Ming LeBon stared at the empty slab where Ashaya Aleine’s body should have been. “Recordings?”
“Blank for a period of fifteen minutes. It went unnoticed because—”
Ming slashed out a hand. “No excuses.”
“Yes, sir.”
“Send Vasic in.”
A minute later, Vasic replaced the security officer. “Sir.”
“You secured Aleine’s organizer?”
Vasic nodded. “As soon as she lost consciousness. Per previous orders, I teleported it to your desk. Would you like me to retrieve it?”
“No.” Ming stared at the other male, one of his most elite soldiers. As an Arrow, Vasic’s loyalty should have been beyond doubt. It wasn’t anything left to chance—Arrows were all placed on a regimen of drugs meant to turn them into the most unwavering of killing machines. “No alarms were tripped, no other monitors aside from those in this section tampered with. What does that mean?”
“A teleport-capable Tk,” Vasic replied, completely unmoved. “Officially, there were none in the immediate vicinity at the time.”
repeated the demand she’d already made three times this past hour alone. “We might not have saved Jon and Noor without her. I need to say thank you, offer her my help.”

God, she was stubborn, but he was a protective, possessive cat. “She’s a threat right now.” He growled when she began to argue. “When we’re sure she’s clean, then you can have a tea party with her for all I care. And you are helping her—through Pack.”

“What about Keenan?”
“Kid’s probably fast asleep.”
“Not funny. I meant later.”
“If Sascha okays a visit, fine. Happy?”
“No.” She got up, came around the table, and slid into his lap. “You’re such a bully.”

He felt his lips twitch. “And you’re still a brat.”

Ashaya came to consciousness in a single heartbeat. Her telepathic senses flared out at the same instant, an automatic reaction honed from years of living a double life. Her Tp status was weak, but it was enough to tell her she wasn’t alone.

“You’re awake.” A familiar masculine voice. “I can hear the change in your heartbeat.”

She turned her head toward him. “You’re lying.”

A raised eyebrow from the lethally beautiful male who sat in a chair in front of the unlit fireplace, playing a pocketknife over and through his fingers. “Are you sure?”

No, she wasn’t. Those eyes were piercing in their directness. She could well imagine his senses were acute enough to detect the spike in her heartbeat as she’d woken—a purely physiological reaction she couldn’t control. Now, she focused on bringing it back down to a resting rate. “My leg feels much better.” She tested it, stretching the muscle, but remaining on her stomach. “Mercy is a good medic.”

Dorian spun the knife on the tip of his finger, a feat of balance and skill that held her absolute attention. One slip and that blade would go through flesh and bone both.

“Speaking of Mercy,” she said, mesmerized by the incredible grace with which he handled the blade, “where is she?”
A hard glance out of those pure blue eyes. The knife disappeared so fast, she didn’t even catch a glimpse of where it went. “You’ve been out for a couple of hours. Mercy had things to do.”

“It’s”—she glanced at the clock on the wall by the fireplace—“one a.m.”

“That’s when Psy like to attack us.”
Muscles warming up, she turned to sit up. “I see.”

“You eyes are the wrong color.”

“You saw me once in the dark.”

“I have the vision of a cat.”

Instead of responding, she swung her legs off the bed and, after resting a few seconds, tried to stand. Her muscles complained but held. Mercy was indeed good. She wouldn’t be running or winning any endurance contests, but she was no longer dependent on others. Especially not on a leopard who watched over her, but with an edge in his gaze that told her he was barely leashed. “My son,” she said, knowing she chanced giving herself away, but unable to stifle the need to know. “Is he truly alive?”

He threw her a small cell phone. “Click through to video.”

She did. And found herself watching a minute-long recording of Keenan curled up in sleep, his breathing steady, his hand pressed to the pillow by his cheek. Her baby boy was safe. A rock lifted off her chest. Still, it took considerable force of will to turn off the recording even after the third repetition, and throw the phone back to Dorian. “Thank you.”

He caught it with lightning-fast reflexes. “Do you want to see him?”

Ashaya felt a curious stillness in that newly awake section of her brain, the part where her bond with Keenan had lived in secret for so long. “No.”

Dorian’s lips thinned. “That’s what I thought.”

The door inside her mind, the one that had slammed open once and never quite closed again, pushed outward. It was only an inch, but it permitted something volatile to break free, something that ricocheted violently through her veins.

“He’s not safe with me,” she blurted out, knowing it for a mistake the instant the words were out. She could already feel
Amara’s mind attempting to shove through what should’ve been the impenetrable ice of Silence, drawn by the pulse of her forbidden emotion for Keenan... drawn, too, by something new. Something dark and raw, and vicious—her reaction to Dorian.
CHAPTER 10

Why do you try to hide from me? You know I’ll always find you. I live inside your mind now.

—Handwritten note left in Ashaya’s hospital locker, circa 2068

Ashaya used every tool she knew to calm herself before her agitation caused enough damage to allow Amara to get a lock on her. When she glanced up, it was to see Dorian watching her with disturbing intensity.

“You saying you care about your son’s safety?” A mocking question, but his eyes were those of a hunter. If she wasn’t careful, this highly intelligent predator would discover her most deadly secrets.

It was better not to engage with him. No matter the depth of her curiosity.

As she looked away from Dorian and the danger he represented, her eye fell on her pack. She walked carefully to where it stood leaning against the wall by the door. It was torn in a couple of places and dirty, but otherwise fine. “Thank you for retrieving this.”

“Don’t thank me—Vaughn got it. I stayed to make sure you didn’t pull any Psy tricks.”

She laid the pack on the floor and opened it up, not bothering with secrecy—Dorian had had plenty of time to go through it if he’d wanted. “Then please pass on my thanks to Vaughn.” She wondered if all male changelings were as hostile as Dorian, then
squelched the thought when it threatened to feed her visceral awareness of him.

No sound of movement, but he was suddenly crouching beside her, close enough that the scent of him—wild, fresh, with bite—washed over her.

She immediately put more distance between them. “Why are you here?”

“You’re pretty skittish for a Psy,” was the cool response.

Deciding to ignore him—a difficult task—she began to go through the jumble he’d created while looking for the first aid kit. Her hand threatened to tremble as she touched the edge of a holoframe she’d asked Zic Zen to retrieve from its hiding place and keep safe for her. Dorian didn’t notice her betraying gesture, distracted by something else, something she’d expected to have to buy on the outside—whoever had packed this bag had clearly realized how integral record keeping was to her work.

“Top-of-the-line organizer.” Dorian picked up the device, currently encased in an air cushion. “Only available to CEOs of major Psy corporations.” Whistling through his teeth, he pricked the air bubble with his knife. “Nice.”

She resisted the urge to snatch back the object. Little breaks, little fractures. The door opened another inch. “Do you always touch others’ belongings?”

One corner of his lips curved upward and she realized Dorian was quite capable of charm. “Now you sound Psy. All pissy and icy.” Getting rid of the packaging, he turned on the organizer. “Password-protected.”

She leaned in and stared at the screen for several seconds. “Give it to me.”

He swiveled the device so it remained on the flat of his palm, but faced her. Too intrigued by the intellectual challenge, she didn’t argue his interpretation of her order. “I wasn’t given the code,” she murmured, “so it has to be logical, something I alone would know.”

“Keenan?” For once, he didn’t sound like he was baiting her. The cat apparently liked gadgets. It was an unexpected discovery. “No.” She looked up, startled at his closeness. “That would be the first word Ming LeBon would use.”

Narrowing his eyes, Dorian pulled the organizer out of reach.
“Now that’s a question I want answered. Why exactly was the Council able to keep you leashed by holding Keenan?”

She could’ve lied, but the truth, she decided, would serve as well. It would reinforce his image of her as a cold monster without any maternal feelings. She needed him to continue to treat her with disgust—because even this tiny hint of a thaw in his attitude was threatening to erode the Silence that was her only protection against Amara. “I was already working for the Council in another capacity,” she began, “when the Councilors asked for my cooperation with Protocol I. Since I disagree with the aims of the protocol, I refused. Keenan was an infant at the time and living with me.”

The tiny hairs on the back of Dorian’s neck rose in warning. Whatever was coming was going to be bad, very bad.

“One night,” Ashaya continued tonelessly, “I went to sleep in my bed and woke up in a room at the Center. I was told that my fallopian tubes had been tied.” Her expression didn’t change but he saw her hands clench on the holoframe she’d been attempting to slide quietly out of sight before he’d put her on the spot.

The gesture set all his sense to humming. It was the first true indication she’d given that maybe, just maybe, she wasn’t the perfect Psy everyone believed her to be—Psy fully enmeshed in Silence never made any physical movements without purpose. Either it was an act to put him off guard, or M-Psy Ashaya Aleine had more secrets than anyone knew. There was nothing Dorian’s cat loved better than a mystery.

He turned his mind to what she’d said. “I don’t get it. It’s reversible, right?”

“The technique they chose, yes?”

“Then?”

“The point wasn’t to make me infertile,” Ashaya said with frightening calm. “The point was to teach me that they had control over every aspect of my life, including my body itself. I was told that if I dared reverse the procedure and get pregnant, they’d make sure my child was aborted.”

Fury boiled in his gut. He stared at her, somehow knowing that that wasn’t the worst of it. “And if you continued to defy them, they’d do worse?” The torture of it, of never knowing when you’d be violated, it gave him one hell of an insight into this woman’s internal strength.
“They said they would remove my uterus and cause enough scar tissue that even a cloned organ wouldn’t heal me.”

“Okay,” he said, clamping down on the need to touch her, to give comfort in the affectionate changeling way, “that leaves Keenan as your only child. But there’s no emotional connection, so why would the threat to him hold you?”

“Psy are quite fanatical about bloodlines. Did you know?”

He shook his head, intrigued by the changes in her scent as she spoke. Snaps of cold, flares of heat. As if she was fighting a silent battle to maintain her conditioning—and yet nothing showed on her face. She was a very good actress, something he’d do well to remember, he thought, even as he said, “Enlighten me.”

She seemed to take his words at face value. “We’re a race that leaves behind no art, no music, no literature. Our immortality lies in the genetic inheritance we pass on to our offspring. Without that, we’re nothing once we cease to exist. Our psychologists believe it’s a primitive need for continuity, as well, of course, for the perpetuation of the species, that makes us reproduce, though children suck up time and effort that could be better spent elsewhere.”

