

Chapter One

Sydney found herself in complete darkness and silence. Her heart pounded with every passing second. Through padded earmuffs, she heard a faint beeping noise coming from her wrist. She ripped off the thick blindfold and earmuffs and threw them to the ground. The blinding sun caused her to squint her icy blue eyes but not enough to prevent her from investigating the new surroundings. She stood in a sparse stand of spruce and could easily see into the distance. Many of the trees had broad trunks large enough for objects to hide behind. The forest stood eerily quiet with only an occasional bird chirp and flutter of wings. She touched the ground and scattered the leaves in search of clues. Several lines of leaves laid flattened; she presumed by a car. The tire tracks led north, into the unknown.

She removed a pistol from her hip and held it out steadily in front of her. Moving quickly and silently through the trees in her rugged black boots, she watched her back with every step. Eagle Lake came back into her mind. So many loved ones gone. The image of Evelyn, her mother, and the look in her eyes as she passed away burrowed its way to the front of her mind. She then thought of Maverick's last moments in battle. All he wanted was to see his daughter one last time.

Just then, a man popped out from behind a tree with a gun pointed at her. Her haunting thoughts tried to distract her, but she squeezed her eyes shut and focused on the blackness. As she breathed in and out, Sydney's eyes flew open, and she steadied her hand. Staring down the sight of her pistol, her index finger jerked the trigger, and he went down. She confirmed the shot and kept moving.

Leaves crunched and she pivoted quickly to shoot. Sydney pulled the trigger each time another appeared. With every gunshot that echoed through the forest, her focus intensified until she moved off pure instinct.

Taking another quick glance around her surroundings, she confirmed she found everyone and moved on. She glided along the ground, following the tire marks. They eventually led her out of the forest and into a small abandoned town. Her senses heightened as she noticed several buildings tall enough for snipers and possible lookouts. Many of the buildings had broken windows, some with cardboard and dated graffiti. Only one car resided on the side of the road, but it was gutted out and stripped for parts. It wasn't the same car from the tracks, judging by three missing tires and one flat. The small town had just one main street straight and short enough to see through to the other side. Sydney thought finding the vehicle wouldn't be difficult. A couple alleyways stretched between buildings on the other side of the road, but she was unsure if they were large enough for a car. With no carports or garages around, she had to investigate.

Sydney glanced down at her wrist watch. She was at the eight-minute mark. She clenched her fists and bit her lip, unhappy with the readout. Sydney ran over to the side of the road and pressed herself up against the buildings with her weapon ready. Spotting a quick movement inside a window on the south side of the street, she aimed her gun and pulled the trigger. She made her way down the wall to an alley she assumed could fit a small car and searched again for tracks. The dirt road looked undisturbed. She dashed down the alley toward a large dumpster. She should have been more cautious. A woman jumped out from behind it and disarmed her.

The woman tried to punch her, but Sydney took her down with a sweeping kick. Before she could make another move, her opponent drove her boot into Sydney's stomach to push her back. All the air in her lungs escaped instantly, and she hurled over in pain. This gave the woman a chance to stand back up and face her. They swung at each other a few more times before Sydney made contact with her jaw and slammed her back to the ground. She pinned the woman down with a fist ready to keep punching, but she tapped Sydney on the leg. They nodded at each other respectfully. Sydney stood back up and ran back to her gun.

She continued to look for the missing vehicle. Along the way she took out a couple more people hiding in doors and windows.

As she turned the corner of a brick building, she saw the one thing that stuck out from the rest of the town: a shiny red van. Just to be sure, she approached it and peeked inside the windows. It was empty but still in good condition. It had to be the same one from the woods. She placed her sweaty hands on the hood of the van. It was still warm, and parts rattled from the engine settling. The only other unusual part of the area was a metal door on a nearby building with a mechanism on the side. It reminded her of the numbers on a payphone but with a digital green screen above it.

She picked the most obvious code she could think of and entered it in. 'NFA'.

The indicator light flashed red.

Her hands shook, and she glanced at her watch again. Twenty-two minutes. Gritting her teeth at the time and drawing a blank as she stared at the keypad, she tried a few more codes.

