

# Vultures: Book Three

## Chapter One

Waves of electricity slowly made their way out of Sydona's system. She stuck to the floor like a paralyzed victim. Every minuscule thought infiltrated her mind, leading up to that exact point. She thought she was ahead of him, but he had always been in the lead. Malik had too many eyes. As large as the Sparrows' rebellion appeared, the Vultures tripled them. Would it always be a losing battle no matter what she did? She hated thinking that way, but her current position left her no alternative.

Peeling herself off the white marble floor as her body felt somewhat normal again, she examined her surroundings. She wiped her face of tears and sweat. She was eager to see her father. A pounding heart leaped out of her chest as she stood up and pressed her hands against the plastic prison wall. In another cell, he sat across from her on a cot as thin as paper.

"Dad!" she cried, pounding a fist on the plastic. The smooth, rigid surface didn't budge. She pounded until both of her hands tingled. He rose to his feet, shuffled to the wall, and pressed his hands against the plastic. She noted his trembling chin, but ignored it as it would only cause her to break down. She couldn't afford to use up any more energy. She had to focus.

Ian spoke, but even in pure silence, she failed to hear anything at all. His voice was so mellow to begin with, she didn't expect to hear him. She shrugged her shoulders to show him she wasn't able to understand. The father and daughter stared into each other's eyes, somehow trying to communicate telepathically. Sydona observed his condition. His skin appeared darker, just like he told her in the letter. The wrinkles in his face had deepened and the hunch in his back seemed worse than before. He shouldn't be in there. She still couldn't understand how they found him. Only the Sparrows knew of the island. An uninhabited island at that. Barely anyone else in existence knew of it.

His fragile hands slid down the wall and he turned away. A chin that once trembled was at its lowest point, fusing with his neck. Sydona perked up and pounded the plastic again to show

him she wasn't done. She would never be done looking at her father, her last living relative on Earth. And he was trapped there because of her.

Unable to communicate effectively with her father, she retired to her so-called bed. She listened to her breathing as she stared up at the white ceiling with an overly exposed fluorescent light fixture. The intense buzzing sound gave her something else to focus on. Her heart steadily beat within her bruised and damaged chest. One by one, her friends' faces came to the forefront of her mind. She wondered if she would ever get to see the people she grew so fond of again. As Raoul's face came to mind, so did Jubilees. Only a week or so ago, she was taken by Natalia. His niece was only four years old, the same fairy they had a Vila Prah for the day before they left. What would Natalia do to her? She had only just learned how to fly.

Just then, someone appeared behind the wall carrying a metallic tray. It was Natalia wearing an outfit just tight enough to expose her stomach and cleavage. Her hair was pulled into a small twisted bun, while her makeup was fresh and heavy. A long chain with a dragon charm hung around her neck, but it didn't seem to match the rest of her ensemble. Sydona accidentally caught her eye, and Natalia winked quickly. Her heart gravitated to her throat, and it made her want to vomit. She had no idea what Natalia was doing there and feared the absolute worst. The Vulture accompanying her wore all black, making him look more sophisticated than Jones. The copper taste of his blood still lingered in her mouth. The tray she carried had a glass of water, an apple, and what looked like a sandwich. Despite how much she despised Natalia, Sydona's mouth watered. Natalia stood behind the guard as he input the code next to her cell that glowed red. As the door slid open, he instantly pointed the gun at Sydona. Cautious, she sat up in her cot.

"Down boy," Natalia barked with a smoky voice and snapped her fingers.

"But the doctor said—"

"Does it really look like I care what the doctor said?" Natalia dropped the food down on the nearby bookshelf and pivoted back around to the guard. She grabbed his groin and leaned in closer to him. Natalia's back was to Sydona as she whispered in his ear. Judging by his face, it was something dirty. Whatever she said worked. The guard lowered his gun back to his side. Natalia locked her eyes on his, and he bit his lip as he left the cell. He must have realized how ridiculous he looked. When he took his post near the door, he cleared his throat and broke eye contact. As Natalia turned to face Sydona, her expression melted into a disgusted scrunch.

She leaned into Sydona. “That man has *the* smallest dick I’ve ever squeezed.”

Sydona answered with wide and confused eyes.

Natalia took a minute to look around the trashed cell. “So, what the fuck happened here? You on your period, too? I think that road trip synced us up.”

“What do you want?” Sydona asked, changing the weird subject.

“I don’t want shit, *niña*. John told me to bring you some food so you don’t starve to death. Would that really be such a bad thing?”

Sydona’s jaw tightened. “I’m not hungry.”

“Let it rot, then.” Natalia grabbed a piece of the broken chair and examined it, admiring the sharp point. “This what you was gonna use to kill him?”

Sydona glanced away. She hoped by not answering she would bore Natalia into leaving.

“It’s not bad, really. You gotta do it in his sleep, though. If you *really* want him dead. No defense. Unaware. It’s *so* much more satisfying when you catch ‘em off guard.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? Was that her plan for her—to come down and kill her when she was sleeping? And the way she said it worried her. It was as if she had done it before, killing the unaware. Sadistic. But at the same time, she had a point. Sleeping makes a person innocent and unarmed. Guards didn’t surround Malik in his bed, did they? She could find that out for herself.

Natalia tossed the stake to the side and sat next to Sydona. Sydona instinctively bounced away from her and halfway off the edge. “I remember when this place used to be crawling with you freaks. Crying and begging to let them go. Like, *all* the fucking time. It was so goddamn annoying.” Natalia grabbed the apple off the tray and took a bite. She continued with a mouthful. “I used to do this thing where I would see how long it would take to get their eyes to change from purple to brown. Turns out, it doesn’t take that long.” She laughed, spewing bits of apple. “But the *real* challenge was getting them to change from green to brown. My record was a minute. It was this teenage boy who was such a little prick. *He* was my Everest. I finally got it when I figured out that fliers don’t necessarily need fingernails. When I got the pinky off, they turned brown *real* quick!” She laughed so hard she practically choked.