Smart words, cold words, but her tone was just a fraction off. “So that was all they had on you—if you didn’t cooperate, there goes your genetic legacy?” Perhaps the Council had believed her motivation, but Dorian had seen her bleeding and wounded . . . and the only thing she’d cared about was whether Keenan was safe.

“No, there goes my immortality.” She refused to break their locked gazes and the leopard approved. “You have no hope of understanding,” she added. “You’re changeling.”

He scowled. “We love children.”

“Children are commodities,” she corrected. “Keenan, by virtue of being the single child it appeared I would ever produce, gained a higher market value. He was worth enough to me that I agreed to the Council’s demands.” She could’ve been talking about stocks and bonds. “Now that I’m out of their reach, I’m free to bear other children. Keenan is no longer important.”

“Callous,” he said, but he was watching that betraying hand. Those clever scientist’s fingers were wrapped around the edge of the holoframe so tightly that bone pushed white against the thin
membrane of her smooth, coffee and cream skin. “Except for
one thing—why did you go to so much trouble to get Keenan out
if you don’t care if he lives or dies?”

A minuscule pause. “Because I knew changelings would be
more inclined to help me if I showed some kind of an attachment
toward a child.” She looked down and began to shift things in
the pack, finally releasing the holoframe. “I knew I’d need
changeling assistance in certain matters, and your race’s attitude
toward the young is well-known.”

What a load of crock. Dorian smiled behind her back, and it
was a smile that held a bite. He’d caught the first hint of the true
scent of his prey. Now it was a case of hunting her down until
he could work off the fire in his blood, the darkly sexual craving
in his gut. Because if sex was the only way to fight this, he’d
swallow his damn principles and take her. Once he’d indulged
the need, it would most likely abate.

She blinked those big brown—wrong color; the cat growled—
eyes. “May I attempt the password now?”

“By all means.” He echoed her arch tone, but his mind was
busy going over everything she’d said and done since that night
two months ago. An intricate game of subterfuge? Or some-
thing more intriguing? “Here.”

Put on guard by his easy cooperation, but wanting to check if
she was right, Ashaya went with her first instinct and used the
touch screen to input a single word: ILIANA. The screen cleared.
“Not difficult after all.”

“Who’s Iliana?”

“An entomologist who specialized in the medicinal prop-
ties of insects—her philosophies had a big impact on my own
work,” she said, and it was a truth.

“Not exactly the hardest thing for anyone familiar with your
work to figure out,” he muttered. “And it’s a single word—so
easy to hack, my great-granny could do it.” Turning the device
toward himself again, he sat down cross-legged and brought up
the menu. “Huh. Lots of applications but no files. No wonder
they put in such a hopeless password.”

“I’ve heard this new line of organizers requires a password
before any usage.”

Dorian nodded. “You’re right—they must’ve put one in so
they could add all these specialist medical programs.”
As his fingers moved over the screen, she realized something. "You know more about the functions than I do."

"I bet you just know how to use one or two programs." His smile was bright, teasing, and so unexpected, it sneaked in through her defenses.

*Amara’s voice, through a rain of white noise. Unintelligible. But getting closer.*

Shoving away the brilliant temptation of Dorian’s smile, she brought up the familiar image of a sheet of ice crawling over her mind, Silencing everything in its path. “I know how to utilize the aspects of the device that relate to my work.” She began to take out the other things in the pack, making an inventory as she progressed. It only took a couple of minutes. She was about to repack when Dorian said, “You forgot the holoframe.” There was a very catlike glint in his eye.

Realizing there was no rational reason to continue hiding it, she pulled out the frame and pressed the On button. An instant later, an uncountable number of light particles came together to form a three-dimensional image of Keenan as a baby. The person holding him—a woman with pale blue gray eyes, curly dark brown, almost black hair, and mocha skin—looked straight at the camera. Her gaze spoke of the Arctic.

"Who the hell is that?" Dorian asked.

It was an unexpected question. “It’s me, of course.”

"Don’t lie to me."

Dorian was uncomfortably close, his body a heated wall, but she couldn’t move away. “It looks exactly like me.”

He snorted. “And I’m the fucking tooth fairy.”

She stared at the image, unable to escape the truth—her secrets were beginning to escape. And this particular secret would find her sooner or later... then one would die, and one would live. “This is Amara,” she said. “My sister... my twin.”
Amara didn’t know how Ashaya had done it, but her sister had literally died for a period of time. Amara wasn’t pleased her twin had given her no warning of the plan—the psychic trauma from the disconnect had left her unconscious for hours. That was how Ming LeBon had managed to track and capture her without a fight.

Now, he stared at her from the other side of a glass wall. “Your sister is gone, dead.”

Amara smiled, aware it irritated Ming to see her parroting human and changeling emotions. He knew nothing. Amara was connected to Ashaya on a level beyond the PsyNet. Nobody had ever discovered that link and as far as Amara was concerned, it wasn’t something that could be permanently destroyed by anything other than death. True death.

“Good,” she said. “I always hated the competition.”

“Hate and love are emotions.”

She shrugged. “Semantics.” What she felt for her sister, it couldn’t be defined, couldn’t be put into one of the nice little boxes preferred by the Psy. “I am who I am.”

“A failure.”

“Ouch.” She put her hand over her heart, pretending shock.
CHAPTER 14

The inevitable future is fast approaching, but there’s time. Time enough to convince you of what you must do if they ever discover the truth. Run and hide. It’s the only way to survive. But even as I try to convince you, I know I’ll fail. She might appear stronger, but you’ve always been the brave one, with more courage than I could ever imagine. But courage won’t stop a Council assassin. Run.

—from a handwritten letter signed “Iliana” circa July 2069

Things happened faster than Dorian had anticipated—he found himself playing bodyguard in the first subbasement of DarkRiver’s San Francisco HQ at nine the next morning. While the pack held shares in CTX, a major communications company, this basement was set up for guerrilla broadcasts. Ashaya’s segment would go out on the Internet and all of CTX’s stations at the same time.

A makeup girl dared approach Ashaya, fluffy brush brandished like a peace offering. Dorian glared. The nineteen-year-old—a packmate like every other person in this room, bar one—swiveled on her heel, and went in the opposite direction. “Very effective.”

He turned to the woman who’d spoken. He was still pissed off with her.

I choose to embrace Silence of my own free will.

He wasn’t stupid enough to believe that Silence could be easily shrugged off—it had taken Judd Lauren more than a yea-
and the catalyst had been finding his mate. But Ashaya had a child. A child she’d refused to see again this morning. Disbelieving, Dorian had left her with Mercy for a couple of hours while he went to speak to Keenan.

The boy had been quiet, but he’d allowed Dorian to hug him.

“He trusts you,” Sascha had said, having spent the night at Tammy’s.

“I promised him I’d be there for him.” And he kept his promises. As Ashaya should have been keeping the promises she’d made simply by giving birth. He knew Keenan mattered to her—she’d given herself away there too many times—so what possible justification could she have for depriving her son of the love and affection he deserved? It was an abandonment neither man nor leopard could accept. “What?” It was a growl.

Her spine went rigid. “The way you got rid of the makeup artist. Efficient.”

Instead of increasing as it had till this point, Dorian’s temper receded at the ice in her voice, his instincts shifting in a different direction. Challenge. Let’s see how long Ashaya Aleine could hold out against a cat determined to charm her out of the cold world she clung to. He wasn’t some green juvenile. No matter how bad things got, he could control his cock. But he wouldn’t have to if he could thaw her enough to shatter her Silence, get her into bed... and work this clawing sexual need out of his system.

His conscience gave a twinge at the ruthless way he was planning to pursue, then take her, but he figured Ashaya could look after herself. The woman was no pushover. She’d make him work for it, he thought, his aggression turning into a lethal kind of focus. “I got rid of her because you don’t need makeup,” he said after a long pause. With her hair pulled off her face in a tight bun that irritated him, and her eyes naturally wolf blue, she looked like a perfectly cut diamond.

“You’re correct,” she replied in that perfect diction of hers, devoid of any hint of personality. “While good grooming and makeup are considered useful tools among the Psy, I need to appear professional to the utmost. A more ascetic approach is the better choice.”

Dorian wondered if she really was as calm as she seemed. He couldn’t scent deceit, but he was beginning to see that Ashaya was an expert at faking Silence. She was also good at
stonewalling—he hadn’t been able to get her to tell him why she was so intent on doing this broadcast. But he’d find out. “That’s not what I meant.” He kept his hands behind his back, though his fingers itched to trace the warm silk of her skin. Her voice might’ve been ice, but her skin . . . her skin called to him with a seductive whisper. Maybe he wasn’t as in control of his cock as he’d thought.

“No?”

“No,” he said. “Your skin is flawless.” It was a deliberate attempt to make her uncomfortable, to push her into betraying the humanity he’d glimpsed mere hours ago. “If you lay naked under the sun, would you glow that same luscious shade all over?”

Her face remained expressionless, but he saw her hands curl. “That is an inappropriate question.”

He smiled, and it was a smile designed to get under her skin. “Why? You’re a woman of science—it’s a simple biological query.” Mocking her to see how she would react. Testing her. The leopard inside him wanted to gauge her strength, find out what its prey was made of. The man was testing her for other reasons—learning her beyond the savage, sexual instincts of the beast.

She tugged at the cuffs of her white shirt, aligning them to perfect straightness and breaking eye contact in the process. “You appear to enjoy playing psychological games with me.”

He didn’t respond, just waited. She was a scientist. He was a predator used to hunting with stealthy patience. He couldn’t go leopard, but it was a wild, integral part of him, filled with the same hungers and needs as that of any other cat in DarkRiver. As a child, he’d sometimes thought he’d go mad with the craving to run, to hunt, to feel his teeth and claws sink into the living flesh of prey.

Then, one freezing winter’s night, he’d gotten up and gone running in human form, breaking all his parents’ rules. He’d stayed out the entire night. The soles of his feet had ended up shredded, but his soul had been at peace for the first time in his life. It was then that he’d decided he would never again consider himself crippled. He would simply become so tough that no one would dare question his changeling identity.

He had been six years old.

Perhaps that was why he’d connected so easily with Keenan Aleine. There was something about the boy that spoke to the
child Dorian had once been. Though clearly of high intelligence and young enough that Silence hadn’t yet got its hooks into him, there was a weight in Keenan’s eyes, a knowledge that shouldn’t have been there.