'FLIER', 'MALIK', 'SPARROW'. Nothing happened.

Sydona's hands vibrated even more as each attempt failed to open the door.

"Don't worry, Gia. I'm getting you out," she said to herself.

Glancing down at her wrist, she wasted an entire minute thinking of the code. Then, a light bulb went off in her head. What does the NFA strive to have the ability to do? Of course.

She entered in 'FLY'. The light flashed green, and the door clicked open.

Turning the rusty handle of the abandoned building, she crept into the darkness waiting inside. It reminded her of an old office building. A circular reception desk stuck out proudly in the lobby, while a long hallway on the right side housed several offices. Sydona thought back to what Willow told her about where the NFA kept their laboratories. To keep citizens from stumbling onto them, they normally set up in basements where they could work in secret. She searched for stairs leading down. As she made her way down the hallway, a few more people showed up with guns, but Sydona took them all out.

Time was running out, and she needed to find Giovanna before it was too late. She ran to the back of the building where she hoped to find an emergency stairwell leading to a basement. Another man ran into her on the stairs, and she took him out with no issues. At the bottom, the place opened up into a large hollowed out parking garage. It had remnants of an old camp Willow mentioned the NFA did experiments in: broken glass, cots with holes, a couple white tents that looked halfway broken down. They were in a hurry to leave. A brick wall created a makeshift office in the corner of the lot. It was clear it wasn't made when the original building was constructed, just like the garage. The only place that seemed logical to hold a prisoner was in that room, and Sydona bolted straight for it.

Two guards stood in the doorway. They both seemed surprised at her presence, and she used that to her advantage. As they fumbled with their weapons, she took both out with ease. Sitting on the back counter of the office, Giovanna greeted her with a big smile. Sydona ran past her and slammed down a big black button on the wall to sound the alarm. A clock with big red numbers on the wall synced up with her watch, and it stopped at twenty-nine minutes and four seconds.

"You did it!" Giovanna jumped up and hugged her.

"Yeah, just barely," Sydona panted.

Just then, the two people who were guarding Giovanna walked into the room, unharmed. They held their hands out to shake Sydona's, and she gladly took them.

"Congratulations, Syd. We knew you would pass," said the large man with long brown hair.

"Thanks guys." She paused to catch her breath. "You changed the code on me."

The other man teased. "We couldn't make it too easy for you."

“Yeah, whatever, dude. I know it was you who changed it, wasn’t it?” she teased.

“It wasn’t me, I swear! It was Willow,” he said with his hands up in surrender.

“I heard my name! Y’all talkin’ smack behind my back?” Willow burst into the room and gave Sydona a sturdy handshake. Silas and Raoul followed behind.

“Congrats!” Silas grinned and gave her a quick hug.

“What, you couldn’t do it any faster than that?” Raoul exclaimed, making himself known to everyone in the room.

“Oh, shut up, Raoul.” Sydona laughed.

She glanced around the room of smiling faces and friendly gestures, and she really felt like she belonged. She didn’t have to hide her true self from them. More people joined them in the room, most all of them were the folks she shot on her way down. One of them was Jet who she’d seen a few times from training. He was a young Asian man with silky black hair that covered one of his eyes. He shook Sydona’s hand then met up with Lacey from the alley. Lacey had a few scrapes and bruises from the brawl but was still in good spirits. Jet touched Lacey’s lip that had a little blood and kissed her cheek. She was young, like Jet, with short ash-brown hair and a vibrant pink strand near her face. She soon made her way over to Sydona and hugged her. It felt strange to fight someone and then hug them minutes later.

Willow spoke up. “Attention everyone.” When no one listened, she spoke louder. “Hey! Shut the hell up!”

The room silenced and everyone gave their attention to the big red-haired woman in the middle.

“I would like to formally announce our newest member of the Sparrows: Sydona!”

The room cheered and applauded. The attention made her face turn slightly pink.

Willow continued as she wrapped her arm around Sydona’s shoulders. “I met this snarky minx just three months ago, and let me tell ya, she was a damn handful! If it wasn’t for her fairy, Raoul, who knows how things would’ve turned out for us. I know I ain’t her favorite person ever, but she got that burnin’ fire in her that don’t stop, an’ I admire her for it. She single handedly took down Dr. Malik at Eagle Lake, and now she wants more! Treat this woman like the princess she is, and help her with anythin’ she asks for.”