Sydona's fists vibrated with anger, and she knew her eyes would be blazing green if they could still change.

Natalia turned to face her. “I can’t do that with you, though. You’re defective. Shame.” As she took a few more bites, she let half eaten fruit fall to the ground. “Well... it’s been *nice* talking to you.”

She turned to leave, but Sydona couldn’t hold back. She still had questions.

“How’d you find Theodore?” she asked.

Natalia flipped back around, turning on her heels. “I’m sorry, who?” she asked with the biggest smile.

Sydona could tell she had been waiting for this question, but she didn’t care. She sprung up and closed the distance between them. Her face was inches away.

Natalia stepped back and chuckled. “He came to *us*, puta. Like a lost little puppy.”

“W—Why would he do that?” She furrowed her brows.

“Fuck if I know. He was homeless, and smelled like shit. He wanted to go somewhere he could stay and eat. Fucking pathetic. Get a job, right? But just as I was about to set my boys on him and put him out of his misery, he said *your* name. Said y’all were friends and sold weed, like a couple amateurs.” She laughed and shook her head. “Anyway, I decided to spare him like the generous person I am and told him that if he could lure you to us, he’d be set for life. Dumbass agreed almost instantly. It was his idea to set the trap.”

Sydona stood dumbfounded, trying to understand her story. “Theo wouldn’t do that... He wouldn’t hurt a fly. There’s no way he would set up explosives.”

“I’m not letting that fucker take my idea! The dynamite was all me. He just found the location and stole a department store mannequin. Everything else was me. Pshh,” she said with an eye roll at the end.

“Theo killed himself right in front of me! Shot his...” Sydona paused and shut her eyes. “You did *that*, too.”

Natalia shrugged. “Looks like I did the world a favor, then.”

Sydona couldn’t hold back any longer. Her shaking fist burst from its cage and landed square in the middle of Natalia’s face.

Natalia fell backwards, and blood began to leak from her nose. “Excellent!” Natalia said, wiping her face and biting her tongue between her grin. She quickly recovered. Within a second, she tackled Sydona and slammed her against the wall. Natalia wailed her fists at Sydona, but she took equal shots back at her. Natalia’s necklace swayed around. Sydona snatched at it. She was

eventually able to grab it, but Natalia yanked herself backwards and forced it out of her hand. The spikey wings sliced into Sydona's palm. The yelling and screeching bounced against the plastic walls until the guard barged in and plucked Natalia out of the brawl. He shoved her back into the hallway and blocked the doorway, refusing to let her back into the cell.

"What the f— I wasn't done yet!" she screamed.

"Orders are not to hurt her. Not even *you!*" he retorted. The plastic wall glowed crimson again as the guard locked it back up. Natalia fixed her hair and glared at Sydona. When Sydona flashed her a sideways smirk, Natalia stormed off, the guard trailing behind.

As soon as they left her sight, Sydona flopped down on the bed. Her entire body ached, and she arched her back in pain. The news about Theodore rushed back to her. Why had she never come back for him? He was so desperate for *something* that he turned to the N.F.A. She could have prevented his death, his messed up life, all of it. Tears welled up, but they retreated as she heard a sound coming from her father's cell. He was hunched over on his bed, coughing. It was so loud it brought a sinking feeling to her stomach. Was he sick?

"Dad," Sydona said out loud to herself. Once she noticed him coughing harder, she panicked.

"Hey! Hey!" she yelled and pounded on the wall as hard as she could. Her eyes darted from her sick father to the edge of the hallway, hoping to see someone who could help. Even if it happened to be the crazy woman. When no one appeared, she grabbed the tray, flung the food off, and threw it at the plastic door. She slammed the metal against the plastic so hard her ears vibrated with a high-pitched ringing. Still, she kept going. After a solid minute of relentless pounding, it was useless. Her father soon held up his hand and stopped coughing. Sydona let out a heavy sigh. Her fists relaxed. Sweat drenched her entire body. The cell felt as if it were growing smaller with each shaky breath.

What would happen if he wasn't okay? The doctor needed them both alive, didn't he? Why wouldn't someone be down there to make sure they didn't try to kill themselves? There were no cameras or buttons or anything she could see to ensure nothing happened.

Not much time passed until she noticed different people walking down the hall. Doctor Malik. Again. This time, he had just one other guard with him. He wore a white lab coat over his suit and propped himself up with a cane that featured a bronze eagle head.

A wide grin was plastered on his face, like she was a present he'd been wanting to open all December. The guard opened her cell and directed her out with a simple head nod. Malik stood still in the hallway as he put handcuffs on her. As it clicked, she took a step, but the doctor stopped her. Sydona stumbled and flinched her head backwards. He then pulled out a metal, flat ring from his pocket and pulled it open. Malik snapped it around the light brown line circling her wrist, and her heart wanted to explode.

"No, no, please..." she pleaded softly. As much as she wanted to fight, she didn't have much left in her. Her stomach suddenly felt completely empty.

"Don't beg, Miss Wilder. It's unbecoming," he cautioned.

The sight of the bracelet forced flashbacks of Eagle Lake, and the memories made her lightheaded. She didn't understand why he bothered with the cuff if she couldn't fly. But she thought it was best not to ask. Malik took the lead, and the guard walked behind her. They made the long walk down the corridor, the same way she first came in with Natalia and Jones. She took a lasting look at her father who stood by his plastic door. His eyes were red and watery, and his face more worn than ever. She needed to tell them about his condition.

"My father is sick. He needs help!"

The guard shoved her forward.