The same knowledge rested in Ashaya’s eyes, magnified a thousand times over.

**Ashaya had played** mind games with Councilors. But she’d never felt as in danger as she did at this moment. Because while she looked into a face that held all the hallmarks of humanity, she knew the man she spoke to was something other, his leopardscd instincts evident in every facet of him. Even now, he stood so still, a cat waiting for his prey to make a mistake.

“Play your games,” she said, refusing to back down, though he unknowingly held the advantage—he’d gone to see her baby today, was watching over Keenan like the protector he was, and for that, he owned an indelible piece of her loyalty. “But know that I grew up in the viper’s nest of the PsyNet.”

A slight curve to his lips. It was odd what made him react favorably. There was no logic to it. Last night, she’d retreated from a fight, and his anger had been a whip against her skin. Today, she spoke to him with the blue frost of Silence in every word, and he smiled.

“You calling me a lightweight again, Ashaya?” he said, his voice threaded through with amusement as well as a feline arrogance that said he knew he was the most dangerous creature in the room.

She got off the stool and made sure her severe black pants were sitting straight before picking up her suit jacket and slipping it on. “In this, yes. You’re a physical creature—used to fighting with your body. I’m used to having only my mind as a defense.”

“Then I guess you won’t mind playing.”

Having finished buttoning the jacket, she looked up. “On the contrary, I would prefer to live in a world where every word didn’t have a double meaning.” Where she wasn’t constantly watching and waiting for a knife in the back. “It would considerably simplify my life.”

She’d surprised him, she saw that at once. His eyes narrowed and he raised a hand ostensibly to straighten her lapel, the act
holding a primitive edge that she “saw” with a rusty section of her brain this leopard alone seemed to awaken.

“That,” he said, “would bore you, sugar. Straight and easy is not what you were born for.”

He’d used an endearment, but his gaze was pure watchful cat. No, she didn’t understand Dorian at all. “We’ll have to agree to disagree on that point. It’s time.”

He dropped his hand from her lapel and she was discomfited to find she’d been clenching her stomach muscles so tightly they hurt. Another mistake. She attempted to relax—the producers of the show were heading her way. If the Psy Council didn’t succeed in disrupting the feed, she’d soon be in living rooms and on billboards from here to Paris and beyond.

Though CTX, being a joint leopard-wolf communications company, was not the Psy media of choice, her broadcast would be picked up by enough rebellious Psy networks that the message would spread. After it was over, she knew full well she’d go to the top of the Council’s hit list. But that was a future concern.

Right now, she had to lay the framework of a chaos that would disrupt everything in the Net, hiding the truth in the midst of lies—lies that would ensure Keenan’s safety. That was the only thing that mattered.

She ignored the burst of activity in that now familiar primitive section of her brain. Dorian intrigued her to the depths of her being—she’d never met anyone so complex. He was light and shadow, savagery and charm, predatory fury and snipe calm. She found herself wondering what it would take for him to drop his guard, and allow a woman to see beyond the surface. Perhaps, in another life, she might’ve taken up the invitation to play his double-edged cat games, and discovered the answer. But in this life, she had no such choice.

“Ready, Ms. Aleine?” The producer had listening devices clipped to both his ears, but appeared to be focusing on her.

He was changeling, too, a leopard; handsome, she supposed. But he didn’t awaken that primitive set of neurons the way Dorian did, didn’t threaten to derail a plan she’d died to put into place. “Let’s go.” She began walking alongside him, very aware of Dorian’s alert presence at her back. He didn’t particularly like her, that much was obvious, but he wouldn’t let her be assassinated. No, if this cat wanted to get rid of her, he’d do it himself
Oddly reassured by the thought, she stepped in front of the camera, looked it straight in the eye, and waited for the signal to proceed.

“Three, two, one... we’re live.”

Dorian watched Ashaya’s absolute stillness, her unfractured composure, and knew it for a lie.

It’s the only way I know to protect him.

He’d been considering the implications of that unguarded statement ever since their arrival at the basement studio—it put her seemingly reckless broadcast in a whole new light. Somehow, some way, this was meant to help Keenan live a life free of fear.

Ashaya Aleine, he thought, was the most intricate of puzzles. The layers of deceit and truth only added to the challenge of her. It was tempting to push her until she surrendered, but sometimes in a hunt, you had to play nice. That thought in mind, he shifted so that he was in her line of sight. It was a silent promise of safety, of protection.

She understood, the knowledge betrayed by the barest flicker of an eyelash. And then she began to speak.

“My name is Ashaya Aleine. I’m a Gradient 9.9 M-Psy and the scientist formerly in charge of Protocol I, otherwise known as the Implant Protocol.”

Her tone was cold enough to freeze summer rain. For the first time, he saw exactly how she’d survived detection in the PsyNet. It created an unexpected burst of pride in his gut—this woman was made of ice-fired steel. She might bend, but Ashaya Aleine would never, ever, break.

“The information I’m about to share is highly classified,” she continued. “In doing so, I break my contract with the Council, but keep the one I made as a scientist—to pursue the truth.”

In the PsyNet, a red alert blasted into the mind of every Councilor.

“While the theoretical research behind the Implant Protocol is common knowledge,” Ashaya continued, “what is not
widely known is that the Council is going ahead with the Protocol, in direct violation of its duty to consult the populace on matters of this scale.

"Silence itself took ten years of debate before it was implemented, and yet this implant, an implant that would enable the imposition of Silence on the biological level, turning many into one—in effect, creating a hive mind—is being railroaded through without even cursory consultation."

**Across the country**, across the world, power started failing in a relentless cascade. Entire towns, then cities, were blacked out as the Council shut down every one of its power providers.

"**Not long ago**, an attack on my lab put the development of the implant back to square one. But it can be rebuilt. I’m not the only scientist with the capacity to do the work."

**Psy telekinetics were dispatched to cause "accidental" breakdowns in media outlets not under the Council’s direct control, including the usually ignored highways of the Internet. The blackout continued to explode across the world in a violent wave. Then the satellites started to blink.**

"**This information is** classified but has been the subject of widespread rumor." Ashaya paused. "But what I tell you next is known only to a select few. The Council-funded research on Protocol I speaks of absolute equality. That is a categorical lie. The implants were never intended to make us all the same. Their purpose is simple—to create a society of ciphers, slaves for whom obedience to the Council and its favored associates is a biological imperative."

**Hackers—Psy, human, and changeling—worked furiously to reboot systems. They failed. Humans swore, changelings**
threw things, Psy began a rapid-fire telepathic “tree” to link to anyone who had a signal and could feed them the broadcast.

“However, while the implants remain a priority for the Council, after the rebels’ successful attack on the original lab—when it became clear that they might possibly realize their aim of halting the Implant Protocol—the Council decided to widen the scope of my mandate.”

Backup Internet servers hidden all over the world came online with a hum, hand-crank radios were unearthed from attics and basements, and the telepathic “tree” grew until still-functioning feeds were found in rural Russia, in the deep-sea station, Alaris, and in several tiny towns in New Zealand.

“The Omega Project existed before Protocol I, before most of us were born. It has always been a possible tool in the Council’s arsenal. Three months ago, I was instructed to begin familiarizing myself with all data pertaining to Omega, as the dormant project would be reinitiated the instant the Protocol I was complete. The aim of the Omega Project—”

High above the earth, three seemingly long-dead satellites came to life, controlled by changelings and humans at a facility buried within the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Their sudden reemergence took everyone by surprise.

“—is to wipe out all spontaneous conception among the Psy.”
that her injured leg hadn’t so much as twinged. Excel

Cleaning up after herself took only another three minutes. Rather

than go back into the bedroom, she walked to the large French

doors that led out to a small balcony overlooking the bay—the

glass was clear, the balcony railing formed of iron bars that

sliced the view into rectangular pieces. She took a cross-legged

position on the soft carpet, her back straight, her eyes on the
dark swell of water in the distance.

It was cool where she sat, as if the chill of the outside air had

stained the warmth inside. She resisted the urge to touch the

glass, and turned her senses inward, into her mind. It was where

she felt the most free. She wasn’t quite sure who or what she

was in her body—it had never truly seemed to belong to her.
The psychological separation wasn’t healthy, she knew that. But

it was a coping mechanism. After the horror of her seventeenth

birthday, she’d needed some way to keep her psyche together.

Dorian threatened that separation. She didn’t want to know

what the result would be if she tried to reintegrate the pieces.
Dangerous thoughts. Again, she pushed them away, concentrat-
ing on the white noise of DNA . . . and, behind that psychic

wall, on the lethal chill of secrets she’d carried so long, they

were burned into her very cells.

She’d told a number of lies during the broadcast.

But those lies hid a far more perilous truth, and it was a truth

that Ashaya intended to protect to the death. Except Ming had

upped the stakes and her original plan of publicity, misdirec-
tion, and distraction lay in shreds at her feet.

The entire plan had been stupidly simple—to make herself so

visible that neither her nor her son’s death or disappearance
could be swept under the carpet. Zie Zen was a good man and

his advice to run had been reasonable, but she knew exactly

what happened to those who tried to outrun the Council—she

had an eleven-year-old death certificate to prove it. Ming had

been tracking and executing rebels for decades.

Since she had no chance of killing Ming, she’d weighed the

variables and decided to take a stand. The bonus had been the

destruction of Protocol I—she didn’t want any child exposed to

the horror of implantation. It had all been going as it should . . .

until Ekaterina’s murder.

Her mind filled with images of the destruction of the Implant
lab, but this time, she maintained her calm. Ekaterina was dead, but Keenan, her little man, was alive.
She would let no one snuff out that life.

Dorian watched Ashaya from his bedroom doorway. He'd been sleeping the light sleep of a leopard on guard, but even so, he'd dreamed. Not of ice and death, but of a beautiful woman's cries of pleasure. In sleep, he'd run his tongue over that perfect silky skin, so rich, so tempting that he'd barely resisted the urge to bite, to mark.

Then she'd whispered, "Do it. Take me."

He'd woken hard as a rock, and very aware that Ashaya, too, was awake. He'd listened to her move around, figured out that she was grabbing some breakfast. Joining her had sounded like a good idea. But by the time he got his erection under control, she'd finished her cereal, and was taking a seat by the window.