Willow’s words resonated deep within her. The feelings she first encountered with Willow were way in the past now. She truly helped Sydona build her trust in humans. The mention of the doctor, however, made her stomach twist. It was still unclear if he was alive or not. But by joining the Sparrows, she would have a better chance of getting the job done in case he was still around.

After a few minutes of cheering for the new member, the crowd dispersed and left the office room. Her friends and family gathered around her.

“Can’t believe you’re a Sparrow now!” Giovanna exclaimed.

“Are you excited for the tattoo?” asked Silas.

“No,” Sydona scoffed, forgetting all about the tattoo part.

“It’s not that bad. Trust me... wouldn’t have done it this many times if it was bad.”

“Yeah, Silas, you were thinking of joining too, right? Where are they going to put yours?” Raoul asked.

Willow spoke up. “He’s right. We haven’t had anyone with the amount of tat’s you got, Sil. Might have’ta just put it on your forehead!”

Sydona laughed. “Oh, I would pay to see that.”

“I’ll find a place. Don’t you worry,” Silas said confidently.

“Where? Like your butt?” Giovanna asked playfully.

The group roared with laughter once more, making Silas grin and bear it. As the rest of the group teased and talked amongst themselves, Sydona joined Silas at the front and had a more serious conversation.

Butterflies filled her stomach as the words she thought about came out. “Where *are* all of your tattoos?”

Silas grinned over at her, and Sydona swore he could see her cheeks turning pink.

“You wanna see all of them?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’re the one claiming you have room, but I’m thinking I **need** proof.”

“Okay,” he smiled and gently touched her fingers with his. “Does that mean you want to go out tonight then?”

She **hesitated**. “I don’t know, Silas.”

The thought of going out in public was nerve racking enough without knowing it would also be a date. With a man. She could tell he wanted to hold her hand, but she swiftly moved farther away so he wouldn’t touch her. Silas gave her a look as if he understood but kept trying.

“It’s been months since Eagle Lake, Syd. There’s nothing to worry about anymore. There still may be camps in hiding, but there’s no looming threats anymore. You can finally relax, babe.”

Babe.

The pet name made her feel sick. “It’s not... that...”

“Oh,” Silas said with defeat. “Well, I know it can’t be me. I mean, look. I even shaved -- that one time. Yeah, it grew back, but that’s biology. No stopping it.”

Sydona chuckled involuntary. “Right...”

His comment played like a broken record in her head. *Biology*. It never failed. Except when it did. The conversation fell flat, and the two walked silently side by side the rest of the way.

Her boots loudly crunched through multi-colored leaves and twigs on the way to the fleet of vehicles hidden in the forest. On the way, she kept thinking of Silas. Her feelings for him were growing a little every day, and now he wanted a date? Though she appreciated the gesture, it just didn’t make sense right now. They had a peculiar life and nowhere to fit a romantic relationship. More than that, she had too much on her mind to worry about petty things.

As she approached the truck, she took the front seat. She expected Silas to get in the back, but he continued to another car. She watched him with narrowed eyes. It had never dawned on her before that they normally sat together when they went out. She guessed they wouldn’t be going on a date, and she felt horrible. It wasn’t the first time her walls went up around him.

Sydona didn’t say a word to anyone as they took off down the road. She couldn’t help but think of the day it happened. The day biology failed her.



A gentle breeze kissed her face as she gripped a backpack full of supplies. It was her group’s turn to fly off to the new safe zone on Sparrow Island. The large cabin stood behind them, and they used the several acre field as their take off area. The dense forest stood ahead, and soon Eagle Lake would be behind her forever. Raoul stood ready on her shoulder, Giovonna was on her right, Silas and Ian were on her left. Willow gave the okay, and the group took off running. As usual, her dominate foot pushed off the ground, but all that happened was a jump, and she landed back on the grass **==**

She shook her head with confusion as she watched her friends flying high above. Willow rushed over to Sydona and **==**ered herself.

“You okay? What happened?”