Sydona stumbled. "I'm serious! He's coughing *a lot*."

"He's old, that's what old people do," said the guard, unconcerned with her father's fate.

Her teeth clenched. "Where are you taking me?"

"We're going to administer some tests," Malik replied.

"What tests?"

"Shut the hell up," said the guard with enunciated syllables.

Before she could retort, Malik spoke. "Now, now, Corry. Is that any way to speak to our guest?"

She narrowed her eyes at the fact he regarded her as a guest and not as she would describe it: a prisoner. Corry backed down and never said another word. As they kept walking and she was able to calm down, she wondered if she should tell him she wasn't able to fly anymore. Maybe that would push him over the edge. Maybe he would end his own miserable life over years of failed research. It was a morbid thought, but it made her smile.

What would he do if she didn't do what he wanted, though? Just kill her? She bit her lip. The last time she did something he didn't like, he electrocuted her and took away her ability. Killing her would be the next step, right? Or something worse. She was too nervous to say anything, so she walked in silence as they left the facility and went outdoors.

The first rush of crisp air embraced her senses, and she inhaled it deeply. Staleness from the prison below quickly dissolved. Her focus was renewed in the fresh, ocean air, and she slowly observed her surroundings. Veering to the left, they walked to the mansion on the hill sitting upon the one-hundred acre location. The house more than doubled the size of her sky blue Victorian. She thought her house was large, but this one was obnoxiously big. Floor-to-ceiling windows covered most of the walls, making it feel as if the room opened up to the outside world. It had multiple levels and even half levels, raising it about three stories high. The landscaping around it was impeccable with not a single leaf out of place. Things that could be symmetrical, were.

A complex of two-story buildings caught her eye in the distance as they proceeded up a large flight of bleached, concrete stairs. It looked similar to an apartment setup with cars parked on the cozy street out front. But they couldn't be normal apartments. In such close vicinity, they had to be part of the complex and not a separate neighborhood. They were on a peninsula. The only logical way Doctor Malik could do what he did without nosey neighbors, was to also own those, too. She wondered who, if anyone, lived there.

Malik slid the glass door open for them, and her bare feet sunk into the lavishly soft carpet. White was a favorite color inside the mansion as well. She imagined slamming Malik's head against a window and staining the carpet red, just to add some color. Every inch of the place was flawlessly designed with blues and whites. She still preferred blood red. It was the back of the house, and they trekked through the living room with twenty-foot ceilings. Windows stretched just as high, letting in the constant Californian sun. She actually admired that detail. Even though the mansion was large and bright with several, high-tech electronics, it somehow still felt homey.

After passing by the kitchen with an island, trekking upstairs and then down a hallway, they entered an office. It was covered floor to ceiling with bookshelves. Ladders were placed along the shelves to reach the higher books and the only window occupied the space behind the desk. The aroma of wood hit her in the face as if she were in the Amazon. A gold bust was

displayed behind glass on a shelf, but she didn't know who it was. And on top of one of the few bookshelves that did not touch the ceiling, was a magnificent broadsword mounted proudly to the wall. This was his sacred place, his sanctuary.

Corry stood by the door in case Sydona tried to escape, while Malik made himself comfortable on the shiniest leather chair she'd ever seen. A sleek computer that would make Giovonna envious sat on an oversized, mahogany desk. Sydona stood in front of his desk where another two shiny leather chairs sat, waiting for something to happen.

"Sit, sit," the doctor spoke, waving his hand out over his desk. "Would you like some tea or water?"

Sydona hesitantly sat on the edge of the leather, with her handcuffed hands placed on her lap. "I'm fine."

The doctor removed his glasses, placed them on his desk, leaned back and began with a long exaggerated sigh. "Well, Miss Wilder, it certainly has been a while, hasn't it?"

Sydona gave a slight nod and swallowed.

"No need to be nervous. I just want to talk. How are things?" he asked, tilting his head. As if he were a high school guidance counselor.

"Uh..." she uttered, stunned by the question. They weren't friends, not even in the slightest. Why would he ask such a trivial question?

"I apologize. Poor choice of words. Let me ask this instead..." He leaned forward in his chair and intertwined his hands on top of the desk. "When exactly did your eyes change color?"

The edges of Sydona's lips curled. "When do you think?"

"Eagle Lake?"

"After you electrocuted the hell out of me," said Sydona and made a slight lunge forward in anger. The doctor's eyes shifted to the guard behind her as if stopping him from intervening, then focused back on her. His bushy eyebrows furrowed and he adjusted himself in his seat. "That's impossible, Miss Wilder."

"Obviously not," Sydona sat back and glanced away from him. His staring was beginning to rub her wrong.

He then stretched his hands out and observed her hands. The brown line on her wrist peeked out from beneath the bracelet, and he grabbed it fiercely. He rotated her arm around to examine the scar. "Your eyes were the only thing affected, yes?"

Her jaw tightened, and she snatched her arm back. She refused to give him the satisfaction of a “yes”. He needed to feel how she felt. The shock of it.

Malik sat back, tilting his head the other way in a different manner. Not in a curious way, but more of an accusing, suspicious way. “Natalia informed me that she saw you in the sky.”

“Well she lied to you.”

He shook his head and pursed his lips. “I don’t believe you.”

Her heart pounded. “If I could fly, I would have gotten here much sooner to kill you.”

He threw his head back in laughter and pushed his chair back. “Lovely. Let’s test it then, shall we?”

Sydonas stomach sank. “What?”

“I need to make sure you’re not lying to me too, Miss Wilder.”

He seized her arm, nails digging into her skin, and forced her to her feet. “Why would I lie about this?” she protested.

“I can do many things, young lady, but one thing I cannot do is read minds. In order for me to truly know, I need to test it.” He put his glasses back on. Sydonas was about to say something when he walked right past her and whispered something to the guard. Corry nodded, grabbed the walkie on his hip and left the room, shutting the door behind him. Malik stood next to the door, waiting in silence.

