks, I was feeling the effects, head buzzing, limbs looser than I liked. I leaned back against the wall outside the last tavern and exhaled.

"Let's call it a night," I muttered, rubbing my temple, "before a monstrous hangover claims my entire day tomorrow."

Damien chuckled, his steps steady despite the drinks. "Lightweight."

"Strategic thinker," I corrected, waving him off as we made our way toward the alley where we'd entered this seedy part of the city. The real work would come after rest, and decoding what we'd gathered tonight.



The next morning, Damien was up before me and made coffee. “What a cheap date you turned out to be,” he chuckled, setting a steaming mug on the table.

I half-smiled, squinting against the morning light as I wrapped my fingers around the cup. The dull ache of a near-missed hangover scrambled my thoughts. “Next time, you’re drinking what I drink.”

“That’s assuming there’s a next time,” he teased, sitting down on the bench across from me with a grin.

“Was last night as productive for you two?” Waddena asked as she crackled into view, her form shimmering like heat off pavement. “Yikes... time for some eyedrops, Ana.”

Damien chuckled.

“Not funny, you two,” I protested, rubbing my temples and blinking at the harsh morning light. “My eyes feel like sandpaper wrapped in regret.”

“Okay, Waddena, let’s give Ana a little extra time this morning. What did you uncover?” Damien asked, his tone laced with mock patience but real kindness.

I gave him a grateful glance over my coffee cup, still half-curved around its warmth like it might ward off the weight behind my eyes.

Waddena’s image flickered more solidly, the smirk audible in her voice.

“Plenty. Five bounty hunters, three clustered close, two posted near the wharf and some big warehouse stacks. Prime real estate if you ask me. Oh, and one very sloppy warehouse guard who doesn’t know how to zip his mouth... or his fly. Not that there was much to show anyway.”

“Who owns the warehouses? Did you get a name?” I asked, unfamiliar with that side of the city.

Waddena didn’t miss a beat. “The Magician.”

“Now that’s convenient. We can take out their gyms *and* a couple of warehouses at the same time,” Damien said, a familiar spark dancing in his eyes.

“This is going to be so fun!” Waddena giggled, practically vibrating with glee.

“Now let’s combine Waddena’s intel with what we found out, Ana,” Damien said, sliding into full tactical mode, the spark in his eyes replaced by calculation.

After another couple of hours cross-referencing names, routes, and schedules, Damien laid out the plan.

“We have our primary and secondary targets to consider,” he began. “Our *primary* targets are the bounty hunters stationed *away* from the wharf. We can’t risk tipping off the warehouses yet. So, the two gyms by the docks ... those will wait until we’re ready to hit the warehouses. That timing has to be flawless.”

“We are going to need to pace this out a little, hit a few targets wait a day for word to spread, then hit the rest. Immediately take out the cash house The Magician owns and leave the bounty hunters penniless. Once the bounty hunters are off our backs, we can target the last two bounty hunters and the warehouses.”

“Let’s start with the two trading post and the one fight club nearby in the upper part of the city first. We can wait a day and then hit the safehouse on the east side, and The Magicians cash house. The next day we hit the last two gyms and the two warehouses on the wharf. We can then hit The Magicians main warehouse in the warehouse district last.

“The fight club is empty mid-afternoon ... so we hit that first. Then that night, when they’re closed, we will hit the trading posts.” Damien said, voice sharp with command. “Waddena ... we’re going to need distractions to pull the gaurds out of the way.”

“Yes sir!” Waddena snaps a salute.

Damien started making the bombs while I gathered wires and pulled the spare car battery from the RV’s understorage.

A vision flashed in front of me as I was outside, lifting the battery. I froze. I was afraid to shut my eyes—I didn’t want to know if it was something bad.

When I got back inside the RV, Damien looked up sharply.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, brow furrowed.

“A vision,” I said, trying not to sound alarmed.

“What was it about?” His voice was laced with concern.

“I don’t know. I’m afraid to shut my eyes.”

“Come here.” He set down his tools and guided me to one of the recliners, motioning for Waddena to take the equipment I was holding. “Now take a deep breath, close your eyes, and tell me what you see.”

I shut my eyes as Damien held my hand. “I see a warehouse... there are workers inside... we don’t know they’re there... there’s an explosion—oh my God. We just killed everyone in there. I think I’m going to be sick!”

“It’s okay... it’s okay... take a deep breath. We haven’t blown anything up yet,” Damien said, trying to reassure me. He turned to Waddena. “We’re sending you in first to make sure there are no workers inside.”

“Understood,” Waddena said, her expression suddenly serious ... one of the rare times she dropped the mischief.

Damien looked at me with gentleness. “Are you going to be okay?”

“We just need to be careful around those warehouses,” I said, steadying my voice as best I could.

We arrived on a vibrant street teeming with entities from a dozen different dimensions. Quickening our pace, we ducked into an alley and slipped around the back of the fight club. The last few stragglers were just leaving.

As Damien and I crouched behind a stack of trash bins, Waddena blinked into the building for a moment and reappeared. “Only the guard posted outside,” she reported.

Damien scanned the area, calculating. “There are more people on this street than I anticipated. We’ll have to scare them off and distract the guard.”

“Right... give me a minute,” I said, already unzipping my pack. “I’ll handle the guard. Waddena, you run interference—make them see something terrifying. Damien, be ready with the detonator.”

I slipped into the sleek, sexy evening dress I'd packed just for this occasion.

Damien muttered under his breath, "If he touches you, I swear I'm tossing his ass back into the building before I blow it up."

I smirked, adjusting the strap. "Relax, soldier. He won't get the chance."

Waddena raised an eyebrow. "Want me to give him warts just in case?"

"Just get that bomb placed and ready. I don't want him touching me either," I half-whispered over my shoulder.

I sauntered up the sidewalk, adding an extra sway to my hips. *Okay, Ana*, I thought, giving myself a silent pep talk, *you can do this*. I threw the guard a wink and a slow smile as I let my dress strap slip suggestively off my shoulder.

It worked better than magic.

The guard peeled himself off the wall and followed me down a nearby alley, eyes locked on me like I was made of honey and starlight. I sent Damien a message: *Get in there and plant that bomb*.

"Mmmm ... and what's your name, handsome?" I asked in a sultry tone, drawing him in.

"They call me Dragon."

I had to wonder if that had something to do with his breath.

I slid my arm up around his neck and pressed my body into his. *Hurry up, Damien*, I messaged telepathically.

Dragon wasn't bad-looking for a Nord, but I could already tell—his arrogance would be his downfall.

He grinned as he slipped his arms around my waist.

That's when it happened—a bloodcurdling screech tore through the air. People screamed and scattered from around the warehouse.

Dragon tensed and started to turn toward the sound. I surged an electromagnetic pulse through my hand and zapped him hard.

He crumpled to the ground just as the explosion shook the street.

I slipped back through the chaos and made my way to the rendezvous point, a rooftop overlooking the alley where our portal was hidden. Damien and Waddena were already there, crouched low behind a rusted air duct.