Sydonia felt like her entire world flipped upside down. Why was she unable to fly? This never happened to her before. When she tried to take off, her body didn't feel light. Something went wrong. Embarrassed by her failed ability, she didn't answer Willow but tried to fly again.

She quickly brushed herself off and took off running again. Her foot pushed off the ground harder, but she fell back down again. Eventually, the group circled back to see what was going on. Raoul was the first to reach her.

“Syd? What's going on?” he asked.

Sydonia brushed the dirt off her knees and clothes without a word. She felt like curling up into a ball and shriveling away. Her inability to fly made her feel like a fish drowning underwater, and she gasped for oxygen. The earth around her spun so quickly that she became dizzy and unstable. In the confusion, everyone's voices blurred together. Raoul suggested he try to use his dust to help her, but she refused. If she couldn't fly on her own, she didn't want him helping her the rest of her life. It wouldn't be fair to herself or him. She couldn't deny the blunt truth before her. The feeling hid in the back of her mind since she was electrocuted by the doctor. She was a full human. A blue eyed, grounded, human.



As they headed back home, the rest of the Sparrows went their separate ways. Sydonia wouldn't call a cabin near Willow home, though. But it did the job for the time being. She was afraid to return to her real home. Afraid he might still be out there. Watching. Waiting.

“Syd,” Raoul said, making her twitch back to reality.

She directed her attention to him and realized they were there already. Willow, Giovonna and Silas walked up to the house while she was still buckled in.

“What were you thinking about?” Raoul asked.

“Home.”

Raoul responded with a sympathetic look. He knew how she felt. But it wasn't like it would change anything.

“So, I've been thinking...” he started. “When *are* we going back?”

Sydonia unbuckled herself. “I'm not talking about this again, Raoul.” She grabbed her green tote and slammed the car door shut.

“But my family...”

“They're my family, too. But we can't go back... Not yet.”

“Okay. Not yet. So *when*?” Raoul pried, hovering close to Sydonia like a gnat.

“I'm just not ready. I don't even know when I will be...” She walked faster and ran up the stairs to join the others.

The cabin reminded her of Willow's, but it was slightly larger. Willow said it had been empty for years and didn't think anyone knew it was there. There were never any sale signs or people stopping by to lease it. Just four walls and a toilet. She walked through the door and into a living room with one dusty couch and a couple chairs. A large burgundy rug laid in the middle, and the walls were barren except for two windows letting the light flicker in. Sydonia nailed a bed sheet covered in cartoon characters over the windows for privacy and security. Although hideous, it helped her feel better.

After everyone put their belongings away, they snatched food from the pantry and put a meal together. They had all been out training since five in the morning. No one was more vocal about being hungry than Raoul.

"I'm glad you're a Sparrow and all, but could you bring those little cheese balls next time?" he complained as he ate an entire loaf of bread. Fairies were opposed to most foods other than fruit, but of course, Raoul had to be dramatic about it.

"I agree, lil' man. I think some of the members should have jerky in their pockets as a spare, just in case. One time, it took them hours to finish. I thought I was gonna see my pops up in heaven," Willow said.

Sydona rolled her eyes. "Yeah, that's what we need to focus on next time. Sure."

Raoul's mood shifted in the last few months. His normal wit and sarcasm had been replaced with bitterness and short replies. Anytime the doctor's name was spoken, he made an audible sigh. Sydona thought traveling with Giovonna was enough to deal with, but he acted more like a teenage girl. She wondered if it would ever end.

"Oh, don't forget 'bout the nation-wide meeting in a couple days. You'll need to be there, princess," Willow said as she took a huge bite of sandwich with deer meat.

"What about us?" Silas asked.

"Yeah, are we allowed to go if we aren't members?" Giovonna added.

Willow looked uncertain. "Ta be honest, I have no clue. I can make a call to see. I don't know if Knox will be alright with y'all."

"Who's Knox?" Giovonna asked as she took a seat at the table.

"Just the most important fella to know. He's the big guy on campus. The head honcho. The leader."

"What's the meeting for again?" Sydona asked.

"Not sure. He called it after Eagle Lake. Prolly just a plan on exterminatin' the rest of the hideouts."