“Where are you taking me?” Sydonas demanded.

Malik stayed silent and peered down at his gold watch to pass the time. Soon, the guard reentered the room and whispered something else to Malik. He nodded and announced, “very good! Come along then, Miss Wilder.”

Sydonas clenched her jaw in frustration. The doctor led the way again, and the guard took his place behind her. After Malik locked the office, they made their way down the long hall and left the house the way they came. She glared at the back of his greasy black hair. His pace quickened as he showed them past the garage prison and to a cliffside jutting out over the vast ocean.

He pivoted around, and his copper, dead eyes snapped onto hers. The wind picked up in the higher altitude. Her short blonde hair whipped around her face, while the gust only moved a single black strand above his eyes. He strutted over and pulled out a key from his pocket. After unlocking her handcuffs, he threw the key at Corry and then pulled out another mechanism that

unhinged the metal bracelet. It was hard to see exactly what it was he used, but it looked something like a bent paperclip. He then let go, stepped to the side, and held his arm out toward the ocean. The cliff dropped away to violent waves only fifty feet from where she stood.

“What?” Sydona genuinely asked.

“Fly,” he said, voice stale.

Her stomach twisted. “I told you I can’t.”

“I said *do it*,” Malik raised his voice.

“No, I’ll die!”

“Then I’ll know you weren’t lying!” he screamed, spraying saliva into the air.

Sydona shook with anger and confusion. Did he really want her to jump off a cliff? Why couldn’t he just believe her? What would she gain from lying about it? And what was to stop her from running the other way?

“We don’t have all day, Miss Wilder!”

“No! I’m not jumping off a cliff!”

“Yes, you will. And you’ll fly.”

“I won’t!” Her anger quickly turned into tears.

Malik dropped his head and shook it back and forth. He made quick strides back over to her. His nose almost touched hers. His breath reeked of menthol and old coffee. He whispered, “Here’s the deal. You do this, whether you can fly or not. If you don’t, I won’t hesitate to hurt your sick father. If you can fly and fly away from me, same outcome. I need to see proof, Miss Wilder... I need to see it!” He paused to compose himself and fix his hair. “You only need to fly for a minute and circle back. Then we can go about our day.”

A huge lump formed in her throat and body surged with rage. She hoped the Sparrows would be there at any second to save her. Willow would come in and do her thing and shoot him in the head like she almost did once before. Or Knox would fly in from nowhere and take him out with a single blow. But no one was coming. They probably couldn’t get within a mile of the place. And leaving would only endanger her sickly father more. Sydona finally nodded reluctantly at him. He stepped back to give her space.

Sydona took in a sharp, deep breath, blew out, and burst into a sprint. The edge of the cliff got closer and closer as her heart beat faster and faster. It was like she was being forced to commit suicide. Her lungs felt tighter the closer she came to the edge. The patch of grass turned

brown, and soon her feet and body hung in midair. For a single second, she truly felt like she was flying. But it quickly ended as gravity took over, and she plummeted toward the rocky waters below. She braced herself for the unforgiving waters and forced her arms and legs into a pinpoint. Eyes squeezed closed as she readied herself for her demise.

“I’m sorry, daddy...” The wind tore the words from her lips, and she wasn’t sure if she imagined herself speaking.

In an instant she was consumed by the ocean. Despite it being so close to the shore, her feet never touched the bottom. The waves were forceful, and she felt as if she were in a washing machine. Salt water invaded her nose and mouth and crept into her lungs. She was a game to the sea as it pushed and pulled her along, trying to see how long she could last before it consumed her. Her head broke the surface. A huge gasp of air filled her lungs, but then the current dragged her into the depths. Just as she thought she might be able to swim her way out of it, one vengeful tide slammed her into a large rock, and she felt the immediate sting of death.

## Chapter Two

### RAOUL

Raoul sat on the end table between the two beds of the hotel room. A cartoon on the television kept Devon, Silas, Jet, and himself preoccupied. Raoul had never really sat and enjoyed an entire show, and he wanted to watch until the very end. After the show ended, he flew up to stretch his wings. Completely unaware of what occurred in the past thirty minutes, he glanced around the room and squinted his dry eyes.

“Where’s Syd?”

Silas left the comfort of the bed to stretch his back and tend to his injured leg. “She’s outside, talking with Gia.”

Raoul flew to the sliding glass door and pulled back the dense, rust colored curtain. He noticed a phone wire leading outside, and the phone sitting on the table, but Sydona was nowhere in sight. “Did she come back in?”

Silas wandered over to look out with him. “Maybe she went for a walk?” He slid the door open wide, and Raoul flew out ahead of him.

A sound like a disconnected line beeped from the receiver, which hung over the edge of the mesh table by its spiral cord.

“Something happened,” Silas said as he observed the small patio. Raoul felt it too.

“What’s going on?” Jet announced as he came to look with Devon.

Raoul’s gut told him something wasn’t right. Sydona wouldn’t just leave without telling them, and the phone off the hook made him uneasy. He flew up to the second floor where the rest of the group was staying. He banged on their glass door as hard as he could. Knox eventually came over and let him in.

“Hey, Raoul!” He greeted him with a smile.

“Sydona up here with you guys?” he asked as he buzzed around the room, searching in the bathroom and under the bed.

Willow chuckled. “I don’t think she’s under the bed, buddy,”

“I can’t find her. I can’t find her.” he mumbled out loud. His heart pounded in his ears.

Avani spoke up. “Chicano, calm down. She’s prolly just out for a walk or somethin’...”

“No! She wouldn’t leave without telling us!” he yelled, his heart thumping fiercely.