We watched as panic rippled through the street below. Smoke curled into the afternoon sky, alarms blared, and figures scattered like startled birds. The bomb Damien had placed had done its job.

"Well," I said, catching my breath, "that was one hell of a distraction."

"So ... did you kiss him?" Damien asked with a flicker of jealousy in his eyes.

"Damien!", I scolded, then added, "No ... thank God."

Damien looked relieved and turned his attention back to the chaos. I leaned over and kissed his temple.

"Get a room!" squawked Waddena.

Damien smirked. "I wish we had time, but we need to plant these other three bombs before nightfall... before the chaos calms down."

I quickly changed back into my street clothes, and we started making our way to the market. We had to be extra careful not to be seen—anyone walking calmly through the market right now would look suspicious. We were almost walking sideways, trying to blend in with the gawking crowds watching the aftermath.

Hours went by as Damien and I set the bombs while Waddena stood watch. But we had to be slow, methodical—we had to get it right and not get caught.

Once the last bomb was placed, we slipped into a quiet, dark corner booth of a pub to go over our final strategy.

“Are we hitting the Magician’s cash house right after we hit the market?” I asked, the knot in my stomach tightening.

“We have to... keeps the element of surprise in our fa ...” Damien’s voice trailed off. His gaze had locked onto a tall figure sitting at the bar, Damien’s glass frozen midair.

“Derrik.” Damien’s voice was almost breathless.

Derrik didn’t turn right away. He took a long, deliberate sip of his drink, set the glass down, then slowly glanced over his shoulder like he’d expected us to notice eventually.

His eyes flicked toward our dark corner ... too precise, too fast.

“He knows I’m here,” Damien growled under his breath.

Derrik’s smirk mirrored Damien’s ... but colder, more calculated. More dangerous.

Damien's jaw clenched. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you," Derrik said smoothly. "Just... watching things fall apart."

He slid into the booth across from us without invitation, scanning the pub with a casualness that felt anything but casual.

"Watching ... or helping?" I asked, my tone sharp.

He met my gaze and smiled. The expression didn't reach his eyes. "You must be Ana. I recognize you from the wanted posters the Magician put out."

"Charmed... I'm sure," I muttered.

"Oh, and just so we're clear," Derrik added, glancing between us, "I had nothing to do with that explosion."

"I didn't think you did," Damien said, voice tight. "It would go against your contract with the Magician."

"Oh, my dear little brother," Derrik said with mock affection, "I meant nothing personal by turning you in."

"*Nothing personal?!*" Damien hissed. His voice was low, but full of fury. "You nearly got me killed... I've been living in exile!"

Derrik leaned back in the booth, unbothered. "You seem to be doing just fine, from what I'm seeing."

His gaze dragged slowly over me, top to bottom.

Damien tensed beside me ... every muscle locked like a spring ready to snap. For a second, I thought he was going to leap over the table and beat Derrik to a pulp.



I reached over and grabbed his arm, giving it a firm, grounding squeeze.  
*Not here*, I whispered into Damien's mind.

He slid his hand over mine and met my eyes.

*Tell Waddena to trigger the bombs once the market clears*, he said. *We'll use my brother as our alibi ... he can vouch we were here when it all went down.*

I nodded once and sent Waddena the message.

*Wait until the market clears, then set off the bombs. Stay invisible when you return. No one sees you. No one knows.*

A soft *ping* echoed in my mind ... her way of saying "got it."

"In my defense," Derrik continued, leaning back with that smug calm, "I was only acting out to keep Mom and Dad safe."

That struck a chord. My mind flashed to Cindy... and her little boy... and the crew. All of them depending on us.

"What about now?" Damien's voice was low, sharp. He wasn't just questioning his brother ... he was challenging Derrik's soul.

"About that, little brother..." Derrik shrugged with maddening calm. "Mom and Dad still come first. Then there's the money."

He reached for my face, fingers brushing the air near my cheek. "Pity to waste such beauty, though."

I pulled back from his hand, a knot coiling in my stomach like a storm about to break.

“That’s it. Let’s go, Ana,” Damien growled, rising to his feet, urgency tightening his voice.

But it was too late.

Four men burst into the pub ... uniformed, armed, and fast ... EM restraints in hand, eyes locked on us.

Instinctively I coiled up a bolt of energy and knocked two guys off their feet leaving them twitching on the floor.

Derrik looked stunned by my ability and ducked under the table.

I jumped onto the bench, then the table, bracing for a better shot.

But then it happened ... the first of the three explosions.

The walls and tables shook. Glasses crashed from shelves.

The two remaining Magician thugs bolted for the door, drawn by the chaos outside.

Damien grabbed me off the table, and we ran.

We burst into the street just as the second explosion hit.

The thugs, mid-sprint toward the first blast, froze—wide-eyed, stunned, looking at each other.

Damien and I didn’t miss a beat. We had to get to the portal.

We sprinted up the alley. Damien murmured something under his breath, and the portal shimmered open.

Grabbing my hand, he pulled us both through just as the third explosion tore through the air.

We were safe. Back on Earth and safe.

My legs turned to jelly, and I collapsed.

Damien scooped me into his arms and carried me to the truck.

Neither of us spoke during the short ride back to the RV.  
My mind was racing. The knot in my stomach hadn't gone anywhere.  
The silence clung to us as we both dropped onto the sofa.  
"So," I finally said, breaking it. "That's Derrik."  
"What a fucked-up piece of work, right?" Damien muttered.  
"I'd have to agree with you on that." My heart was still thudding against my ribs.  
"So much for that mission," I added, trying to catch my breath.  
"What the hell happened?" Waddena's crisp voice sliced through the thick air of the RV.  
"My brother is what happened. We were nearly captured." Damien's words came out sharp, edged with fury.  
"I knew I didn't like him," Waddena pouted. "What a killjoy! I was really looking forward to hitting the cash house on the Magician's estate."  
I nodded, quietly taking that in ... but deep down, I was just relieved the day was over.  
"No worries, Waddena. You'll get your wish," Damien said, already recalculating everything in his mind.  
"Yippie!" Waddena chirped.  
I just shook my head and started to cry.  
Damien reached out to put his arm around me for comfort, but I pushed him away. "How can you say that?" I stammered, my voice cracking.  
"Please, Ana ... just hear me out."  
"No!" I managed to squeak.  
I got up, stormed into the bedroom, and slammed the door behind me.  
All I could do was throw myself on the bed and sob. I felt beaten. Violated.  
And now... I had to go back.

The bedroom door slowly creaked open. Damien walked up to the bed, sat beside me, and gently lifted me into his arms. This time, I didn't fight him.

"Hey now," he murmured, his voice soft. "I know today was brutal... but strategically, we have to hit the cash house tonight. Destroying the money is the only way this works. If we wait until tomorrow, it'll give the bounty hunters time to regroup ... and everything we did today will be for nothing."

He paused, his arms steady around me. "I don't want to lose this war, Ana. We need our freedom."

Waddena materialized with her signature crackle. "Look, you two ... maybe going back tonight isn't the best move. After what happened at the pub, the whole damn city knows you were there. Every bounty hunter's going to want a piece of you after today."