"Have you met him before?" Sydona asked.

"No, only heard o' him in passin'. Knox is a great man but not one to cross. Been the leader for a while now."

"Can't wait," Sydona said. She wanted to sound interested, but she received a skewed look from Willow. She didn't bother to correct herself.

Sydona changed the subject. "Who's making a fruit run tomorrow? Any more bread in Raoul's stomach and I think he'll explode."

No one volunteered.

"I'm fine, Syd. You're not my mother. I can take care of myself," Raoul retorted.

Silas snatched the keys sitting on the countertop. "I'll go."

Sydona smirked.

"Bananas and mango, right?" asked Silas.

"Right!" Raoul answered. "And kiwi. I miss kiwi. And strawberries, papaya, grapes, oh and oranges! Or, whatever you can find. Thanks..."

Silas nodded his head and caught Sydona's eye. She couldn't help but smile at his generosity. After everyone finished eating, Sydona and Silas were left alone in the kitchen.

Silas cleared his throat. "About earlier..."

Sydona didn't need him to finish to know what he was referencing. The thought of bringing up the painful subject made her want to shut down. The chair legs reverberated on the tile floor as she sat down and waited for him to finish.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable about the date thing. I mean, where would we even go, right?” He chuckled and joined her at the table. His hands stayed on top of the table, close to hers.

Sydona knew he meant well, and the look he gave her made it hard to be upset. She noticed his hands fidgeting and all the dirt under his nails. His grungy hands and nails never appealed to her at first, but now it was somewhat familiar and comforting. Those hands taught her sign language that helped find her best friend. Who was she to judge the cleanliness if it meant warmth in her heart? Her feelings for Silas began to feel the same way she felt when she was at home with the fairies.

“No, it wasn’t that, actually. I just can’t stop thinking of the day I couldn’t fly... You said you can’t stop biology, but here we are--stopped.”

She stared at a knot in the floorboard until she felt her hands being squeezed by the man across the table. Silas curled up a sideways grin and winked.

“I have an idea. Raoul!”

Raoul flew into the room at attention. “Yeah?”

“Come with us.”

Silas stood up with Sydona’s hand in his and ran outside. Curiosity and nervousness nuzzled together in the depths of her stomach. Deep into the woods, he scanned the area for a clearing to run.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked.

“You’ll see!” he said in a witty, high-pitched voice.

Once they found an open area, Silas nodded at Raoul who then covered Sydona with fairy dust. Silas gripped her hand tighter and took off running. Sydona ran alongside him, feeling light as the breeze and carefree. Treetops swayed from side to side below her; it was a sight she was unsure she’d ever see again. Her senses tingled and goosebumps rose on her skin. Fairy dust had that effect, but it wasn’t the dust this time. As the two sped up, her hand climbed up Silas’s arm and squeezed. Adrenaline soared through her body like a falcon. The amount of happiness she felt in that moment made everything bad disappear. Soon, though, her excitement drained. She was a stone and no longer wanted their help.

“Hey,” she yelled at Silas. “Can we get down now?”

Silas’s bright smiling face dwindled at her hardened expression. “We just got started.”

“Please.” Sydona blinked away tears forming in the corners of her eyes. They rolled behind her ears and into her blonde hair, whipping into the cold air.

“What happened?” he asked as he turned them back around.

Sydona stayed quiet. She just wanted to land and bolt.

An awkward silence fell over the pair as they headed back down. Sydona’s hand slipped back down to his, but she barely held on. Once she was able to judge the height from the ground, she let go and landed on the dirt with a thud. Raoul’s orange dust made the landing softer, and Sydona walked away before they could catch up to her. She needed to fly on her own again if it was the last thing she did.

Chapter Two

As the day settled and the crickets came out, Sydona wandered to the room she shared with Silas. While they both agreed to share, she was less enthusiastic. It was better than sleeping in Giovonna's room, though. Silas wouldn't talk to her at all hours of the night.

Stacks of books and piles of clothes were strewn about the room. Sydona didn't mind the mess. She had more important things to focus on.