A loud knocking on the door stopped the talking. Harold opened it cautiously. Silas pushed it open further and limped into the room, out of breath. “D—did you find her, Raoul?”

“Sydona? No...” Knox scratched the back of his neck. “What the hell is going on?”

Jet spoke from the doorway in unison with Devon. “She’s gone.”

“Syd’s missing?” asked Avani with wide lilac eyes.

Willow shook her head. “She ain’t gone; she’s gotta be somewhere. Come’on, I’ll help ya find her.”

Raoul nodded, squashing his fears down. Willow’s cool tone helped calm him, and he buzzed around the room to search for clues.

Devon spoke up, his voice small and high-pitched. “She wouldn’t just leave us, would she? She’s our family.”

Jet patted the boy’s back. “We’ll find her, don’t worry.”

The comforting words didn’t help, and he began to sob in the middle of the room. “I miss my mom and dad!” He cried and wrapped his arms around Jet’s waist. Jet stood still for a minute, unsure of what to say and then bent down to hug him. Raoul heard Devon’s muffled words in Jet’s hoodie, “I just wanna go home...” Jet squeezed him tighter.

Raoul flew over to face Devon. “Hey, we’re going to find Syd. I can promise you that, okay? And yes, we are all family and will be here for you always.” He smiled with a wink, and it made Devon laugh.

Devon pulled away from Jet and wiped his face with his glasses still on. “I—I think I heard Syd on the phone earlier with Gia. Maybe she knows something?”

“Yes!” Silas exclaimed. “That’s a great idea, kiddo! Let’s see if we can find something.”

Devon’s smile widened, and everyone praised him, lifting his spirits right back up. Raoul noticed Jet in the corner, less than excited. But before Raoul could ask him anything, the group headed downstairs.

Raoul dove from the upstairs balcony and flew right to the phone, which was still outside, before everyone else even left the room. When he landed on the table, he noticed a sliver of yellow paper poked out from under the phone. He grabbed it with both hands and beat his wings to help him pull it out.

“Silas!” Raoul yelled. “I think this is Gia’s number. Can you call her?”

Without hesitation, Silas dialed her number, while also bringing the phone back inside. The rest of the group began to trickle into the hotel room.

Silas placed the receiver to his ear, and when the ringing on the other end stopped, Raoul flew up to the receiver to hear what was being said.

*“Syd? Syd is that you?!”* Giovonna’s voice rushed out.

“No, Gia. It’s me, Silas,” he answered.

“And Raoul!” Raoul yelled.

*“Oh my God. It’s so good to hear your voices! But... where’s Syd? What happened?”*

Silas replied. “That’s why we’re calling. Did you happen to hear anything? Before she stopped talking?”

*“Uh, well, we were in the middle of talking when I heard Sydona make a weird noise and then nothing. In the background sounded like a woman. She called her a puta. Whatever that is...”*

“A puta?” Silas twisted his face. Raoul caught Avani’s and Knox’s reaction to the word. It then seemed very clear who was involved. Only Natalia would use a word like that.

*“Yeah. What happened to her, Silas?”*

“Not sure, but we think it involves Avani’s sister, Natalia,” Silas answered. Knox nodded his head heavily up and down, and Avani smacked him.

*“Avani has a sister?! What do you think she did?”*

“Natalia works for the doctor. There’s only one place she would’ve taken her...” Silas’s words faded off, and he removed the receiver from his ear and gripped it tighter. His eyes squeezed shut, and he swallowed hard. He returned the phone to his ear. “We need to find her.”

*“Oh no...”* said Gia. After a long pause she spoke up again. *“Come get me. I want to go with you.”*

“What?” Silas asked with a slight laugh at the impulsive decision.

*“I want to help you find her. I need to make sure she’s okay.”*

“Gia...” Raoul said as he and Silas exchanged looks.

*“Please, Silas!”*

Silas replied. “We can’t come get you, Gia. We would be backtracking. And, not all of us can fly. My leg—”

Willow pushed her face closer to the phone, causing Silas to crane his neck away. “Yeah, sorry, baby girl; I ain’t flyin’ anymore on this trip. I tried it, and I am *done*.”

*“Willow? Oh my god! Willow the Widowed! I’ve missed your voice so much!”* Giovonna said much louder.

“I’ve missed ya too, pumpkin. But we can’t go back; we’re too far now.”

Raoul watched Willow’s face. It suddenly turned pink, and her eyes glistened. She really cared about Giovonna. They all did.

*“Okay then. I’ll come to you,”* she said confidently. *“Where are you?”*

Raoul flicked his wings. “You’re coming here? It will take too long, Gia.”

*“No it won’t. I’ve actually calculated it out. If I can force myself to fly roughly sixty miles per hour, I could make it there by morning.”*

“Morning?” Silas asked with raised eyebrows.

“You’d be flyin’ all night. You’ll exhaust yourself,” Willow said.

Silas added. “Plus, it’s dangerous. It’s like midnight right now.”

*“You guys can argue all you want, I’m coming. Gimme the address.”*

The three collectively sighed. Raoul felt the situation was all too familiar. It was just like back at the diner when Sydona told her she wanted to go alone, and Giovonna insisted. Once she got something on her mind, nothing could stop her. Even now that they were closer to the doctor’s headquarters, she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Take the I-80 west until you start seeing mountains. We’re at Three Peak Inn. Room 12,” Raoul said.

Everyone in the room glared at him. “What? She’s family. She’s coming with.”

“What about your folks, hun?” Willow asked Giovonna.

*“Screw ‘em. You guys are more important.”*

Raoul’s chest pounded. Her words made him feel warm but also broke his heart. Were her parents really that bad? What if they put out another search for her? But it felt wrong to not have her as part of the rescue mission.