Intensely curious about her, he simply watched as she brought her breathing and heartbeat under a level of control he'd never witnessed in any living creature. It was almost as if she'd willed herself out of existence.

He came closer on silent feet. It was as he crouched down beside her that he realized how fragile she really was. Intellectually, he'd always known that her bones were weaker than his, her physiology much more breakable. But when she was awake, he tended to forget. He saw only the cold steel of her spine, the chilly determination of her gaze. Strength. He saw a woman of incredible strength.

But now, as his eyes took in the naked skin of her nape, framed by two tight braids, he glimpsed the vulnerability of her. Her body was curvy, quintessentially female, but delicate, too. He had the certain awareness that he could close his hand over her shoulder and crush it.

His beast snarled at the idea.

Agreeing with the sentiment, he maintained his silence and continued to study her. As he'd witnessed a number of times now, she could put on the appearance of a perfect Psy on cue, but he knew in his gut that that was all it was—an appearance. No woman could have faked the reaction he'd scented in her on the balcony. Fury. Pure, pissed-off female fury.
But not only was her act damn good, the fact that she'd survived in the Council ranks for as long as she had meant she was also brilliant at the games of manipulation that were the Council’s stock in trade. Yet she’d never played those games with him, choosing brutal honesty instead.

*What right do you have to call me anything? You, with your prejudice and your self-pity.*

It made him want to bare his teeth, but not in anger at her—he’d been acting like an ass and she’d called him on it. But there was one thing he couldn’t understand—the way she wouldn’t go to her son. He’d offered to take her again this afternoon. She’d refused.

Yet even that disquieting fact wasn’t enough to temper his hunger where she was concerned. Lucas was right—he was snarling at her because he wanted her as he’d never before wanted a woman. His leopard was constantly fighting him for control, trying to overrule his humanity. It was strong. Getting stronger. So strong that Dorian had begun to wonder if a latent could go rogue in the true sense of the word, losing his humanity and surrendering completely to the savagery of the cat... becoming a leopard on two legs, a man who cared nothing for a woman’s fragility, only for her submission.

Her eyes opened.

**Locked with his.**

“**Why are you watching me?**” Her eyes, he saw, were not blue. not truly. They were a vivid pale gray with blue shards coming in from the outer ring to hit the pure black of her pupils. Strange eyes. **Wolf eyes.**

“My leopard is fascinated by you.” By her sensuous, flawless skin, her wild hair, her damn curves. He leaned in and blew a gentle breath that made a rebel tendril dance. “I dreamed of running my tongue across your skin.” He spoke to release some of the tension, to leash the beast before it broke its bonds. “Of exploring you in long, slow licks.”

She didn’t break the deeply intimate visual connection. “You’re crossing lines again,”

**Hell, yeah.** It was either that or go insane. “And your heartbeat just got erratic.” The cat smiled, pleased. Ashaya Aleine wasn’t as immune to him as she liked to pretend. “What would happen if I tasted you? If I took a bite out of you?”
Another spike in her heartbeat, music to the leopard’s ears. But when she spoke, it was to say, “Nothing.”

He gave her a sleepy-eyed look that he knew screamed challenge. “Then come here.”

“You’re disturbing me.”

“Good.” He smiled, playful and wicked, realizing he had the advantage—Ms. Alcine wasn’t used to playing with cats. “I don’t like being ignored.”

“Get used to it,” she said, surprising him, delighting him. “I’m working.”

“Oh?” He was genuinely interested. “I though M-Psy saw inside the body and diagnosed illnesses.” His family had consulted several when his inability to shift had become apparent. All had been brilliant, but not one had understood what it meant to a changeling to be denied half of who he was.

Ashaya’s gaze skimmed down his body. “Isn’t that an uncomfortable position?”

He’d listened to her body, knew she was aware of him on a level she’d never admit. It soothed the cat, even as it ratcheted up his need. “I’m fine, sugar,” he said, fighting the urge to sink his teeth into the delicate curve of her neck. He tended to like his sex slow and intense, but right now, with this woman, his body wanted hard, furious, a little rough. Reining in the leopard’s territorial instincts made sweat bead along his spine. “M-Psy?”

She became very still, as if she’d sensed his tenuous control. But she didn’t retreat. If she had . . .

“Like all Psy designations,” she said, “medical, or M, is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of specializations. It includes those unusual few who can actually heal—”

“Anything?” He’d never heard of a Psy with that power.

She shook her head. “No, their scope is limited. Some can reset bones, while others can seal wounds—the types of things that might be needed in the field. The healing abilities apparently appeared in children born during the Territorial Wars, though there’s no proof of that. As far as I know, no M-Psy can psychically cure diseases or reverse hereditary conditions. May I continue?” A scientist’s cool question.

He wanted to bite her. “Go on.”

“The scanning you mentioned is the most well-known and prevalent manifestation of the M designation. My ability is a
subset of that—I can’t see broken bones or diseased organs, but it’s because my mind sees too deep.”

“How deep?”

“To the DNA level.”

His cat’s attention was momentarily diverted from the seduction of her skin. “No one can do that. It would make you a walking DNA scanner.”

“Yes,” she said, not seeming to realize she’d maintained constant eye contact. “Only a very small percentage of the designation possesses the ability. Even fewer master it to the level where we become more accurate than the machines.” Her eyes traced his lips and his entire body grew taut with the caress—she might not call it that, but that’s what it was. She was stroking him. Purring inwardly, he didn’t move, didn’t break the spell.

“Because of available equipment,” she continued, “it’s a fairly redundant ability in itself. You have to pair it with study—it was my knack for working with nanotech and implants that made me of interest to the Council. My ability gives me an edge with technology at that level of miniaturization.”

He wondered what she’d do if he gave in to temptation and flicked his tongue along her full lower lip. “How does your gift work?” he asked, curling his hand into a tight fist. “You see me and know my genetic blueprint?”

She shook her head. “Not quite. Depending on what I’m searching for, it can take hours, days, weeks, sometimes months to tease apart the DNA.”

“Why tell me all this?” He was a leopard sentinel. Even half-insane with this unwanted craving, his brain cells were working just fine. And he knew there had to be a reason for her unusual openness. “What do you want?”

She bit her lower lip.

His blood rushed to his cock. The roaring in his ears was so loud, he almost missed her next words.

“I want your DNA.”
A kiss is a melding of mouths. I’ve considered every aspect of this form of affection since the last perplexing dream, but I still don’t see the point of it.

—From the encrypted personal files of Ashaya Aleine

**Surprise** hit **Dorian** hard. “You obviously weren’t this blunt with the Council.”

“I can play political games if necessary.” Cool voice, jittery heartbeat. “It’s not who I am.”

He believed her. “Are you planning to mutate my DNA?” he teased.

“Obviously not.” She straightened out her legs, stretching until her toes touched the clear glass of the French doors.

He looked at her primly cut, unpainted nails and felt another urge to bite. Then she said, “If I planned to get rid of you, I’d do it silently and with such efficiency that everyone would think you’d died a natural death.”

If any other woman had made the threat, he’d probably have grinned and said something about never making her mad. But this wasn’t any other woman. Ashaya was a scientist who’d spent years in the arms of the Psy Council. She was also the only female to have ever threatened his control. “You could try.” It was a soft, lethal threat.

Ashaya hadn’t expected that response, though why, she couldn’t say. It just seemed wrong on a fundamental level. “Would you kill me?”
At the edge of his control, he took her mouth in an open-mouthed kiss, insinuating his hand between their bodies at the same time, and using the heel of his hand to give her the sexual friction she needed. He couldn’t handle any more. “Come on, sweet darling. Come for me.”

“Dorian.” It was a gasp as her eyes went pure black and her body arched like a bow, her breasts crushed against him.

“Good girl,” he whispered. “Good girl. I should get sainthood for this.”

She didn’t hear him, and that was fine. He liked seeing her like this, all loose and relaxed . . . and his.
CHAPTER 33

I’m latent. That used to make me angry. But that was before I decided I was going to become a sentinel. My mother thinks I’m pigheaded. I think I know what I want. And no one is going to stop me. No one had better even try.

*From an essay titled “What I Want to Be When I Grow Up” by Dorian Christensen, age 8 (Graded A+)*

They made it back to Tammy and Nate’s house around six thirty.

Something struck him as they entered. “Your PsyNet shields?” “I’m safe.” She gave him a puzzled look. “I shouldn’t be. Dorian, what we did—”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.” His guess was that Amara was protecting Ashaya. But he didn’t want to bring up her twin again so soon. “Keep your head down and don’t get lazy with the shields.”

She nodded. “Sound advice.”

It made him smile to hear her being scientist-like after she’d just exploded in his arms. “I forgot to tell you—Rina’s set up another broadcast for tomorrow.”

Her eyes met his. “Maybe we can discuss it after dinner.” An invitation, a gesture of trust.

“It’s a date.” He let the memory of their earlier pleasure color the air.

“Dorian.”
Grinning, he nudged her upstairs. “Go on—Keenan’s probably wondering what’s keeping you. I’ll come up after I talk to Nate.”

When he finally did get upstairs, it was to find both mother and child asleep despite the early hour—Keenan lay tucked against Ashaya, her arms holding him tight. The sight was a violent kick to his heart. And he knew.

No more dancing around the truth. No more suspicions. It knew.

Chest brutally tight, he walked out into the hall, leaving the door ajar. The staggering weight of the realization had him shaking. Ashaya was his mate. That was why his leopard had gone so crazy around her from the start. It had known. But the man had been too angry to listen. So the cat had shoved all that need, all that hunger, into the most vicious sexual need. “Christ, I’m blind.” And he knew the blindness had been at least partly willful. He hadn’t wanted to feel such excruciating tenderness for the enemy.

It was so much easier to hate.

Ten minutes later, when he could breathe again, he walked back into the room and closed the door behind himself. As he slid down the back of it to sit on the floor, his eyes on the bed, he saw that his hands were shaking.

The tenderness was there deep inside, mingled with a feral protectiveness. But it was need that had him in its claws. Raw, visceral, painful. Their play this afternoon had already ratcheted up the level of his hunger, and now that he consciously knew the truth of what she was to him, the drive to possess her was close to crushing.

But he wasn’t an animal, so he wrenched the hunger back under control and kept watch as they slept. That sleep was all the truly exhausted—deep and intense—as if they finally felt safe. Realizing that calmed the leopard enough that he could think—given the current hour and the fact they were missing a meal, chances were high that his mate and child would wake during the night. He had to be alert when they did.