Sydona shuffled through the books she brought from Willow's house and the Lake. She paused and pulled out a book with a deep blue cover. It looked familiar, but she couldn't place where she knew it from. Then it came to her. As she flipped through the pages, Maverick's face popped into her mind. During the short time she spent with him, he had it glued to his face and mouthed every word. A scrap of paper fell out, and her heart sank down into her stomach. It fluttered onto the shag carpet, and as she bent down to pick it up, she read the words she wrote down before the revolution.



Borba i amore bez strah -- "Fight and love without fear."

A flash of her late mother's face flooded her memories. Those were the last words she ever heard her speak. Words that changed the fate of their species.

A knock on her door made Sydona shove the paper back into the book for safekeeping.

Giovonna poked her head through the crack in the door. "Syd?"

"Yeah, come in," she answered and threw the book under her bed.

"Where did you go with Silas just now?"

"Nowhere. Just messing around."

Giovonna scrunched her face. "Oh... out in the woods?"

Sydona raised an eyebrow. "What? Oh, no. Not... no, he was just trying to make me feel better."

"Okay?" Giovonna said slowly.

"How are the bracelets coming along?" Sydona asked and flopped down on the squeaky bed.

Giovonna joined her. "Um, not good actually. It's hard to know how to fix it when I can't activate them."

"Why would you need to activate it?"

"Well, um, think of it like a car. When it's on and running, you can see all the moving parts and what it all does. Without seeing how it works to begin with, I don't really know where to start."

Sydona furrowed her brow. "You're just now letting me know this? Haven't you been 'working on it' for a couple months now?"

"Yeah, but I've been helping you train for the Sparrows most of the time. By the time we got home, I'd be exhausted," Giovonna argued.

"But why didn't you mention this to me three months ago? I've been waiting on that bracelet to make me fly again," Sydona said with a twinge of sadness in her voice.

"I know. I'm sorry Syd... I hate to say this, but I honestly don't think it will help. The bracelets were specifically designed to stop flying. It's not a switch you can just turn on and off."

Sydona hung her head low, not wanting to accept the truth. Technology was not her strong suit, and she trusted Giovonna. But reality stung like a thousand yellow jackets.

"Thank you, Gia, for trying. I know it's not your fault..."

Giovonna gave her friend a hug. "I'll keep trying though." She closed the door gently behind her.

Sydona lay back on the bed, and a single tear slipped out. As she soaked in the events of the day in silence, she let out a sigh and closed her eyes. Just then, her door opened again, and Silas made a gross hacking sound that made her scrunch her face. She grabbed a pillow, placed it on top of her face and stuck her arms down at her side. There was never a moment of peace anymore.

The bed sunk down on her left side, and she knew Silas lay down next to her.

“You doin’ okay?” he asked softly.

Sydona growled in response, the pillow muting most of it.

“That bad, huh?”

She pushed the sides of the pillow down around her ears.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

Silas stayed quiet, but she felt him shifting around in the covers.

“Willow left, by the way. She said to say she was proud of you.”

Sydona sighed. She didn’t know why those words made her calm, but she liked hearing them. Soon the room went dark, and Silas stopped moving. She removed the pillow and turned her head to the side to stare at the back of his head. Living with three and half other people took its toll on her. The fairy tree didn’t count as it was more of a guest house, and they had their own living arrangements. Raoul didn’t make the transition any easier. She hoped it would just be the two of them again like the old days.

After a brief and troubling night, she woke the next morning to an empty bed. Her hand circled the sheets, searching for the missing warm body. A whiff of eggs and pancakes found its way into the room. She sat up and heard singing and laughing from the kitchen. A smile crept up on her, and she made her way into the fun.

“...Come on, Raoul. I wanna hear a song from our culture!” Giovonna exclaimed while flinging a spatula around.

Raoul flew around her, laughing. “I don’t sing like *every other* fairy in my family. I will make your ears bleed!”

Sydona spoke up. “I know one.”

They turned their heads and stared at the third person suddenly standing in the room.

“My mother used to sing it to me when I was sick,” Sydona said.

She took a deep breath and shut her blue eyes. A vision of her young mother sitting on the edge of her bed floated into memory. Evelyn’s humming slowly brought the words into melody, and Sydona sang the familiar lullaby.