“We could all get a good night’s rest while we wait for Gia, and that way we’ll be fully refreshed to get Syd back. Yeah?” Raoul said confidently.

Giovonna answered, *“Perfect. Willow, I have my beeper. Let me know if anything happens. Otherwise, I’ll see you guys in a few hours!”*

“See ya real soon,” Willow said. Her voice was gentle, but Raoul could tell she didn’t really want her to come. Perhaps because of how dangerous it was. She’d be safer at her own home.

“Can’t wait! Bye!” Giovonna said quickly.

Silas hung up and glanced over at Willow. “Guess we wait ‘til mornin’.”

“Gia’s coming back?” Devon spoke up from the twin bed.

Jet rubbed Devon’s head. “I guess so. Let’s get you ready for bed, okay?”

“We’ll go back upstairs then, sí?” Avani nodded.

Knox agreed. “A good night’s rest isn’t a bad idea.”

“How are we supposed to sleep with Syd missing?” Silas said shortly.

The group stayed silent, and Raoul could almost see a dark cloud hovering just below the ceiling.

“We have to keep the faith,” said Raoul. “Syd and I have a deep connection, and I know she’s still alive. I can feel it.”

“Amen, Raoul,” said Willow, tears welling in her eyes. “I’ll be sayin’ a prayer for her tonight, an’ I expect you all to do the same. She’ll be back with us before ya’ know it.”

Raoul glanced at Silas who lay on his side of the bed and draped a jacket over his face. Avani made a point to hug Devon before she left, and she whispered something in his ear that seemed to cheer him up.

As the rest of the group left the hotel room, everyone got settled underneath the sheets. But Raoul couldn’t sleep. He felt his blood pressure rise the more he realized his best friend was completely alone with Vultures. With Malik. And the fact it happened right under their noses. Maybe if he hadn’t indulged in a silly cartoon, all of it would have been avoided. He couldn’t bear to sit back and relax again until she was found.

He fluttered over to the tiny bathroom and landed on the sink. Turning the handle, he warmed up the water, then plugged it up. The oval sink filled with water, and Raoul jumped up, turned his back to the water, and landed on the surface with his toes pointed up. Water covered his ears, and he closed his eyes. Shaman Faro’s words entered his mind, and he repeated them over and over in his head.

*“Imagine the water as a sponge. Let the emotions that flow over absorb into the basin. Look at it around you, look at it from above. It cannot control you. You control it. Now that the water holds your emotions, allow them to drain. Wash them away.”*

*“Remember: everything happens in the universe for a specific purpose. We are not meant to understand but to accept that which we cannot change.”*

Raoul took several deep breaths as he held onto the Shaman's words. Focusing only on the water surrounding him, he allowed his anger to seep out and suddenly felt a weight lifted. He swam to the edge of the sink and pulled the plug. Raoul watched the water circle into a small tornado down the metal drain. Lifting his chin and exhaling, he then made a soft makeshift bed on the table between the beds and was finally able to fall asleep. He knew once he woke, Giovonna would be there, and they would find Sydona again.

The next morning, Raoul was the first one up.

Skipping his usual stretch, he curled up on his towel and lay there, waiting for someone else to wake. The sun rose over the mountain peaks and flooded through their curtains. Giovonna hadn't made it yet. His leg shook anxiously. Did she get lost? Did she even leave her house, or did her parents stop her before she could? And more importantly, was she going to stop somewhere to get fruit?

At last, two gentle knocks rapped their hotel door, and his red wings flicked.

"She's here!" Raoul said excitedly. "Wake up!"

He flew over to the window and peeked out to see Giovonna. She wore her hair in a pink headband, a blue t-shirt, a black jacket, and had a full backpack slung over her shoulders. She waved with both hands.

"Can you open the door?" Giovonna asked, muffled by the glass between them.

Raoul shook his head. "It's too heavy!"

"Well wake one of them up. I feel weird standing out here like... a creeper..." Her eyes wandered behind her.

He flipped back the curtain to see Silas sitting up in bed. Once his grogginess passed, his tired eyes flew open, and he looked at the window to see a show in front of it. "It's Gia! Open the door!" said Raoul.

Silas rushed to the door. When he swung it open, Giovonna stood in the doorway with the biggest smile Raoul had ever seen. She went in for a hug with Silas, and he hugged her back, his arms not long enough to fit around her giant backpack.

"Hey!" Raoul greeted, waiting patiently behind Silas for his turn.

"Raoul!" she called out with arms open. Raoul grinned and flew right up to her chest, and she pressed him against her with a happy sigh. "Man, I missed you."

“Missed you too, Gia.”

“You made it!” Devon shouted as he whipped the covers off him. He ran to her and jumped into her arms. Jet emerged from the covers to give her a sleepy smile followed by a yawn.

“Devon!” She held him tight. “You’ve grown since I last saw you, huh?” Giovonna smiled brightly and grabbed both his shoulders.

“I’m a Sparrow now!” Devon shouted, making Silas fully conscious.

“Whoa! Seriously? That’s so awesome, dude! Gimme five!” Giovonna held her hand up and bit her lip with excitement.

Devon slapped it and giggled.

“Hey, Gia,” Jet finally said.

“Hi, Jet!” She narrowed in for a hug from him too, even though he was more reluctant.

Silas shut the door and asked, “Everything went okay, I’m assuming?”

“Yeah, actually. It was so exhilarating! Flying all on my own. No parents, no rules, no one to shoot me down. I had a lot of time to reflect. But, uh, I do need to use the bathroom. So, if you’ll excuse me…” Giovonna ran to the bathroom and slammed it shut.

“I’ll go tell them she’s here,” said Silas. He threw on a pair of pants and shoes and left the room to go upstairs.

“Are we going to get Syd back now?” Devon looked up at Jet.

“Yep. Are you excited?”