Whispering the situation to Tammy when she came upstairs to grab them for dinner, he ignored the red gold glow of evening sunlight and forced himself into the light doze all soldiers used...
when necessary. The scream had him jackknifing to a standing position what felt like an instant later—however, one glance at his watch told him it was ten after nine. The house was quiet, peaceful. But for the rapid breathing of a frightened child, and a woman’s soothing murmurs.

“Nightmare?” he asked, after running an automatic security sweep—and letting Nate know things were under control when the other sentinel ran in. As Nate left, Dorian turned back to the room. “Shaya?”

“Yes, a nightmare.” She looked to him with a quiet need in her eyes. He could no more have stopped himself from walking across the room to sink down on the bed beside her than he could’ve stopped breathing. “You want to talk about the dream, K-Man?”

Keenan cuddled deeper into his mom, but nodded. “She’s looking for me.”

“Who?” Dorian asked, though he already knew the answer.

“My mother.”

Dorian saw Ashaya go pale under her dark honey and sunlight skin. “Your mother’s right here.”

“No.” Scowling, the kid shook his head. “My mommy’s right here, but my mother is looking for me.” He emphasized the word very carefully. “She’s doesn’t like me, not like Mommy.”

Dorian figured the boy had confused Amara and Ashaya in his mind, but that didn’t explain the terror emanating from Ashaya. “How do you know she’s looking for you?”

“I can feel her poking at my head.” He frowned. “She can’t come inside me because I’m in your net. But I think she’s seen Mommy.” A jaw-cracking yawn.

“Sleep, baby,” Ashaya whispered. “We’ll keep you safe.” The promise was fierce.

“I know.” A childish smile, but the eyes remained those of an old man. “Dorian?”

“Yeah, kiddo?” He took the hand Keenan held out. It was warm, fragile, a precious indication of trust.

The boy fought the wings of sleep to say, “Don’t let her hurt my mommy.”

“I won’t.” His heart a knot in his throat, he held that tiny hand as Ashaya stroked Keenan back into an easy sleep. “So what aren’t you telling me?” he said when he was certain Keenan was
well and truly out for the count. Her fear had been too piercing for this to have been a mere dream.

Ashaya’s face was stark with dread when she looked up. “He called her his mother, Dorian.”

“You’re identical twins and he’s not even five.”

“He shouldn’t know that she’s his mother.” Ashaya’s breath grew choppy. “I’ve raised him from the day, the hour, he was born. Me, always me.”

She might as well have slammed a brick into his chest. He couldn’t speak.

“That means she isn’t just poking at his mind, Dorian. It means she’s talking to him.” Her voice rose. “Who knows how long it’s been going on? She could’ve been telling him anything, influencing him—”

Having regained control, he pressed a finger to her lips. “Shh, don’t wake him.” He saw her struggle to master her panic as he dropped his hand. “I think you’ve been keeping more secrets.” He was furious, but attempting to come across as calm. “But we’ll talk about that later. Right now, you need to tell me if we should move Keenan.”

“I don’t want to be separated from him.” Her voice trembled. “But you’re right, we can’t be together, not until Amara’s been contained. Even if she has a lock on him, she’ll come to me first—the farther away he is from me, the safer he’ll be.”

Dorian had figured as much. “I’ll have—”

“Don’t tell me where he’ll be.” A tight order. “I could still be compromised.”

“You can leave the Net.” She damn well was going to leave it, even if he had to drag her out kicking and screaming. “There’s a way.”

Her eyes locked into his. “No, there isn’t. I need to stay.” A resolute answer, but the need in her eyes was a wild, angry thing. “Amara will spin completely out of control if I don’t.”

His eyes narrowed, but her stubbornness wasn’t something they could deal with right then. He spent the next few minutes with Nate and Tammy, making arrangements for Keenan to be taken up to the SnowDancer den, the most logical hiding place. Not only was it almost impossible to find if you didn’t already know where it was, but Judd and his brother, Walker, would be
able to keep a psychic eye on Keenan. "I'll drive him up——" he began, knowing Ashaya would be safe under Nate's watch. And since the other man was already mated, Dorian's leopard didn't snarl at the idea.

"No," Tammy interrupted. "Sascha needs to go up with Keenan. I've already called her and Lucas—we need to monitor if the Web is elastic enough to cover him at that distance, despite the fact that he's connected directly to you."

"I promised him I'd take care of him." And Dorian kept his promises.

Nate scowled. "He's Pack now. You don't think we have rights over him?"

Man and leopard both calmed at the mention of the solid strength of Pack. "Yeah, you do." He thrust a hand through his hair. "Kid's got a grip on my heart, Nate."

"They have a way of doing that." The other sentinel slapped him on the back. "You'll get over it sometime in the next hundred years or so."

Strangely, that made him feel better. Because there was no way he was letting his mate, and the boy he already considered his own, go.

Lucas and Sascha arrived less than an hour later, and Dorian ran upstairs to fetch Keenan—he'd reawakened on his own twenty minutes earlier, stomach rumbling. It had given Dorian the opportunity to make sure Ashaya ate as well before she headed up to prepare Keenan for the change in location.

"Keep your mind quiet," she was saying now as she zipped up Keenan's insulated jacket. "Don't listen to her."

"I won't." Keenan shifted from foot to foot. "It's getting fuzzy anyway. Her voice."

"That's good. Don't be scared, baby. This is only for a little while."

Keenan threw his arms around Ashaya. "I'm not scared, Mommy. I can feel you inside my head. If I need you, I'll call. I know you'll come."

Ashaya's face was a study in wonder as she hugged her son. "Yes, I will."
Walking over, Dorian picked up the little knapsack she’d packed for Keenan. “We’ll keep him safe, Shaya. I give you my word.”

She glanced up, a silent trust in her eyes that the leopard accepted as its due. Nodding, she kissed Keenan and rose. “Come on, little man. You’re going for a ride.”

Instead of following her, Keenan turned and pulled on Dorian’s pant leg with a confidence that clearly startled Ashaya. What appeared to startle her even more was that Dorian simply bent down and picked the boy up. “Go on, Shaya. I need to chat with Keenan.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “He’s—”

Dorian shook his head slightly, gratified when she left the room. “You have to trust me with your mom,” he said to the boy in his arms.

“She’s mean.” A ferocious protectiveness filled that small face. “She wants to hurt my mommy.”

“I know. But I’m pretty mean myself.” He let Keenan see the lethal edge in his eyes, something most children wouldn’t have understood. But Keenan Aleine was no more a child than Dorian had been at his age. “No one will get close to her.”

A small nod. “Dorian?”

“Yeah?”

“I want my mommy in our web.”

Dorian’s heart kicked in his chest. “She will be.” It was the one thing he wouldn’t compromise on. And if that made him animal in his possessiveness, so be it.

After Keenan left, Ashaya went back upstairs and began to pack her stuff. “I have to move as well. Nate and Tammy’s cubs returned tonight, didn’t they?”

“Yeah.” He’d already made the same decision, but the leopard was proud of her instinctive need to protect the pack’s young. “We definitely need to get out of here if Amara’s hunting.”

Ashaya halted in the act of closing up her bag. “You’re angry.”

Angry didn’t even come close. “Tell me about Amara being Keenan’s mother.”

“I don’t know if I want to with you growling at me.”
His hands clenched. “Sugar, I’m *this* close to tearing off your clothes and teaching you exactly how badly I take you keeping secrets from me. Your choice. Talk or get naked.”

Ashaya felt her throat dry up. “You won’t hurt me.”

“No. But I bet I can make you whimper.”

Her thighs pressed together and she knew he was right. Part of her, the part that had been fascinated with Dorian since the moment she first heard his voice, was tempted to taunt him until he made good on his promise. However, right now she needed to keep her wits about her. “Amara is Keenan’s biological mother. Both the level of his intelligence and his lack of a fail-safe switch come from her. But *I’m* his mother in every way that counts.”

“I’m not arguing.” His tone had smoothed out a little, but the growl was still there, under the surface. “What I don’t get is—you were both in the Council substructure. How could anyone not know which one of you was pregnant?”

“We’re so identical that people—and even Psy are prone to this failing—often mixed us up. Not only that, but we worked in the same lab, on the same projects. We made the decision early, and it wasn’t hard to imitate one another once the pregnancy began showing. Those months, I allowed Amara to shadow my mind and vice versa.” It had been worth every painful second. “We did get lucky once—when they tied my tubes. Since physical injury wasn’t the point, the medics used noninvasive keyhole surgery.” If they had opened Ashaya up, there was a good chance her body would’ve given her away.

Dorian grabbed the bag as she closed the last flap. “Come on—you can tell me the rest on the way.” He headed downstairs and out to the car.

Nate and Tammy watched them drive off, the senior sentinel standing with his mate in the circle of his arms. *I want that,* Dorian thought. A family. His mate safe with him. His child sleeping within hearing distance.

But at this precise second, he was well beyond annoyed with said mate. “What was the trigger for the swap?” he said as he pulled out onto the main road.


He hadn’t even realized he was making the angry sound.

*Talk.*

Her back stiffened but she answered, speaking so fast he could
barely separate out the words. "Amara used her own eggs and donor sperm to create an embryo, which she then infected with a disease. She intended to kill the fetus when it was born and dissect sections of its brain to study the progress of that infection."

The horror of it stunned Dorian. It took him several minutes to fight past the clawing protectiveness of the cat. "She intended to kill her own child?" *Kill Keenan."

"I told you," Ashaya said, voice trembling with a mix of anger and anguish, "Amara doesn't really see people as people. The only person she's ever seen as human is me—and until Keenan, I was able to keep her from crossing the line into murder."

He tried to wrap his mind around the sheer weight of that responsibility and couldn't. How the hell had Ashaya survived? "Can't have been easy."

"Actually, it was," she said to his surprise. "She's a sociopath, but she has no desire to kill for the sake of it. She is, in fact, the perfect scientist in her capacity to be completely impartial, and science is her life. All I had to do was keep an eye out to make sure she was being given work that challenged her." A shaky breath. "But this time, the science was going to lead to death. I knew I'd kill her before I allowed her to harm the baby. Except..."

He shook his head. "I understand that it must be hell to even consider killing your twin, but women have a way of being feral about their cubs. You're no different. Why is Amara still alive?"