*“Rest your head and close your eyes,
Your spirit soars to the skies.
Let my warmth, my song, and soothing voice,
Heal your aches, return your joys.
Dream of happy days and bliss
I’ll melt your pain with my loving kiss.”*

Raoul caught Sydona’s glance and gave her a kind smile.

“That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard,” Giovonna said with a cracking, sentimental voice.

Sydona blinked a tear. She then looked around the house, which was growing brighter with the morning sun, and realized Silas wasn’t there.

“Where’s Silas?”

“He went out for food,” Raoul said and sat on her shoulder. It had been weeks since he sat on her shoulder, and her face relaxed with satisfaction.

“This early?” Sydona asked.

“Seems like someone is eager to please.” Giovonna winked.

Sydona laughed and blushed. “Didn’t think he was such an early bird.”

“He seems happier lately,” Raoul said.

“Does he?”

“Oh yeah,” said Giovonna.

“When he’s not being shot down for doing something nice,” Raoul retorted.

Sydona was taken aback by his words, but she understood what he meant. They were doing well, and she didn’t want to argue about her feelings.

“Sorry about that. I know it was well intentioned,” she said softly.

Raoul flew off her shoulder. “You didn’t have to run off, though.”

Sydona clenched her jaw. Luckily, Silas walked through the door only seconds later. He carried several bags of food; three of them were filled with fruit. As he set them down on the kitchen table, she noticed something different about him. His face was free of stubble and looked ten years younger. It amazed her how a simple thing like removing hair made someone more attractive. Sydona had only seen him one other time with baby soft skin. The way the light shone in between the sheets on the window made his skin glow and his black hair glisten. He wore a t-shirt slightly too small, and his large biceps made her swoon as he carried in a television set.

“Wait, is that a T.V.?” Sydona asked, snapping out of a trance.

“Yep,” Silas grunted as he set it on the floor in the living room. “Got a super good deal on it. And some other stuff I got in the car.”

As if time escaped her, she looked around and saw Giovonna carrying things inside while she stood there in the middle of the room.

“Do you think you could help, or would you rather stand there and stare at me? I’d honestly be alright with the second option,” Silas teased.

Sydona covered her face with her hands, hiding a smile. She punched his arm on her way out to help the others.

Along with the television, he had a lamp without a shade, a couple of small rugs, a scale, a crudely painted picture of an orange cat, a broom with several missing bristles, clothes of varying sizes and a couple of VHS tapes with no sleeves. They dumped everything onto the couch.

“Silas!” Giovonna rummaged around. “Did you get a VCR for these tapes?”

“Oh. I guess not,” said Silas with a shrug.

“How are we supposed to watch these then?” Giovonna whined.

“Can’t. But it did come with an antenna!” Silas said, pulling out a metal contraption.

Silas dusted off the television and hooked up the signal while Sydona looked through the clothes. “Looks like you stopped by Willow’s house or something. Where did you get all this crap?”

“I stopped by a yard sale on the way back from the farmers market. Thought we could start making this place look more like a home.”

Sydona grinned and began to fold the clothes, even though some were big enough for Willow to wear as a dress. The mentioning of the farmers market made Sydona wonder about Jim, Annie and her son Joseph. It felt like years since she saw them.

“You stopped by a fruit stand at the market in Redford, right? Did you see a woman with a little boy by chance?” Sydona asked.

Silas poked his head out from behind the television with a puzzled look. “Yeah. I think I did. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious. How did they look? Okay?”

“Like people running a food stand. So a little farmy I suppose?”

“Thanks, Silas. That’s super helpful,” she said with a slight chuckle.

Silas finished setting up the T.V. but was only able to receive five channels. The group helped to clean up and put the new items away. The lamp stayed in the living room as they only had one light source from the kitchen. Sydona placed the painting in Giovonna’s room so she wouldn’t have to look at it every day. Since Giovonna would be in the living room watching television most of the time, she didn’t mind it.

The rest of the afternoon was quiet and pleasant. Sydona kept busy by reading books on the back patio and identifying bird songs from the surrounding forest. Silas went hunting with Giovonna’s bow to catch something not fruit or plant based, and Giovonna stayed inside to clean.