"We have to at least hit the cash house," Damien said, his tone hardening.

"We can save the bounty hunters' safe house for tomorrow if we need to."

"Will you let me finish, you oversized baboon?" Waddena snapped, arms crossed and eyes blazing. "Like I was saying... the city's crawling with people who want your heads. So let me go in alone."

"What?!" Damien blinked, caught off guard but listening.

"Yeah," Waddena said, a sly grin tugging at one corner of her mouth. "I can do an aerial assault on both the safe house and the cash house ... bomb 'em fast and clean. All before they even know what hit them."

"No!" I protested, sitting up. "It's too dangerous."

Waddena shrugged. "What are they going to do... kill me?"

“She’s not wrong,” Damien murmured, gears clearly turning in his head.

I watched from the bedroom doorway as Damien prepped Waddena for the assault.

“These two bombs are a little stronger than the last three,” he said, voice steady. “But the trigger works the same.”

“Got it,” Waddena nodded, her whole body bouncing with the motion.

Damien crouched next to her, clearly trying to stay calm. “Are you sure you’ve got the right coordinates? Let’s double-check.”

“I said I got it!” she grinned, stuffing the coordinates into her tiny bag along with the bombs.

After tying the pouch to her waist, Damien blinked. “How did you even fit all that in there?”

“Magic!” Waddena declared. And with a clap of her hands... she was gone.

When I arrived, I could feel the hum of the city around me, its vibrations like the pulse of a drum ... a perfect rhythm to move with. I felt like dancing, spinning right down the alleyway with a trail of sparks behind me. But I had to stay focused. Ana was counting on me.

The streets, cluttered with people too distracted by their own little lives to notice me, were my playground. They wouldn’t see me... not unless I wanted them to. Not unless I gave them a *show*.

Still, the stakes were high. The Magician’s men were *everywhere*. I could almost taste their desperation in the air ... like stale smoke and fear-sweat. Gross. But helpful. I followed it straight to the first target: the safe house.

The little bomb bags nestled snugly at my side like warm eggs in a nest. Damien's instructions echoed in my head as I slipped down an alley and crouched beside a dumpster. His voice ... steady, focused, annoyingly responsible ... had actually calmed me. At least until I'd heard Ana's voice trembling with concern.

That did something to me. Strange ... I wasn't used to being cared for... not like that. Not with that kind of softness. I didn't need it. Didn't *want* it. Still, it made me pause for just a moment.

I shook my head, snapping myself back. *Focus, Waddena. You've got work to do.*

The safe house crouched ahead, tucked behind a row of half-dead buildings like it was ashamed of itself. I approached silent as a spark.

I pulled the pouch from my waist and searched for the perfect place to plant the bomb. But then I heard them—voices inside. People. Civilians, maybe. Ana would never forgive me if someone innocent got hurt.

I adjusted. Slipped through the shadows until I found an air vent between the first and second floors. That would do. I reached up and slid the bomb inside ... then fumbled. It clanked against the metal like a cymbal.

"What was that noise?" someone shouted from inside.

Great, Waddena. Just great. Everyone *definitely* heard that.

"It's probably a rat," one of the bounty hunters muttered.

*A rat?* Really? So rude.

“As long as it isn’t a ghost!” another chimed in. “I heard this place is haunted.”

I couldn’t help myself. I grinned.

“Ohhh... really?” I whispered just loud enough. “Well, I can’t vouch for any ghosts that came before me...”

I let a flicker of light ripple through the vents. Sparks. Whispers. A shadow on the wall.

“...but I’m here.”

Time to get scary.

I found a couple of loose nails and scratched them across the metal of the air duct.

*SCREEECH!!!*

What a horrible noise. Perfect.

“That’s no damn rat!” one of the bounty hunters shouted, his voice thick with fear.

I scraped the nails again, just for fun.

The bounty hunter’s eyes widened, his face draining of color. “I’m out of here!” he cried, scrambling for the door.

“Wait, you big coward!” the second bounty hunter shouted, but his words were drowned out by the sound of boots pounding the floor as the first one bolted.

I couldn't hold back anymore. I burst out laughing, the sound echoing off the walls like something from a funhouse.

Screams erupted from inside, followed by the frantic sound of boots skidding and thudding against the wood floors. I laughed again, watching them scramble, desperate to escape.

They were climbing over each other now, falling over themselves just to get to the door.

*This was too easy.*

I made my way back to the bomb, twisting the timer with a grin.

*Three... two... one...*

I held my breath, watching the seconds tick by. Damien had been right, that bomb was stronger than the others. I braced myself, but as the countdown finished, I felt the pulse of the explosion shake the building. The force was like a giant hand slamming the world apart.

The dust began to settle, and I took a slow, satisfied breath. There wasn't much left of the safe house, just jagged remnants of broken walls and splintered wood.

Great job, Waddena, I thought to myself, giving an invisible pat on the back. Now, the real fun begins.

The Magician's cash house loomed ahead like a scar from a wound that never healed. Stone walls, steel gates, and the kind of silence that only comes from pain. I felt it crawl up my spine ... not fear, not exactly ... but memory. Raw, painful memory.



This was where I died.

Where they watched me die.

My sisters.

Their faces flashed through my mind ... wide eyes, trembling hands, pressed up against glass like dolls in a cabinet. I'd tried to forget those moments, but they had branded themselves into the very being of who I am.

And now I was back.

I crouched behind a hedgerow just beyond the compound fence. The bomb bags pressed lightly against my side, a reminder of the mission Ana and Damien entrusted me with. *Destroy the money. Break the Magician's power. Walk away invisible.*

But nothing about this place would let me walk away clean.

I closed my eyes for a second. If I went in for them now, it would raise alarms. The guards would flood the place before I even reached the vault. It could ruin everything.

But how could I leave them?

No. I wasn't going to choose between the mission and my sisters. That's not how I work. There had to be a way to do both.

There's *always* a way.

I took a deep breath and let the hum of the night fade behind me. My senses stretched outward... the magic stirring just beneath my ethereal layer, a shimmering tingle of possibility dancing across my skin.

*I have an idea.*

I ghosted through the shadows toward the slave quarters, locating the electrical room tucked near the back like a forgotten nerve center. Then, I turned ... eyes locked on the real target. The cash house.

It was just as Ana described: cold, quiet, waiting for morning light.

I floated through walls like smoke, past rows of desks cluttered with ledgers and records. There it was ... the vault. Sealed tight. Blast-proof. That was good. The ledgers would survive in there. The Magician would have no proof of his operations when the flames finished their work.

I scooped the ledgers into my arms and shoved them into the vault, tucking them deep inside. Then I dragged stacks of money from the safe ... bills, coins, loose bundles ... and piled them in the center.

Time was tight. I pulled out my last bomb. No hesitation.

Five seconds on the timer. Twist. Click. Go.

I vanished through the wall and raced back to the slave house, my feet barely touching the floor. I reached the electrical room just in time ... the explosion thundered behind me, rattling the walls.

Alarms screamed. Lights strobed. Burning money rained like confetti from the heavens.