"Don't you see, Dorian?" A shattered whisper. "For better or worse, she is his biological mother." The words were like hidden grenades, blowing up in his face. "She's the reason he exists—how could I steal her child and then get rid of her? How could I go to my son with his mother's blood on my hands?"

The emotional knives kept twisting deeper, harder. "So you somehow convinced her to give up maternal rights? How?"

"I had to speak to her on her level." An unflinching answer, a leopardess fighting for her cub. "I had to pretend I understood and accepted what she'd done. I talked her into making it a long-term experiment. She said it would be far too much work, but I said I'd take care of the long-term part."

"The infection—oh, Jesus. Omega?" It was such a vile thought the cat refused to believe it could be the truth.

"In a sense." A calm tone, but her hands were trembling so hard he saw her grab hold of one with the other to immobilize it.
Dorian let out a slow breath. “Does the Council know?”

“They didn’t when I left and I highly doubt they do now. Only Amara and I know everything. Keenan knows a little—just what he needs to protect himself. I hate that he has to know anything.”

“Keenan’s a smart kid,” Dorian muttered, pride thickening his voice, “and Amara will never betray you.” Yet she was a monster who’d planned to kill her own child. The discordance between the two was harsh, allowing for no easy answer. “Zie Zen?”

“A former associate of our mother’s. I asked him to tell this one lie without asking me why, and he did.” She met his eyes. “Do you understand now why I will get very angry with you if you treat him with anything less than respect?”

He bowed his head. Sometimes, even a leopard had to admit being in the wrong.

Apparently satisfied, she continued. “Technically, Keenan has no biological father—Amara spliced together genetic material from an incredible number of donors, most likely so no one else would have a claim on the embryo. I used that. I told everyone his DNA scan didn’t line up with Zie Zen’s because we experimented on it in vitro. They believed us—after all, we are the DNA specialists.

“That understanding both increased Keenan’s value as a hostage and kept him safe from discovery—while the Council was certain he was important to me because I was using him as an experiment, they didn’t think to go beyond the DNA.”

For the first time in hours, Ashaya felt a hard push at her mind. It was a surprise, but she held Amara back, the task far easier than it should’ve been. Something had changed in her. She checked her PsyNet shields again, relaxing only when she saw that she continued to remain anonymous. “We all knew about the idea of Omega,” she continued, “but Amara became obsessed with it. Except, she didn’t see the point in making everyone infertile. It would still leave the insurgents alive and able to agitate.”

Dorian blew out a disbelieving breath. “Why worry about procreation when you could have control over life and death itself?”

“Yes. She decided to create a lethal and easily transmissible bioagent.”

The coldness of the equation chilled Dorian’s beast. At the same time, he was struck by Amara’s almost childlike lack of
concern for others. It made a twisted kind of sense if the Dark-Mind was involved—the twin of the NetMind was a child in many ways, a stunted creature with no real sense of the world outside its cage. “What did she base her virus on?”

“It wasn’t actually a virus. Do you know anything about prions?”

“I’ve heard that somewhere.” He frowned, thinking. “Mad cow disease?”

“Bovine spongiform encephalopathy,” Ashaya said. “Prions are responsible for that as well as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies in humans. They’re the most deadly infectious agents in the world because no cure has ever been discovered. The only reason TSEs haven’t wiped us out is that they’re extremely hard to catch.”

“Hell.” But he could see the logic of it, as Amara must’ve seen it. “Aren’t prions proteins?” At her nod, he blew out a breath. “Easy stuff for her to work with.” Ashaya and Amara could both see proteins without the need for a microscope.

“By the time I found out what she was doing,” Ashaya said, her crisp scientist’s voice beginning to grow ragged at the edges, “she simply wouldn’t be stopped. The science, you see—it was brilliant, cutting-edge science.” She seemed to be waiting for a response.

He shot her a dark look. “I’m not going to blame you for what she did. Go on.”

“I heard Tammy say you could be charming. I haven’t seen any proof yet.”

Oh, his cat liked that. “I thought I was very charming when I petted you into orgasm.” He shot her a look filled with sexual heat. “I plan to do more of that—right after I teach you about keeping secrets.”

Her eyes narrowed, and color rode high on her cheeks, but the byplay seemed to have given her the will to go on. “I switched to damage control when I couldn’t stop her—I pointed out that by killing everyone, she’d negate the reason for Omega in the first place. That’s when she realized she’d need to work out a way to ensure the disease lay dormant until necessary. Once activated, there would have to be a means to either reverse it or slow it down. I was happy for her to work on that—to have a cure for
prion diseases would be a good thing, but it’s also such a difficult
task that the answer’s eluded scientists for over a century.”
“You thought it would keep her occupied.”
“Yes. But”—her next words were shredded with a violent
mix of rage and pain—“I didn’t know enough about prions
then. They’re notoriously difficult to culture.”
Dorian didn’t need her to explain the rest. “So she created a
living petri dish.” He imagined that was how Amara must’ve
thought of it. To use a child in that way—it was a concept utterly
abhorrent to his nature. And yet Amara was Keenan’s mother.
That was something that couldn’t be ignored in any decision they
made. Neither could his duty to DarkRiver. “Is he infectious?”
Amara threw the glass beaker against the wall and watched the liquid dribble down the white surface without seeing anything.

"Sir?"

She glanced at Keishon Talbot, her assistant, and probable spy for Ming LeBOn. "Get out before I kill you."

The other woman left without a word.

Amara threw another beaker, her mind chaotic. Ashaya had done something. The link between them, the one that nothing could break, it was getting weaker. It had always shifted in strength—from background noise to a pure telepathic bond when they both focused. But it was always there, easy to pick up from either end.

Not now.

Something was interfering with the transmission—Amara didn’t know how that was even possible. She considered all the parameters and came to the logical conclusion: he was the cause. The intruder. He had to be destroyed.

Calm descended with the decision.

She stepped over the broken glass on the floor and headed outside—though the psychic link between her and Ashaya was
erratic, it was enough to lead Amara to her twin. The guards would try to stop her, of course. But they thought of her as a polite, controlled M-Psy, like Ashaya. Of course, Ashaya had never actually been controlled, either, but that was their secret.

She picked up several loaded pressure injectors as she walked.
CHAPTER 35

Clay lets you get away with far too much, Ms. Smart-Ass. My mate is going to adore me so much, she’ll do everything I say.

—Dorian Christensen in a text message to Talin McKade, six weeks ago

Is he infectious?
“1 won’t let anyone touch him,” Dorian promised Ashaya. “and the pack will stand by you.” As he’d stood by their mates and children. “But we need to know.”

“To catch it from him,” Ashaya said, her voice thick, “you’d have to cut him open and ingest sections of his brain tissue. Amara got that idea from an obscure New Guinean prion disease called kuru. She tinkered with the protein until ingestion was the only method of transmission—she didn’t want anyone to be able to steal her research.”

Unable to put the car on automatic, he reached out and tangled the fingers of one hand with hers. “Is he terminal?”

“No.” To his amazement, her face lit up. “Keenan is absolutely, utterly healthy and he’ll stay that way. I don’t know what Amara did to him in the test tube, but Dorian, he’s a miracle... he has antibodies in his blood.”

He wasn’t a scientist. It took him a second. “He holds the answer to a cure for all prion diseases.” Hard on the heels of that joyful realization came another, darker one. “He’s also the key
the Council needs to unleash Omega.” It was a truth they could never be allowed to discover.

Ashaya nodded. “Amara has no idea about the antibodies—I sabotaged her tests. But no matter what, I knew it would come down to her or him.” Her eyes met his and in them he saw a heartbreaking decision, the bloody protectiveness of a mother winning out over the ties of a bond formed before birth. “Age five was the point at which she planned to dissect his brain.”

Jesus. “You were racing a deadline from day one.”

“Yes, at first. Then two and a half years ago, when Ming began to pay her too much attention and she went underground, I thought he was safe.”

“But she didn’t forget him,” he guessed.

A jerky shake of the head. “She considers him the first step in her most important piece of work.”

Her fingers were clenching around his hard enough to bruise. She was, he realized, barely keeping it together. “You want to talk about something else for a while?” He wasn’t up to subtlety at the moment, but he needed to take care of her.

She grabbed on to the offered escape with desperate quickness. “Yes.”

“How about my abnormal DNA?” he teased, though the cat was still snarling in protective fury. “Have you fixed me?”

“I’m working on it.” Her fingers relaxed as she found her footing in science.

His leopard growled in pleased approval. Ashaya’s internal strength was a thing of beauty. Yet she’d let him soothe her. It was as much a caress to his predator’s soul as if she’d curled those long, talented fingers around him.

That was all it took.

Sexual heat was suddenly a talon inside him, his beast one step closer to animal savagery. “Tell me.” Letting her go, he squeezed both hands around the steering wheel in a vain effort to stop the primitive fury of his reaction. He’d waited too long, and now his cat was no longer giving him a choice. Either he coaxed Ashaya into melting for him in every way . . . or he got the hell away from her. And right now, there was no damn way he was going to leave her unprotected.

“It’s a puzzle,” she said, unknowingly stoking his hunger
with the primness of her voice. Especially now that he knew how uninhibited she was in bed. He could still hear her gasping little cries from this afternoon, all hot and demanding.

*If he didn’t have her naked and under him soon, he’d go fucking insane.*

“Your DNA is identical to normal changeling DNA in every respect that I can see, but—”

“Where did you get the control sample?” A flash of dark heat raced through him and he knew himself well enough to identify it as a dose of pure jealousy.

“From Tamsyn.” A pause, as if she was debating whether to continue. “I knew you’d react negatively if I approached a male. You’re... possessive.”

“Sugar, I’m way past possessive.” His voice was no longer fully human.

“Dorian?”

The sound of her voice, thick velvet and honey, wrapped around him like a silken fist. “Be quiet.” He focused his attention on getting them where they needed to go.

“I won’t take being talked to in that tone.”

She was worried about his tone? If she didn’t stop inciting the beast, she’d be hot and tight around his cock before they even got off this bloody highway. He growled low in his throat, releasing the leopard the only way he could. “Be. Quiet.”

Ashaya seemed shocked into silence. It lasted about six minutes. “Predatory changeling men are meant to be protective toward women.”

He kept his eyes on the road.

“They women, in any case,” she said after another pause.

Fifteen more minutes and he’d show her exactly how protective he was.