“Uh-huh. I miss her. Do we get to fly again?”

Jet bounced on the bed as he took a seat. “No. No, not this time. Silas is still injured. But uh…” he sighed. “I need to talk to you about where we’re going.”

“What about it?” Devon asked and sat next to him.

“It’s a dangerous place. There are very bad people there. They don’t like people like us, who can fly. They will try to hurt us.”

“Oh.” Devon sulked. “Like Lacey?”

It took a second for Jet to respond. “Yeah, like Lacey…”

Raoul felt the mood change in the room. He could almost see the walls rising around Jet.

Devon furrowed his brows, looking over at Jet through his fingerprint smudged glasses.

“But you’re not hurting anyone. Why does he want to hurt you?”

Jet couldn't look at him so Raoul answered. "Some people are just bad. Can't help it. They're wired a different way than us."

Devon focused on Raoul. "Like the guy who killed my parents?"

Raoul saw Jet's face melt, but Jet quickly replied, "Uh... no, not like him."

"But he hurt my parents. When someone hurts someone, they deserve to be hurt too, right? That's what you said."

"It's complicated, man," Jet said irritably with a mumble. His fingers wiggled quickly against his knees while his leg shook.

Raoul felt bad for Jet. Before he could interject, the front door flew open, and Knox and the others came waltzing in.

"She here?!" Willow asked and threw her bag down.

Jet walked away from Devon, relieved by the sudden intrusion. He poured something into his coffee and took a long sip.

The bathroom door swung open, and Giovonna shrieked and giggled at the sight of Willow. Her friend laughed and held her arms open. When she jumped into her arms, Willow twirled her around in a circle.

Raoul grinned and watched the reunion from the dresser.

Knox stared at the girls. "Wow. Is she like Willow's long lost daughter or something?"

"You have no idea how much Willow talks about that girl," Harold said.

"I think it's muy precioso," Avani said while braiding her ebony hair.

Once Willow and Giovonna's reunion ended, they were finally good to leave. They took one last look around the room for supplies. Harold and Jet grabbed as much soap and other small things as they could shove in the packs. Once everyone was ready, they trampled down the stairs like a stampede.

Harold and Knox took the front seat of the vehicle, so Harold could help with directions the rest of the way to the headquarters. Raoul sat in the back with all of the luggage and a large window to look out of. A part of him wanted to sit up front with all the action, music, and talking, but most of him wanted to be alone. He wanted to get Sydona back, but then he remembered, she wasn't the only one who needed saving. His niece Jubilee was still in their custody. In all the recent chaos, Raoul almost forgot she was taken, too. He cringed at the idea of what the doctor or Natalia

could be doing to her. If it was anything like what he did to the fairy in his office at Eagle Lake, she was in huge trouble.

Raoul shook his mind free of the dark thought and decided to make his way up to the front.

“Were you able to figure out the bracelets at all?” Silas asked, sitting across from Giovonna.

“I mean, it’s only been a few days, but I did what I could. I just need to be able to test it.”

“Kinda feel bad for the princess,” Willow said. “I hate flyin’, but I know how much she loved it.”

“Me too,” Knox added. “Can’t imagine not flying.”

“I wonder what he’s gonna do when he finds out,” said Avani, still braiding.

“Well he won’t be happy, I can tell ya that much,” Harold replied.

Jet joined in. “What do you think he’d do to her?”

Harold sighed heavily. “I honestly don’t know.”

The group sat quietly, lingering on uncertainty. Not even Harold could tell them what would happen, and he worked with the doctor for years. Raoul thought he could have more information but didn’t want to set more of a depressing tone. He changed the subject to something more productive. “What are we going to do when we get there?”

Knox nodded his large, bald head. “You know the place, Harold. What are you thinking?”

Harold cleared his throat and took a chug of coffee. “Alright, so, John’s sittin’ on several acres of land with all of it protected with... us. There’s a place to check into a mile before you even see his house. You need to be verified before gettin’ past them.”

“How you suppose we do that since you ain’t a Vulture anymore?” Avani wondered.

“I still got my ID. I just hope they won’t know I don’t really do that anymore.”

“You hope?” Jet scoffed. “Yeah, we’re screwed.”

“What’s plan B?” Knox asked patiently.

“If that don’t work, then we’ll have to sneak in. Park somewhere far away and walk the rest of the way.”

“You just said the place is surrounded by Vultures. That’s an even worse idea than the first one!” Jet argued.

“Look, I told you where he was; it ain’t my job to get you in, too,” Harold said and slumped down in his seat.

Knox let out a heavy sigh.

“I’ll do it,” Devon said quietly from the back.

“What?” Jet asked.

“I’m small. I can sneak around them. And I’m not a flier, so they won’t hurt me, right?”

Raoul grinned. Everyone else stayed silent with wide eyes and exchanged looks.

Jet spoke softly to the ten year old. “Devon, you don’t have—”

“It’s the only plan that might work. And I want to do it.”

“Lacey would kill me if I let you go through with this, Dev,” Jet warned.

“How else are we getting in if I don’t go?” Devon argued.

Raoul saw his face harden.

Willow spoke up. “If we don’t come up with anythin’ else, son, we’ll let ya know.”

“What if I go with him?” Raoul proposed.

Giovonna glanced at him with hopeful eyes. “That could... actually work.”

“Yeah!” Devon exclaimed.

“I can keep an eye out and tell him where he could go without being seen,” said Raoul.

Silas agreed. “I like that plan. The best one I’ve heard so far.”

“No, he’s not going out there. I won’t let him,” Jet said.

“You can’t do that! I’m a Sparrow just like you now. You can’t tell me what to do!” Devon yelled.

“I’m in charge of you now, Devon, and I won’t allow you to do this. Not by yourself!” Jet fired back.