Guards spilled out of the slave building, yelling, scrambling to contain the fire.

Perfect.

I slipped inside and yanked the main power switch. The hum of the current died.

The current that bound the EM shackles to my sisters ... gone.

The current that kept them enslaved ... dead.

“Hurry!” I called to my sisters, “follow me!”

My sisters stood there speechless for a moment, staring at the shackles that once enslaved them lying on the ground.

“Waddena?” Mary Beath said. She was the oldest of us and a mother to us all.

“Hurry!” I yelled again. This time my sisters snapped to attention.

As we exited the building I snapped an invisibility cloak over them and led them safely past the gate.

The Magician’s goons were frantically trying to put out the fire but the blast had damaged the lock and prevented them from entering the vault. A small hole in the roof was the only way to get water into the room.

Once I had my sisters at a safe distance from the estate, I lifted the cloak.

“Waddena.” Mary Beth said with tears in her eyes. “You came back for us, you saved us.”

All the sisters were crying.

“I couldn’t leave you there. I made a promise with my dying breath that I was going to free you.”

“Your final vow has now been fulfilled, Waddena. You are free to go to the other side of the veil now and live in peace.” Mary Beth could not stop crying.

I thought about those words ... to live in peace ... Mom and Dad are there.”

“No, I have made other commitments now. If it wasn’t for my new friends, I would have never been able to free you. I owe them.” I smiled knowing it was the right thing to do.

“Whenever you’re ready to cross over, Just let us know, you know where to find us.”

With that I left, to return to Ana and Damien and give them my report.

## Chapter Ten: The Gloves Come Off

I was sitting on the sofa pensively biting my nails as Damien paced the floor. We were worried ... It had been hours since Waddena left, and not a word. The sun was just about to rise, and exhaustion was settling in my bones.

Then we heard it .. the familiar crackling of electricity in the air as Waddena materialized. Damien and I just stared at her with a mixture of relief and fear.

“What happened?” Damiens voice was sharp with wonder.

“Mission accomplished sir!” Waddena saluted, then added with a more sober ton,. “And I even took care of some personal matters.”

My head dropped back against the sofa cushion, relief and exhaustion sweeping over me.

“Yes! Yes!” Damien was almost giddy. “I wished I could have been there.”

“Waddena, thank you. I’m so proud of you. Taking out the safe house *and* cash house was a key mission to accomplish. Now ... I need sleep, I’m exhausted.” I gave Waddena a weak smile and headed to bed.

I could hear Damien’s excited voice as he pressed Waddena for details as I staggered to bed. I was unconscious before my head even hit the pillow.

I wasn’t sure of the time, or when Damien crawled in bed next to me, but I knew it had to be late. I got up and made some coffee, glancing at the clock on the microwave ... 1:45 pm. Damien got up and joined me at the table.

“I’m sorry I fell apart yesterday,” I couldn’t even bring myself to look at him.

“I am not complaining.” His gentle voice gliding through the air. “I’m so glad Waddena could carry as much as she did, I can see where this was becoming too much for you to do all in one day.”

“I’m just not the soldier you think I am.”

“Everyone has a breaking point.” Damien placed his hand gently over mine. “It doesn’t mean you’re weak. You are a lot stronger than a lot of men I know.”

I looked at him from across the table and smiled. He was so strong but so tender and understanding.

Waddena materialized with her usual flair. “Hey sleepy heads. Are we ready to attack the warehouses now?”

“You just really know how to break a moment, don’t you firefly.” Damien said in an almost warm undertone.

Wadena shrugged it off.

“Ana you know more about warehouses and ships. Where are they all located?” It doesn’t take much to nudge Damien into strategic planning mode.

I grabbed a pencil and some paper and started mapping out what I knew.

"I just hope the word got out that we were not involved in the bombings, otherwise, he could set a trap for us." I had a feeling that things could start going sideways.

"You forget," Damien began, "my brother and a couple of the Magician's thugs saw us at the pub when the bombings happened."

"It's hard to forget your bother." I rubbed my cheek where Derrik nearly touched me. It tingled a little.

Damien noticed me rubbing my cheek, "Don't worry," he said gently, "I'm not going to let him touch you."

I looked at him and smiled. I knew he would keep me safe.

"Nothing personal Damien, but I trust your brother about as far as I could pick up your truck and toss it." Waddena said smugly.

"I've seen you pick up things heavier than my truck before." Damien quipped.

"Oh yeah ... ok Waddena, time for a new metaphor." She said quietly to herself.

Damien smirked. "OK ladies, this what we have." Damien laid my drawing on the table. "We have the two warehouses here by the wharf, accompanied by two bounty hunter fight clubs. There are three warehouses clustered together off of eighth street and a main warehouse with docking bays and ships close by. All owned by our friend the Magician"

Waddena leaned over the table, scanning the map. "Fight clubs double as cover and recruitment centers. We take those out first, we cripple his muscle."

"And send a message," I added, circling the wharf on the map. "It has to be fast. Loud enough to draw attention ... delayed just enough to get us out before it goes."

Damien nodded, already moving in his mind. “Waddena, you take the 8th Street warehouses. I’ll handle the main dock and the central warehouse. Ana, you’re in charge of the wharf.”

I hesitated. “We’ll need decoys. If they think we hit the cash house, they might be waiting.”

“I’ve got that covered,” came Derrik’s voice from the doorway ... smooth, smug, and very much uninvited. “I know their rotations. Let me drop some bad intel.”

Damien froze. “How the hell did you find us?”

Derrik just grinned. “Little magic of my own,” he said, throwing me a wink.

That wink made my skin crawl. The nerve of him, just showing up like this.

“Oh, perfect,” I snapped. “Now the Magician *definitely* knows it’s us ... thanks to Mr. Bigmouth over here!”

My anger surged. Waddena arched a brow and casually reached for something sharp.

“I broke my allegiance with the Magician,” Derrik insisted, trying, and failing, to sound sincere. “I’m on your side now.”

“What about Mom and Dad?” Damien’s fists clenched as tightly as his jaw. “Are they safe?”

“Of course they are. I wasn’t the only one to bail on him. The Magician’s too busy assessing the damage to worry about threatening families right now.”

“No money, no henchmen... no leverage,” I muttered, still eyeing him with suspicion.

“I saw the writing on the wall. I got out as soon as I could,” Derrik said, like that somehow excused everything.

“If the family threats are gone, then a lot of his merchants are gone too,” I added. “They were never loyal to him... just scared.”

“Which means the warehouses,” Damien said, shifting back into tactical mode, “are finally ready for their big night.”

Damien and Derrik got to work assembling the bombs while Waddena and I gathered wires, switches, and batteries from our stash.

I paused, watching the brothers work side by side. The resemblance was clear, the same hair, the same sharp jawline, even the eyes. But in every other way, they couldn't have been more different. Personalities like night and day. Still, there was a rhythm to the way they moved, a familiarity that only brothers could share.