“I suppose technically I’m one of the enemy, so the protective element of your nature wouldn’t apply.”

Where the hell was the turnoff? There! He swept the vehicle into a narrow dirt track, taking Ashaya deep into an isolated section of the sprawling Yosemite forest. While most of it was a national park, habitation was allowed under certain restricted rules.

“Dorian?”

Ten more minutes, he told himself.
"I’m right, aren’t I? You consider me an ene—"
"Shaya," he gritted out, "you’re babbling."
That made her snap her mouth shut for several more minutes. "A nervous reaction. I should be able to handle it using the same tools I used when sitting face-to-face with Councilor Ming LeBon."
The dirt track became nothing more than the most primitive of paths a hundred meters ahead. Switching to the hover-drive, he took them into the shadow of the majestic guardians of the forest—the giant sequoias.
"However, none of my tools seem to be working."
He slammed the car into low gear, maneuvering them over a small outcropping of rock. Even using the hover-drive, he could cause damage, but he knew the forest well enough to avoid going near anything that wouldn’t regenerate quickly. Right now, he was more worried about his cock regenerating. It was going to end up cut in half if he didn’t lower the zipper soon.
"I can’t stop talking," she said, her shock open. "Why? My stomach is full of butterflies, my heart is thundering, and my palms are damp." A small pause, followed by a relieved sigh. "Must be fear. You’ve got a very threatening look on your face."
That did it. He brought the car to a halt in front of a cabin so well hidden by greenery, not even cats would find it if they weren’t actively looking. He wondered what Ashaya would think of it. But first things first. "You," he said, turning to glare at her, "are never to be threatened by me. Understood?"
She blinked. "Actually, right now you’re—"
"Tell me you understand." He leaned closer, eyes narrowed.
"But—"
"No buts, no nothing. You have the ability to piss me off without even trying, but I’ll fucking take a gun to my head before I lay a hand on you. You clear on that?"
She was crushed against the door now, his hand palm down beside her head. But her face was one of rebellion. "No. Not while you’re being so aggressive."
"Go on, baby, push me a little more." He smiled.
Ashaya had a very bad feeling about that smile—but it was the kind of bad that had her body melting from the inside out. "Dorian, maybe we should go inside the house... I assume there is a house close by?"
He smiled widened. "Sure."

Wary of his agreement, she waited until he moved back and then quickly got out. He followed a few seconds later, stopping to get her pack out of the back. "This way." He jerked his head toward a heavy mass of foliage.

Her eyes widened as he nudged aside a sweep of trailing vines dotted with tiny white flowers and put his hand on a high-tech scanner, unlocking the door. She entered to find that the entire place was—but for a corridor that she assumed led to the bathroom facilities—a single large room shaded with the green dark of the forest.

"Lights," he said a second later, and cunningly placed fixtures bathed the cabin in what felt like sunshine.

"It's all glass," she breathed, taking in the way he'd brought the forest inside. The leaves and flowers felt so close, she was tempted to reach out and touch. While the greenery was all shadowed curves outside, clean lines dominated inside. The bed took up the left section, but with plenty of room to move around it. To her right was a comfortable seating area, and beyond it, a small kitchen.

Suddenly, and though she'd heard no voice command, the lights all dimmed, except for the one that lit up the sleeping area. Turning, she opened her mouth to ask him—"Oh."

Dorian was unbuttoning his shirt.

Her throat dried up as inch after inch of golden male flesh was revealed. A strange heat washed through her body, a turbulent internal storm. This afternoon, she'd held on to him because she needed to forget. Tonight, she knew she'd remember every touch, every caress...every hard male demand.

He shrugged off the shirt, and she saw it glide to the floor in a motion that seemed ridiculously slow to her heightened senses. In front of her, he was all sleek muscle and heat, a leopard contained in a body blessed with quicksilver grace. Whenever Dorian moved, she felt compelled to watch, it was such a beautiful thing.

Now, with his shirt off and an intrinsically male look on his face, his grace turned into the stalking prowl of a big hunting cat. And she knew very well she was the prey. Still, she stayed in place as he circled around her without speaking before stopping at her back. Tugs on her braid, her hair being released into a
a wild, curly mass. Then strong male hands stroked over her, sliding her cardigan down her arms.

She should’ve resisted . . . except she could find no reason to do so. What he’d done to her on the sofa—it had been beyond pleasure. She wanted more—to touch him as he’d touched her, to explore, to taste. And, given that her PsyNet shields were miraculously solid, she had no cause to fear. As for the rest . . . she didn’t know how the chaos of what she felt for Dorian kept Anara at bay, but it did. For these stolen moments, she was free. To live. To touch. And be touched.

The cardigan made a soft shush as it hit the floor.

“I’m going to take that as a yes,” Dorian said, his fingers resting on her hips, at the very edge of her waistband. “If you want to say no, do it now.” Taut strain in every syllable.

The practical question should’ve broken the sensual spell, but all it did was unlock her tongue. “You’re distracting me from my work on your DNA,” she said, trying to tease him. It came out wrong—she wasn’t used to this kind of play. And her mind wasn’t quite functioning, her body having taken complete control.

“I’m latent, not broken.”

Something stilled inside her, the primal heart of her—a heart that had come to screaming life entombed below the earth—understanding that his words weren’t a statement at all. “You’re a lethal, dangerously skilled sniper,” she said, speaking the absolute truth because she seemed unable to lie to him. “In many ways you’re tougher than those who know they can fall back on the strength of their beast.”

Clever fingers slid up and under her T-shirt, stroking skin that quivered at the first touch. “So why bother?”

She drew in a shuddering breath, put her hands on his wrists. “Slower.”

His fingers played over her ribs. “I told you the time for saying no was over.”

Despite the harsh words, she knew he’d never hurt her. She knew in a way that she’d never before known anything. As if the truth was carved deep inside her soul. “I’m not going to say no.” Against her skin, his fingertips were slightly rough, quintessentially male in a way she couldn’t define. She just knew that the feel of it was an erotic sensation she’d never have expected.
“But sensuality is a drug I need to get used to in small doses.” She thought she might’ve surprised him when his fingers paused.

An instant later, they began moving again, stoking the fire within her with dark precision. “I’m patient.”

“I know.” He was also incredibly focused—he’d become a powerful and respected member of his pack despite being born with what many would’ve considered a handicap. But... “You hurt, Dorian.” A whisper that froze him. “I might be Psy, but I can feel your hurt at being unable to shift.” The knowing bewildered her, but that made it no less true.

Dorian felt as if she’d knocked him flat with that single quiet statement. He’d done such a damn good job of moving past his genetic flaw that he’d convinced everyone—even himself—that it didn’t matter. And on one level, it didn’t. He was proud of what he’d become, a changeling fully capable of defending his pack, his family. But... “I couldn’t save her.” A gut-wrenching confession.

Ashaya’s hands slid under the tee to clench on his. “From all I know, Santano Enrique was a monster in every way. Don’t allow the echo of his evil to taint your memories of your sister.”

“I swore to destroy the Psy Council.” Sascha’s empathic gift had saved him from becoming a beast ravaged by vengeance alone, but he was a predatory changeling male. He couldn’t forget. “They nurtured Enrique, protected him. I want their blood to flow in the streets.”

“Hate will destroy you,” she whispered. “It’ll destroy... us.”

He shuddered, burying his face in the curve of her neck. The electric curls of her hair cushioned him with a soft warmth that was so intrinsically female, he couldn’t hope to explain it. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he simply held her, allowed himself to hold her, to accept that she was his mate. And that she came from the very race he’d made the target of all his rage, all his pain... so that he wouldn’t have to face his own guilt.

A scientist’s practical hand rose to press against his cheek as Ashaya tilted her head in a sweet gesture of acceptance. “People always say it’s changelings who most crave touch, but that’s not the truth. A long time ago, long before Silence, Psy craved it more than any other.”

He let her words wash over him like affectionate rain. His
mate, his *mate*, was trying to temper his grief, trying to tell him they weren't so very different after all.

"We were becoming so mentally inclined, living so much on the psychic plane that it scared us. We sought out physical sensation to anchor us, to bring us back to reality."

"Did it work?"

Her hand rubbed gently and he felt the cat in him shudder in surrender. "Yes," she said. "It turned the course of our history powerfuly that even Silence couldn't derail it. Not even the strongest among us retreat wholly from their physical bodies. Much saved us."

"Then save me, Shaya." He laid his heart bare, invited her to save it.

Dropping her hand, she turned in his arms. Then, rising up on tiptoe, she cupped his face in her palms and drew him down. Her kiss was innocent, vulnerable, a caress so gentle that it made him her slave between one breath and the next.

"Dorian," she said and it was another caress. One hand fluttered to rest on his shoulder, the fingers of the other tracing a line across his cheekbone, along his jaw and down until she splayed her hand flat against his heartbeat.

Whether she understood or not, he knew he was being marked in a very feminine way. "More," he demanded, greedy, starving, ready to take.
Sascha’s face grew solemn. “To have a broken twin... That’s got to be a powerful bond—even in the PsyNet, twins aren’t separated. I can’t imagine how this could possibly end happily.” Her hand curled around his. “Dorian’s emotionally involved.”

“Yeah.”

“If he loses another woman he considers his...” She shook her head. “He’ll give in to the darkness. Nobody will be able to stop him.”

Lucas didn’t argue. He knew full well that if Ashaya died, Dorian would pick up a gun and go hunting. Only death would halt his quest for vengeance this time.

**Ashaya met Dorian’s eyes.** “I want to stay on watch with you.”

He scowled. “You have to go on camera again tomorrow—no, today. Catch some z’s.”

She sat on the edge of the bed, braiding her hair. “Yes,” she said. “I have to make sure people understand that the Council murdered Ekaterina and the others.”

He heard the anger and the leopard understood. For some crimes, there could be no forgiveness. “There’s one other thing you need to take care of—we’ve had indications that some human group wants to use Omega to hit the Psy.”

She blew out a breath. “I can’t retract my statement. That’ll undo everything we’ve achieved.” A pause. “I’ll make it clear the virus knows no racial boundaries.”

“Should work.”

“I never thought about that aspect of things,” she murmured. “I used Omega because it was the biggest Council secret I knew—I wanted something that would cause so many ripples that they’d forget about looking for one small lost boy.”

“You used the very thing that could’ve led to his death, to protect him.”