Raoul disappeared, and she imagined he slept most of the day like a cat. Soon, he joined her through the open window and sat on the opposite chair.

“It’s really peaceful here,” Raoul said as he warmed his body in the sun.

Sydona closed her book and looked down at him glowing in the light. “It is.”

“I wonder how much longer we should stay.”

“I wonder too. I miss home.”

Sydona took another look around the quiet woods. It seemed almost like she was trapped in a dream. At any moment she could discover the doctor’s death and wake up. As long as she didn’t know, she would be teetering on the edge of a cliff. She stared down at Raoul who drifted off to sleep in the lawn chair and her gut began to twist. They had been bonding more lately, and maybe it was the right time to confess what she knew about the doctor. It was never really the right time, but the longer she kept it a secret, the worse it would get.

Her lip shook nervously. “Raoul. I--”

“Oh thank goodness we found you!” A pink-winged fairy barged in between her words.

Sydona stood up in shock. “Lilly?”

“Xander! Over here!” Lilly yelled out with an extremely high-pitched voice.

Raoul flew up at the sound of yelling and the sight of his relatives. Soon, another fairy with green wings buzzed over with a heaving chest.

“Lilly? Xander? What are you doing here?” Raoul asked, still unable to process their presence.

The smaller pink-winged fairy spoke up. “It’s so good to see you two!”

“We’ve been looking for you everywhere!” Xander said with a slightly lower pitched tone.

Everyone quickly hugged before getting back to the rundown of what was happening.

“Is everything alright? How did you find us?” Sydona asked.

“Something’s happened,” Xander said and flicked his lime green wings. “The NFA came by the house.”

“What?” Sydona and Raoul exchanged a terrified look.

“A few days ago. They... they...” Lilly shook her head and burst out crying.

Xander comforted her and whispered as low as he could. “They burned our tree down.”

Another wail from Lilly screeched in everyone’s ears.

Sydonas heart stopped like a freight train derailling. The worst possible thing had happened, and it was all her fault. Her mouth went dry, and she drew a blank on what to say next. Raoul looked as if a ghost passed through him. Seeing him speechless was like seeing a unicorn.

Xander spoke with a heavy heart. "Jubilee... I know she was like a sister to you, Raoul."

"What about her?" Raoul said on the verge of tears.

"She, uh, she was captured. It happened so fast. None of us could stop them."

Raoul's eyes flooded. He constantly complained about Jubilee and how much of a pest she was. But she admired Raoul like a role model. Sydona knew deep down he really cared about her. His face said it all. What hurt the most about the news was that Jubilee just learned to fly only a few months ago. The last time they saw her was at her Vila Prah Ceremony, and she was so happy.

"We want you to come back home," Lilly choked.

Sydonas wondered how much more the NFA would take from her. They took her parents, killed her mom, and now they had ransacked her home and killed innocent fairies. She didn't plan on making it to the Sparrows meeting the next day. It was a time for family, not revenge.

"Let me get the car keys from Silas," Sydona said. Raoul nodded at her as he cleaned off his face.

"Keys?" Lilly asked. "Driving will take too long. We need to fly."

Sydonas clenched her jaw. "I--can't." And she wouldn't fly even if she could. It was too dangerous.

"What do you mean you can't?" Xander asked.

"It was stolen from me at Eagle Lake," Sydona whispered, still ashamed to admit it.

"Oh. Well maybe Shaman Faro can help. Like a V.I.P ceremony!" Lilly exclaimed, her high-pitched voice returning.

Sydonas shook her head with uncertainty. "I don't think it will work with me. And I couldn't ask him to do that after what just happened..."

"Poppycock!" Xander stood up straight. "What's the harm in trying if you'll be there anyway, right? Come on."

The afternoon sun had dipped behind the trees and fireflies danced beneath the branches.

"Alright. We should go now, though. Let me tell the others," Sydona said and walked back inside.

Could the Shaman really make her fly again? The thought sent tingles through her pale skin. It might be her only chance to feel whole again, and she couldn't pass it up. Sydona grabbed the keys and an empty suitcase. They were finally on their way back home.

Intrigued? Make sure to pre-order to get the rest of the story on June 25th!

Thank you for reading!