*Damien, I projected, is Derrik coming with us on this mission?*

He didn't miss a beat as he adjusted a wire. *Yes. He's staying with me. I don't trust him here alone.*

We had arrived in our usual alley and knew exactly where we needed to go. It was already dark, so we could move a little more stealthily.

Damien and Derrik headed toward the main warehouse. Waddena took off for 8th Street. That left me on my own.

My heart pounded in my chest, but I knew this area well.

The wharf was unusually quiet ... too quiet. An eerie kind of quiet. Not like I remembered at all. It used to be full of life, trade, my crew...

I shook my head, pushing the memories aside to focus on the task at hand. The windows were the weakest entry points, and I opened the one closest to the water.

Sliding through, I crept to the center of the building and placed the bomb in the middle of the floor. Then I slipped back out through the window and repeated the process for the other three buildings.

Waddena was already waiting at the rendezvous site, but the boys were still gone.

*Damien, are you almost done?* I projected.

A moment of silence followed ... far too long.

Yes, he finally responded. *We just finished and are on our way back to you now.*



I let out a long exhale. I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath.

"Waddena... start triggering the bombs. Start with the main warehouse, then the docks. 8th Street next. Save the wharf for last. Wait for my signal to start. Hit them rapid-fire."

"What's wrong, Ana? This isn't the plan." Waddena's voice held a sharp note of concern.

"I'm not sure... but something's off. Now go. Quickly!"

She vanished just as Damien and Derrik appeared, both a little breathless.

"Where's Waddena?" Derrik asked, scanning the alley.

"She ran off after a mouse," I lied, the words tumbling out too fast.

*Something's wrong*, I projected to Damien.

He didn't have time to respond.

In an instant, we were surrounded ... henchmen pouring in from every direction, throwing dampening nets over us before we could react. Our abilities vanished like snuffed-out flames. Shackles clamped down hard around our wrists and ankles.

Derrik cackled with delight. "That was way too easy."

He strode over and yanked me to my feet, gripping my arm.

"Now," he said, voice dark and cold, "I'm only going to ask nicely one more time... Where is Waddena?"

"Go to hell," I spat.

BOOM.

An explosion shattered the night.

*Waddena!* A slow smile crept across my face as I locked eyes with Derrik.

BOOM. BOOM.

Two more blasts echoed in quick succession.

Derrik's face twisted ... panic rising like smoke.

"No... no, no, no..."

Four. Five. Six. The sky lit in pulses, orange, and red flashes dancing in his widening eyes.

Seven. Eight.

"Stop it ... stop it!" he shrieked, his confidence unraveling.

Nine.

I didn't flinch. I just watched him burn.

"You'll pay for that one, bitch!" Derrik snarled. "Load them up!"

Damien and I were pushed toward a multi-passenger transport waiting nearby. Its engines hummed low, ready to deliver us straight into the Magician's hands.

I had one foot on the transport and the other still on the ground when a sharp whine cut through the air ... more transport engines approaching fast.

Suddenly, multiple security sleds closed in, kicking up a spray of dust as they skidded into position around us. Local agents leapt out, weapons raised and locked on target.

"Hands where we can see them!" one barked.

I exhaled a breath I hadn't realized I was holding ... but the relief was short-lived.

As the security agents shackled and loaded the Magician's henchmen onto their transport, I noticed one glaring absence.

Derrik was gone.

Before I could voice it, a security agent seized my arm. Another grabbed Damien. No words, no explanations ... just firm hands and silent orders. We were escorted to a separate transport.

*This can't be good*, I thought, heart sinking.

I looked across at Damien. His face had gone pale, his expression hollow and defeated. Whatever hope we had was slipping fast ... and I feared we were no longer being rescued.

We were being taken.

"Where are you taking us?" Damien finally broke the silence, his voice low but sharp.

"It's protocol," one of the agents said, not bothering to look at us. "When transports are caught in dampening nets and fitted with EM shackles, the subjects are taken to a secure facility for arraignment. It's for your protection... and ours."

A sudden crackle from the driver's com link cut the silence. After a quick exchange, the speaking agent stood and moved toward me. Without a word, he brushed my collar aside to inspect the back of my neck.

The Senate sigil glowed blue.

He froze for a beat, then returned to his seat. More hushed whispers. Another call on the com link. Then, without explanation, the transport banked hard and changed course.

I looked at Damien and smiled.

He blinked at me, confused ... but I could feel it, deep in my bones. Something had shifted.

We weren't being taken.

We were being rerouted.

And somehow... I knew things were going to be okay.

The transport stopped outside a large marble gray, gothic looking building ... The Senate Chambers.

Still wearing our nets and shackles we were taken inside and placed on a hover platform. Slowly we were lifted to face the senate, now things were looking familiar.

"Ms. Montoya ... what have you to report?" The voice of the lead Senator echoed through the cavernous chamber.

Damien stood motionless. ... like a statue frozen in time.

"Mr. Senator, honored counsel, I can inform you that my colleague and I have disarmed and disrupted the Magician's syndicate. It will only be a matter of days now before we bring the Magician before you."

The Senators closed ranks and started muttering between themselves. After a moment all the Senators resumed their seats, and the lead Senator once again spoke.

"Ms. Montoya, the Senate will overlook your unorthodox methods and allow you one more week to fulfill your obligation. That is all."

His gavel fell and our platform lowered. Once we reached the floor the shackles and nets were finally removed, and I felt like I could breathe again.

Damien didn't say a word, but he took my hand and led me outside. Without a second thought, he muttered a few words under his breath, and just like that, a portal opened. We were home.

Waddena was already there, her panic evident in her every word. "Are you two okay? Where did the cops take you? What happened to the Magician's dogs? Where did Derrik go?"

Damien let out a long breath, finally breaking his silence. "Okay, firefly... we're okay," he said, voice still unsteady. "Come here."

He reached for me then, pulling me into his arms and kissing me with a fervor that left me breathless. I could feel his hands trembling, his body shaking as he held me close. "I thought I was going to lose you today," he whispered, voice thick with emotion. "I've never been that scared before." His lips found mine again, softer this time, but just as desperate.

Waddena disappeared. The world disappeared. Dimensions no longer exist. I needed Damien as much as he needed me at that moment.

Morning came too early. Every inch of my body hurt ... every inch of my brain hurt ... every inch hurt. I made coffee and sat down at the table with a mug cradled in my hands.

Damien staggered into the kitchen looking just as wrecked as I felt. He grabbed a mug, shuffled over, and stopped beside me. Gently, he lifted my chin and gave me the sweetest kiss.

"Have I ever told you how much I love you?" he murmured, voice sleepy and soft.

"I love you too," I smiled.

Neither of us said another word. We just sat there, letting the silence hold everything we couldn't speak yet.

Derrik's intrusion. His betrayal. The near capture. Waddena detonating the bombs. The Senate hearing.

The air crackled.

Waddena appeared, hands on hips. "You two look like a train wreck!"

"Thanks for noticing, firefly," Damien grunted.

"How's the plan coming for capturing the Magician?"

"How did you know to start detonating the bombs last night I never was able to give you the signal?" I looked at Waddena blankly.