It was a strange sight to see Jet trying to play the part of a parent. Maybe he thought he needed to replace Lacey or make up for something he did. Raoul would never fully understand him.

“You’re not in charge of me! You’re not my dad! I want to do this. I want to help,” Devon cried with a cracking voice.

Jet soon wore a face of defeat. He wasn’t Devon’s father. And Jet knew that.

“You know what? Fine. Do it. But don’t come crying to me if something happens.”

“I won’t because you ain’t my dad!”

“You already said that!”

The car fell silent once again, and all that could be heard were Devon’s sniffles.

A few hours passed by as they continued on their way to the house. Giovonna caught up on sleep while everyone else kept to themselves. Tensions remained high between Jet and Devon, and the entire energy of the group was unstable. Raoul couldn't wait to see his best friend again.

They drove until the stars came out, and the moon glinted over the mountains behind them. The glow from the dashboard shone on everyone's exhausted faces. Harold informed Knox when they were getting close. He took a dirt trail off the main road and parked way back into the woods. Everyone got out and stretched their legs.

"Alright, little man," Knox announced. "You still want to do this?"

"Yes, sir. Knox, sir." Devon saluted. He then glared at Jet who rolled his eyes.

With a grunt, Jet marched away from the van. The rest of the group scattered around the vehicle, waiting.

Devon stood at attention and pushed up his glasses. He was wide awake. "What do I need to do?"

Avani cleared her throat and grabbed Knox's arm. "Excuse us, *niñito*. I need to talk to my husband for just a second."

Raoul narrowed his eyes. She was going to try to talk him out of it. What other plan could work better than this one? Devon would be in and out so quickly, no one would even notice him. He could probably run faster than any of the adults, and he was harder to spot. If they did somehow try to shoot at him, he made a much smaller target than anyone else—other than himself. Raoul flew over to listen to the conversation.

"...think about what you're about to do here, Elias. He's just.. *él es un niño*," Avani whispered.

Knox sighed. "He wants to help, babe. It's the best idea we've got."

"What if he's *delicado*? Can you live with that? He's not *ours* to put in jeopardy. Not even Jet wants him to do this. *Jet!*"

"I'll be with him," Raoul said. "I'll make sure nothing happens."

Avani's eyes darted to him. "No offense, Raoul, but you're *muy pequeño*. Can't exactly protect him from a gun."

Raoul's face flushed and blood rushed to his head. "I can help in more ways than being a flying shield, Avani. Just ask Syd..."

Knox spoke. "Exactly. His size could benefit us more than we realize."

Avani crossed her arms and pursed her ruby lips.

“We have a radio to equip him with, so we can keep in contact with him that way, too. It will be fine, my darling.” Knox reached out to uncross her arms, but she rejected it.

“Whateva. Consider me out of this mission, then. I don’t want to be anywhere around this if it goes south.” She stormed off and shut the van door behind her.

Raoul turned to Knox who was rubbing his bald head. “I will do anything to protect Devon, Knox. I promise.”

“I know you will. You’re a good man,” Knox said, then inhaled through his large nose. “Let’s get him suited up.”

They returned to the car to get Devon in some darker clothing. Since he was so small, Knox found a black jacket for him to wear, but it came down to his knees. He said it could work in his favor to hide inside of it, in case anything happened. Devon stuck a tiny earpiece in his ear connected to a microphone with a wire. It worked both ways. Knox asked Devon to pick a codeword, and after deciding on one, he was finally ready. Raoul examined the bag Knox handed to him, and his heart sank. It was Sydona’s. It smelled just the way it used to.

“All set?” asked Raoul, clearing his throat.

“Yes!” Devon said, and saluted him and Knox.

“Good. Just pay attention to me, and we’ll be in and out quickly.” Raoul heard the seriousness of his tone, and it filled him with pride. He was in charge. And he liked it.

Devon nodded his head. “Okay. What do we do when we find her?”

Raoul opened his mouth, but Harold cleared his throat and began spewing information. “So what you’re gonna wanna do is find his gigantic white and clear house. It’s big, you can’t miss it. Even at night. Now, there’s a garage to the right of it that’s always open. Go in there and there’s a door inside on your right-hand side. He’s got a couple dozen cells down there full of fliers. She’ll prolly be down there. Here’s a key to get into the garage.” Harold handed Devon the brass key, and he stuck it in the breast pocket.

“Won’t there be guards?” Silas asked.

“I’ll distract them,” Raoul said.

“How?” asked Giovonna.

“I’ll figure it out,” Raoul replied shortly.

“What happens if you aren’t able to and they catch him?” Jet asked as he marched up to the conversation.

“He’s a kid and a human. They wouldn’t hurt him,” Raoul argued.

Avani angrily trudged behind him. “Just ‘cause they won’t hurt him, doesn’t mean they won’t capture him. What if they start to question why he’s there?”

“I have this under control!” Raoul shouted but then paused to compose himself. “I’m taking this one step at a time. I need you all to trust me.” His heart pounded in his ears.

“I’d trust you with my life, Raoul,” Giovonna said honestly.

Raoul smiled at her. He always did like her. He then turned back to the boy. “I believe in you, Devon. You can do this.”

Devon lifted his chin at this comment.

“I believe in you too, Dev,” said Jet at the last second.

Devon heard but scoffed at him. Jet rolled his eyes and chugged the last of his coffee and hid in the van. Everyone made sure to give them a hug before they left the comfort of the group.

Raoul took a deep breath and glanced between everyone. “We’ll keep in touch. Ready Devon?”

Devon nodded his head and adjusted his black-rimmed glasses.

Harold moved the walkie to his lips. “Testing, testing.”

Raoul overheard him through the bud in Devon’s ear. His voice was loud and clear, and the two headed off toward the doctor’s lair.

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed!

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