"I stayed invisible and stuck around a minute, I knew something had to be wrong, just from the way you were acting." She became very somber remembering what happened. "I was hoping the explosions would give you an opportunity to escape. I couldn't get back to you in time."

"You did the right thing." Damien said with an encouraging smile. "You carried out the mission and left us at the tactical advantage."

"But the cops were already stuffing you into a transport by the time I got back. I couldn't save you." Waddena looked so upset.

"It all turned out fine, firefly. Luck was on our side."

"Yes we came back from this a little shaken but all the more resolved." I added softly.

"You're going to need to be resolved. The Magician must be as hot as a hornet by now." Waddena chirped.

“Correction the Magician must be seething by now ... exactly where we want him. His anger and determination for revenge are going to trip him up and make him fall into our trap.” Damiens wheels were now turning.

“I don’t like the thought of being bait.” I spoke my thoughts aloud.

“Ana, he’s going to have to go through me to get to you.” Damien was trying to reassure me.

“I don’t like the thought of that either.” I protested.

Damien gave me a sympathetic look and then focused back on the plan.

“We’ll need to stage it somewhere with choke points ... natural bottlenecks. Somewhere we control the terrain.”

Waddena stepped forward. “I have just the place. Remote, high electromagnetic charge ... he won’t sense the trap until it’s too late. A canyon just outside the city.”

I crossed my arms, unsettled. “And once he’s there?”

“We box him in,” Damien replied. “Psionic dampeners, grounding fields, and Waddena’s EM snare. No teleporting, no tricks.”

“Then what?” My voice was quiet.

“Then,” Waddena said, her eyes glowing faintly, “we imprison him where even the flares can’t reach.”

“Too obvious ... that will only work if the Magician is so enraged and focused on the chase he’ll have blinders on to his surroundings. He’s nobody’s fool.” I injected.

Waddena nodded slowly, the glow in her eyes dimming. “You’re right. He reads energy like a second language. If it feels too clean, too controlled ... he’ll smell the setup.”

Damien’s jaw tightened. “So we make it *messy*. Real. Chaotic.”

“Layered,” I added. “Let him think he’s intercepted us mid-move ... like he’s found us off guard, forced us into a bad decision.”

Waddena's lips curved into a small, impressed smile. "An ambush inside an ambush. I like it."

"We'll need decoys," Damien mused. "And allies ... ones we trust."

I felt the cold edge of doubt creep in. "That list keeps getting shorter."

Waddena giggled, "Oh, I think I can rustle up a few allies ... about six of them." She thought of her sisters. "And illusions make great decoys"

Damien raised an eyebrow. "You think your sisters are up for this?"

Waddena's expression sobered. "They're not just up for it ... they've been *waiting* for it."

I leaned forward. "And these illusions... how real can you make them?"

Waddena gave a sly grin. "Real enough to bleed if he cuts them. Real enough to scream."

A chill ran through me. "That's dark."

"Effective," she countered.

Damien exhaled through his nose, the beginnings of a plan swirling behind his eyes. "Then let's give the Magician what he's been hunting for... *US*. We set the traps as planned and plant ourselves not far from the canyon with a broken-down scooter. Well it actually isn't broken down. We can act like it just got fixed as the Magician and his men start to close-in. And the race is on."

"A race?" I was questioning that part of the plan.

"No worries." Damien smiled. "Waddena ... we're going to need your sisters strategically placed ... hiding ... taking out the Magicians men one at a time with natural disasters. Falling rocks, sand guizers, that sort of thing. That way it will increase the Magician's determination and blind him to the obvious. And then we spring the trap!"



“Do you think the scooter will be fast enough?” I did not like this whole race thing.

“Of course it will be ... we will be nothing but an illusion in the race. Illusions are always faster ... but just enough.” Damien was happy with himself, and I suddenly felt better about the race.

Waddena gave a low whistle. “A high-speed illusionary chase with elemental sabotage. You two really know how to party.”

I smirked, but tension still tugged at my spine. “What about the real us? Where will we be while this... illusion is playing out?”

Damien glanced sideways at me. “Close enough to monitor, far enough to stay safe. Waddena will anchor the illusion from one of her shadow zones, and I’ll cloak us. The moment he’s lured into the canyon, we trigger the convergence.”

“Convergence?” I raised a brow.

“A binding prism. Crystalline, electromagnetic, psionic, the works,” Waddena replied. “He’s not getting out this time.”

“Waddena ... go tell your sisters the plan and make sure they’re on board.” Damien wanted to start getting prepared.

“On it!” And with a clap of her hands, she was gone.

“So, what now?” I was curious, but not sure I wanted an answer.

“Now,” Damien smirked, “now we create a plan ‘B’.”

“There’s a *plan B*?”

“There’s always a plan B,” Damien said grimly. “I don’t trust my brother.”

The lights started to flicker in the RV, and the sound of a rushing wind entered the room. A portal opened and Derrik stepped through.

“How in the hell do you keep finding us?” Damien snapped, stepping between me and Derrik so fast the air shimmered with static.

I palmed a jolt of electricity in case we needed it.

“Whoa ... whoa ... just calm down you two. I come in peace.” Derrik put his hands up, palms facing us in a peaceful gesture.

“You haven’t answered my question.” Damien was clearly not in the mood to trust his brother.

“Yeah ... right, so ... the little hand wave I did near Ana’s face at the pub a couple of days ago ... I attached a tether.” Derrik said in a matter-of-fact way.

“A *what?*” I took a step forward, my pulse spiking.

Damien’s eyes blazed. “You *tethered* her?”

“It’s not like that,” Derrik said quickly, stepping back. “It’s just a locator. A ping.”

“You had no right,” Damien growled. Sparks danced across his knuckles.

I raised a hand. “Stop. Both of you. We don’t have time for this.”

Derrik glanced at me, his expression softening. “I knew you’d be the reasonable one.”

“Don’t count on it,” I snapped. “Remove the tether. *Now!*”

“Fine ... fine ... here.” Derrik reached for my face, and Damien grabbed his wrist.

“You touch her, and I’ll kill you in a heartbeat.” Damien growled more deeply than before.

“Now brother ... I have to put my hand close to her face to remove the tether.” Derrik said smugly.

Fire lit in Damien’s eyes as he let go of Derrik’s wrist.

Derrik smirked like he’d just won a round he didn’t deserve. He slowly raised his hand, fingers splayed, stopping just shy of my cheek.

A warmth pulsed faintly against my skin ... then a flicker, like static. The tether snapped. I felt it, like an invisible thread had been cut loose from the back of my mind.

“It’s done,” Derrik said.

I didn’t move. “And the next time you think about tagging me like I’m one of your field experiments, you’d better remember who I am.”

Derrik’s smug composure faltered. Just a flicker ... but enough. He raised his hands again, mocked surrender in every motion. “Noted.”

Waddena’s voice popped in from thin air. “Oh good, we’re all still alive. So ... who invited this piece of work to join us?”

“Nobody!” I was so angry.

“Are we expecting company?” Damien pulled back the curtain of the RV to look. His concern was growing as much as his distrust.

“Nope, no Magician henchmen ... just me.” Derrik sat down making himself comfortable on our sofa. Aurora wandered up and hissed at him.

Derrik flinched at Aurora’s hiss, blinking in mild surprise. “Charming cat. Real warm welcome.”

“She knows what doesn’t belong,” I muttered, scooping her up before she decided to shred his pant leg. She settled in my arms, green eyes locked on him with unblinking suspicion.

Waddena folded her arms, eyeing Derrik like he was a stain on the rug.

“You’re not just hanging out for the brotherly love, I assume?”

“Like I said, I come in peace. I know the winning side when I see it.” Derrik began. “I thought you could use a little inside information ... consider it my peace offering.”

Damien grabbed Derrik by his collar and pulled him to his feet. Inches from Derik’s face, Damien said in a low tone, “You double cross us and your pieces will become an offering.”

“So, what’s the plan brother? Derrik asked smugly.

“This is!” And with that Damien punched Derrik right in the face.

Derrik’s body hit the sofa with such force ... the entire RV rocked.

Thalis’ voice popped up “Earthquake measuring 3.6 on the Richter scale detected.”

Blood was streaming from Derrik’s nose. “You deserve worse.” I stated as I walked into the kitchen to get a damp iced rag.

“OH! OH! My nose!” Derrik cried out.

“Shut up you cry baby!” I handed Derrik the rag.

“You’re actually going to help hm?” Damien looked shocked.

“I’m only trying to save the upholstery” I claimed.

## Chapter Eleven:

### Trapping the Rat

Waddena had gathered her sisters and was already in route to the canyon. Derrik was safely confined in the RV, trapped inside an electromagnetic grid so tight he couldn’t even sneeze through it. Meanwhile, Damien and I sat at the local pub, right out in the open ... exactly where we wanted to be. Word would spread fast. It had to. The trap was being set.

We ordered food and a couple of drinks. When the plates arrived, I only picked at mine. The knot in my stomach was too tight to eat. I couldn’t stop replaying how things had gone wrong last time.

“Hey,” Damien said in a low voice, leaning closer. “Everything is going to be fine this time. Please ... at least look like you’re eating.”

I took a small bite, chewed without tasting, and forced myself to swallow.

Then I felt it ... that subtle shift in the air. A pressure drop. The weight of watching eyes.

“We’ve got admirers,” I said quietly, not even turning to look.

“I see them,” Damien replied, already on alert. “Let’s finish this.”

He stood, casually enough not to startle anyone, and I followed suit. We made our way out and mounted the scooter, pulling out like we were just heading home.

A black POV lurched into the road ahead, cutting us off. Tires screeched behind as a second vehicle closed in, trying to box us in. The race had started early.

*Waddena, I hope you have everything ready... we’re coming in hot!* I shot the message out as Damien swerved between traffic and startled pedestrians.

*We’re set up and ready,* came her instant reply.

Damien didn’t speak ... his focus was razor-sharp as he zigzagged us through the chaos. Another of the Magician’s henchmen cut us off, forcing our scooter into a hard turn onto a narrow side street.

*Damien, I sent the thought, sharp and urgent, we have to get off this street. It could be a trap.*

He gave a quick nod and veered into an alley without hesitation.

Another black POV skidded to a stop, blocking the exit ahead.

Damien didn't slow. He zeroed in on a dumpster with a couple of wooden boards propped against its side ... and gunned the engine.

I shut my eyes.

The tires hit the boards with a jolt, and for one heart-stopping moment, we were weightless ... airborne and utterly at the mercy of fate.

If there's a God out there... now would be a great time to show up.

I opened my eyes. If I was going to die, I wanted the last thing I saw to be Damien.

But midair... something shimmered around us, bending the light like heat off asphalt.

Then Waddena's voice slipped into my mind: *"Enjoy the pixie dust!"*

The scooter touched down on the far side of the street like it landed on a cloud. Tires squealed, rubber caught pavement, and we lurched forward ... alive.

Damien got us back on the main road out of the city, but the henchmen were still right behind us.

*Thank you, Waddena... we're heading your way,* I sent the thought out quickly.

She pinged back in acknowledgment, her energy calm and ready.

We hit the edge of the city and tore toward the canyon. Four of the Magician's POVs were in pursuit ... but still no sign of the Magician himself.

Something wasn't right. This was starting to go sideways ... I could feel it in my gut.

We screamed past the stretch of road where we were supposed to fake a breakdown. No time.

The jutting rocks where Waddena's illusion was supposed to take hold was coming up ... fast. Too fast.

I shut my eyes.

No ... I had to see.

Our scooter was still at full speed, barreling deeper into the canyon.

I shot another message to Waddena: *Where are the sisters? You should be taking out these henchmen!*

*We're a little busy up here right now,* she shot back.

*Busy???*

Then it happened.

The first rockslide thundered down. Dust, stone, and debris roared to life.

Was that ... ? Yes. A black POV was sliding down with the rocks, flipping end over end as it tumbled.

The debris slammed into the last POV tailing us, crushing its front end, and scattering the rest.

A sand geyser erupted behind us ... violent and sudden ... taking out two more POVs in a cloud of dust and force.

*Nice shot, ladies!* I sent.

*Ping.* That was their answer.

Only one POV left ... and still no sign of the Magician.



*What the hell...?*

Damien slammed on the brakes. The scooter screeched and skidded to a stop.

Behind us, the last POV ground to a halt. Two henchmen bailed out, but neither advanced.

In front of us loomed a canyon wall ... sheer, solid, and completely blocking the road.

Then *he* came.

All pomp and twisted pageantry, the Magician arrived in his oversized POV, flanked by a transport vehicle that rumbled to a halt beside him.

The transport door hissed open.

Inside, six small heads turned toward us, eyes wide with fear. Each sprite's tiny hands were bound in glowing EM cuffs.

*Where is Waddena?* I pushed the thought out hard—loud enough it should have echoed off the canyon walls. *Waddena!*

No answer.

Beside me, I felt Damien tense. The knot in my stomach pulled tighter, almost unbearable.

*What do we do, Damien?*

*I'm thinking... give me a minute,* he responded, eyes never leaving the Magician.

*Whatever happens ... Don't let them cuff you. Get ready for combat.*

Damien's thoughts were clear.

“Bravo... bravo!” the Magician called out, mock applause echoing off the canyon walls. “I must admit, your little ambushes caught me off guard. But in the end...” He grinned darkly, “...I have you. You and your tiny sprite friends will pay dearly for what you’ve cost me!”

His boots crunched against the gravel as he stepped closer.

“You,” he sneered, eyes fixed on me, “my dear Ana... will get a front row seat. You’ll watch as each of your sprite friends is slowly tortured to death. And for the grand finale?”

His grin widened.

“It will be Damien’s turn.”

“You see, Ana,” he continued, voice slick with triumph, “I can always rebuild. And the best part? You’ll be mine ... to own, to break, to use however I please.”

“NO!” Damien roared.

In a split second, he erupted into a towering surge of electricity. Blue-white lightning arced from his body, jagged and alive, each bolt a scream of fury. His eyes blazed, shooting raw energy at anyone in his line of sight.

The Magician was the first to collapse, limbs jerking uncontrollably as the current tore through him. Then the four remaining henchmen dropped in quick succession, convulsing violently across the canyon floor.

I stood frozen, stunned into silence. The air still crackled with residual energy, but I couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, Damien’s light dimmed ... like someone had flipped a switch.

He crumpled to the ground.

The shock snapped me back into myself. I rushed to his side, dropped to my knees, and gently lifted his head. His breath was shallow. I broke down and wept.

“Quickly, dear ... there isn’t much time,” one of the sisters said, her voice urgent and firm.

They had managed to wiggle free from the transport and scurried toward me, their tiny forms glowing faintly. “You must get these cuffs off us so we can save him.”

Save him... cuffs... free the sprites. My brain kicked into gear. I scrambled to the transport, yanked open the door, and lunged for the glovebox.

Locked.

The keys ... ignition! I grabbed them, unlocked the compartment, and snatched the set of keys.

I ran back to the sisters, who were already gathering around Damien’s still form. One by one, I freed them. One by one, they joined hands and began to chant.

The eldest stepped forward, her hands glowing like starlight. She placed one palm gently over Damien’s heart, the other across his forehead.

The chant grew louder.

And then ... Damien’s eyes fluttered open. He gasped and began to cough.

The sisters stopped chanting and smiled; the elder one moved back so I could move up close to him.

As I held Damien in my arms another transport arrived out stepped Derrik ... Waddena fluttering at his side. Another transport landed and six Interdimensional Senate security agents got out and began EM cuffing The Magicians crew ... starting with the Magician himself.

Damien was conscious but very weak. Derrik walked up and knelt down next to me, "I brought some friends." He said with a concerned smile.

"You look terrible" Damien faintly said with a weak smile.

"Yeah ... well a broken nose does tend to make one look that way." Derrik retorted.

The sisters giggled and encircled Derrik, and within a minute Derrik looked good as new.

"Thank you ladies." Derrik actually smiled.

Waddena hugged her sisters and watched as a portal opened, and they went home.

One of the security agents walked up and handed me a piece of paper.

"You have been officially served a summons to appear before the Interdimensional Senate tomorrow at 3." The agent promptly walked off he was the last to get into the transport and both transports left together.

Derrik helped to get Damien home and into bed, Waddena hovering close to Damien attending to his breathing and fatigue.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Curious as to Derrik's schemes.

"So many options, so little time," was his mysterious answer.

I half smiled and rolled my eyes. "Seriously."

“Seriously, he said sitting next me on the couch, “I could use a woman like you at my side. Strong, assertive, even a little ... stealthy. I’m looking to start a business dealing in merchandise. I hear you have experience in that line of work.”

I thought for a moment about my crew. Tomorrow I plea for their release.

“I might not be able to help you there ... but maybe I know of some that can.”

Derrik raised his eyebrows.

Morning came and Damien was looking so much better. Waddena stayed vigil all night and allowed me to rest. I got up as usual and made coffee. Derrik woke up after a night on the sofa and came into the kitchen to get a mug of coffee. “The sofa isn’t that bad to sleep on.”

“You spent the night on the sofa?” Damien had gotten up and staggered into the kitchen. Derrik threw Damien’s arm over his shoulder and helped him to the table. While I brought him a mug of coffee.

“You always were stubborn.” Derrik said with a grunt.

I just smiled.

“I guess I should thank you for calling in reinforcements yesterday.” Damien said grudgingly.

Derrik smirked “And how about an apology for breaking my nose.”

“Hell no,” Damien snorted, “that one you deserved.”

“I would have to agree with Damien on that one.” I said as I took another sip of hot coffee.

“Me too.” Waddena chirped as she crackled into existence.

“ My how your tone has changed from yesterday ... begging for my help, making deals with me.” Derrik said in recollection.

“I did what I had to do to help my sisters, Ana and Damien.” She replied smugly.

“All for the greater good.” Derrik retorted.

Waddena’s eyes narrowed, sparkles flickering at her fingertips.

“Greater than you know.”

Three o’clock Senate time came around too quicky and Damien and I entered the Interdimensional Senate Chambers while Derrik and Waddena waited in the lobby.

As Damien and I waited outside the chamber doors, I looked at him and smiled. He returned my gaze and smiled. “Damien ... whatever happens in there...” I couldn’t finish my words.

He just took my hand and squeezed it gently. “I love you too.

The chamber doors opened, and our names were announced as we were led to a platform.

As the platform slowly rose I noticed how immense the senate chamber was, filled with delegates of various species and dimensions. I felt the tension crackle. There was even a U.S. ambassador present via hologram, looking cold and strategic.

Our platform stopped in front of a familiar face. Senator Barracus, the lead Senator in my hearings. His silver hair shimmered against his pale blue skin.

“Ms. Montoya.” His deep voice echoing through the chamber. “You stand before the Senate today to be held in account of your contract made four months ago in this chamber. The contract was for you to deliver the Magician to the Senate so he could be held accountable for his interdimensional crimes. Not only did you deliver the Magician, but you destroyed his empire, and this Senate is indebted to you. Take a knee Ms. Montoya.”

With that I knelt.

“Upon your completion of your contract with this senate, your sigil is hereby removed.” With a wave of his hand I felt a tingle, then a warm glow on the back of my neck fading into nothing. “You may rise.”

I stood back up, feeling a little lightheaded but steady. The tingling absence on the back of my neck was a strange relief ... like breathing freely for the first time in months.

Senator Barracus gave a single nod. “This Senate no longer binds you. Your debt is paid. However...”

He turned slightly, gesturing toward the glowing hologram of the U.S. ambassador. “Earth's representative has requested audience.”

The chamber dimmed again as the ambassador's form sharpened. He was tall, angular, his expression unreadable.

“Ana Montoya. Damien Voss,” he began, his voice as cool as his stare.

“You’ve raised more questions than answers. Earth’s intelligence community is... unsettled by your actions, and unsure of your classification. Some fear you. Others want to study you. I offer a third option.”

My jaw clenched, but I let him continue.

“You will be designated as interdimensional ambassadors ... representing Earth in this chamber. In return, your legal status on Earth will be resolved. But understand this: you will answer to both governments. Your choices will ripple across realities.”

Damien gave me a sidelong look and projected a message. *What do you think, partner?*

I took a breath. The sigil was gone. My debt was paid. But I wasn’t done ... I still wanted to free my crew.

“I accept,” I said, voice firm. “On one condition.”

Barracus raised an eyebrow. The ambassador gave the faintest smirk.

“My crew walks free. No surveillance. No interference. And no black site detentions. If this senate wants my loyalty, they start by honoring my crew. They are hardworking people who were pressed into the service of the Magician against their will”

A moment passed.

“Agreed,” Senator Barracus said at last. “You’ll receive your credentials by morning. Your first mission... comes soon.”

The Senate chamber buzzed again. The decision was made.



I looked at Damien, who gave me a rare grin.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a new gig,” he said.