“Ironic, isn’t it?”

“Smart,” he said, flicking his eyes toward her. She looked so solemn and neat with those tight braids on either side of her head that he had the wicked impulse to mess her up again.

She met his gaze. “You have the cat in your eyes.”

In truth, the leopard was stretched out inside him, tense with
worry. But it was also . . . happy. Because she was here. And both man and leopard would do everything and anything to keep her safe. "Whatever happens, you do the broadcast today. We need to make you so hot that your death would cause more problems than it would solve." For one, they’d have a sniper on their trail. It was an icy calm thought.

"The Council wouldn’t have cared once," Ashaya said. "They’d have silenced me and any critics. I guess things are changing, but the pace is so slow."

"Silence has had over a century to take root," he reminded her. "It can’t be ended overnight."

"I don’t care so much about Silence."

He shot her a look of utter disbelief. "What?"

"I think most Psy would break Silence if given a choice, but others would choose to hold on to it. That should be an option."

He returned his attention to the window. "If you say so."

"It’s not black and white." He could feel her glaring at his back. "Shades of gray dominate."

"Uh-huh."

Something hit his back. "Hey!" When he turned around, Ashaya gave him a prim look. "You weren’t paying attention."

"I just don’t get it—why the hell would anyone choose to remain an emotionless robot?" He lobbed the pillow back to her.

Grabbing it, she hugged it to her stomach. "Because there are some Psy gifts so dangerous that even we fear them on the deepest, most primal level. Silence is sometimes the only thing holding these powerful Psy back from the edge of the abyss."

Dorian folded his arms and leaned his shoulder against the wall next to the window, from where he could continue to keep watch while facing Ashaya. "No, Shaya, that’s the one thing I won’t accept. Silence spawned the fucking bastard who took my sister’s life. I want it destroyed." Fury uncurled deep inside him, threading through his veins with savage intensity.

"And what about the innocent people who’ll lose their minds to the blinding fire of their gifts?" Getting up, she walked over to touch his arm. "You saw the end result of that kind of degradation in the violence of that murder-suicide."

A sheet of red rising at his back, a broken woman in an assassin’s arms. "Not my problem." He cupped her cheek. "You’re
mine. You matter. Pack matters. Everyone else can take their chances.”

Ashaya shook her head. “You don’t mean that.”

“I mean every word. I’ll do everything I can to bring Silence down.” Because as far as he was concerned, the madness, the evil, it all stemmed from the imposition of a protocol that had eliminated emotion from the Psy.

“No, Dorian.” She tugged at his wrist, but he broke contact and turned back to the window. “It’s the Council that’s the true enemy. Once they’re gone, once we have a leadership that cares—”

He snorted. “Psy who lead tend to be power hungry.”

“Not all.” Pushing into his space, Ashaya gripped his arm, feeling herself teetering on the edge of some crucial understanding. Then he shot her a hard look and she knew. “You’re not this bitter, hateful man who refuses to see the truth. You’re better than this.”

This time his glance was filled with cold rage. “My sister was butchered, Shaya. Butchered. One of the Silenced tortured her, cut her, broke her. Then he brought her home and killed her in her safe place.” His hands clenched so tight she was afraid he’d shatter his own bones. “Her skin was still warm when I reached her. I heard the echo of her scream as I ran up the stairwell and some nights, that scream haunts me until it’s all I can hear.”

She couldn’t imagine the depth of his horror, but that nameless knowing inside her, a knowing attuned only to this leopard in human skin, comprehended that his grief could also turn into a kind of poison. The wonder of it was that it hadn’t already.

His pack, she thought, recalling the look in Lucas Hunter’s eyes that day on theCTX balcony. Dorian’s packmates hadn’t just looked out for him, they’d refused to allow him to drown under the crushing weight of his tormented anguish. “You were getting better,” she said, shoulders tight with sudden realization. “Before I came into your life, you were getting past the loss.”

“You’re mine.” A flat declaration that was no answer.

“It was me,” she said, hand dropping off his arm. “I pushed you back into the poison of rage.”

“Ashaya.” A warning.

“No,” she said, raising her voice to be heard above the roaring silence of his anger. “I’m Psy and you swore to destroy the
Psy. This . . . connection we have, it’s not something you were ready for, not something you’re comfortable with—"

“I’m more than fucking comfortable with you.” The words were bullets. “You don’t get to walk away from this using some self-serving psychological bullshit.”

“I don’t want to walk away!” He was inside her, this cat. And his hurt pulsed in her own heart. “I just want you to face up to the truth.”

He snarled at her, a sound that raised every hair on her body. “What the fuck do you want me to say, Shaya? That I never expected to fall for a Psy? That it kills a part of me that keeping you safe is now more important to me than destroying the Council? That the guilt of the pleasure you give me is a dead weight in my chest? Is that what you want?” A vicious question. “There, I’ve said it. But you know what?” He backed her to the window, closing his hand around the side of her neck. “It doesn’t matter shit. The leopard recognizes you, knows you were meant to be mine.”

“What about the man?” she asked, refusing to let him silence her with the sheer force of his anger. “What does the man think?”
CHAPTER 40

“The man wishes this was easy.” His finger rubbed at the ragged beat of her pulse. “He wishes you were changeling or human so he wouldn’t have to question his need to hate the Psy, so he wouldn’t have to look into his sister’s accusing face every time he closes his eyes, so he damn well wouldn’t have to feel a traitor to his own vows.”

Pain, such pain tearing through her. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Shaya, don’t be sorry. Because even while the man is wishing that, he knows that he wouldn’t trade you in for anything . . . even if that trade would bring his sister back from the grave.” The incredible depth of his guilt was a shadow that turned the blue of his eyes to midnight. “I’ll stand watch outside.” He left her without another word.

Ashaya stared at the closed door, her heart filled with a turbulence of emotion she was far too inexperienced to fully comprehend. All she knew was that Dorian was hurting. Hurting so badly that it threatened to break his heart. She raised a hand, rubbing it unconsciously over her own chest. She was an
M-Psy—she had no capacity to heal emotional hurts. She didn’t even know how to begin.

The only thing she could do for Dorian, the only gift she could give him, was to enable his body to shift. That’s what she would work on, she thought, clinging to the familiar, the easily understood. It was a good solution, a solution that utilized her skills... and yet she knew it was wrong. She couldn’t sit here, willfully ignoring the truth—she had shoved Dorian to the edge of the abyss.

The only question was, was she ready to walk over the edge with him?

Ashaya had never considered herself a coward—she’d survived the Council with her mind intact, had put her life on the line to help others escape certain death. But tonight, this choice, it was the hardest of her life. She knew that if she went after Dorian, if she accepted his pain as her own, it would be an irrevocable step.

Keenan, she thought, her mother’s heart clenching—he was already at home with these cats. This choice would take nothing away from him. But Amara... she didn’t know what would happen to Amara. Her twin had been with her since birth, since before birth, their minds linked, their souls connected. A single tear streaked down her face as she cried for the loss of a relationship that had never stood a chance, but that held her prisoner.

Then she stood, wiped away the tear... and walked outside.

Dorian was standing with his back to the hidden wall of glass, his eyes focused on the shadowy bulk of the trees that faced his home. He didn’t say anything when she opened the door and came out, as unmoving and unwelcoming as stone. But when she made a small movement toward him, he lifted his arm and dragged her close. “Don’t cry.” It was an order couched in a voice that still trembled with anger. But beneath the anger was a powerful, blinding emotion that threatened to wrench her from everything she’d ever known and throw her into the spinning darkness.

Burying her face in his chest, she wrapped her arms around him. “Then don’t hurt.” She felt something tug at her soul, inciting an odd kind of breathlessness.
Dorian went very quiet around her.
She fought the pull, knowing it would tear her from Amara. And while Amara was her jailer, Ashaya was also her keeper. Without Ashaya, Amara would kill, would murder, would become the very monster Ashaya had spent her life trying to prevent her from becoming. "I was born first," she whispered. "She's my responsibility."

Dorian's body stiffened for a moment. Then he shifted to drop a kiss on top of her head. "So was I."
"Will you tell me about her?"

He pulled her tighter against his warmth. "She was laughter," he said, a painful roughness in his tone. "Nothing seemed to make her sad. The only time I ever saw Kylie cry as a child was after someone taunted me for not being able to shift." His voice caught. "She was so mad. She said it didn't matter to her that I was the brother she would've chosen if she'd been given the choice. God, she was a fighter."

Unbidden, an image formed in Ashaya's head, of a girl with Dorian's charm and mischief in her eyes. "Did she look like you?"
"Same hair, same eyes. But her smile—a knockout. She could talk anyone into anything." A husky laugh. "Even when she pissed me off, she could make me smile. She'd tell me stupid 'knock, knock' jokes until I broke. Then she'd hug me, call me her favorite brother, and smile because she knew she was forgiven."

Squeezing her eyes shut, Ashaya swallowed the knot in her throat. "She was precious to you."
"A piece of my heart died with her. I don't know if it will ever grow back."
"That's okay," she managed to whisper. "That piece was hers to take."

"I miss her." He buried his face in the curve of her neck as she rose on tiptoe to wrap her arms around him. "I miss her calling me up to pick her up from some club at one in the morning. I miss her telling me those stupid jokes. I miss her laugh. I miss her every damn minute of every day!" His body shuddered and damp heat bloomed against her neck.

Blinded by her own tears, she held this powerful leopard, this sentinel.
She held him as he cried... as he stole the last remaining pieces of her own heart.

**Forty-five minutes later,** Dorian watched dawn begin its stealthy creep across the sky and felt an odd kind of peace take hold in his heart. Perhaps it would last only a moment, perhaps longer. What mattered was that he knew the peace was a gift from the woman who moved so softly inside his home while he stood watch outside.

He’d tried to tell her to go back to sleep, but she’d shaken her head. Twice now, she’d come to tell him she could feel Amara getting closer. Once she’d worried that her twin was lost in the dark, a catch in her voice. When he heard her footsteps getting closer again, he expected another update.

But she exited with a cup of coffee in hand. “Here.”

“Thanks.” He looked intently at her, knowing he’d have to be careful with his mate—force of habit might make her hide what he needed to see. As he’d expected, her face bore no visible remnants of her sleepless night or the words spoken between them... until he looked into her eyes.

Those eyes, so fucking beautiful. Like one of the lakes up in the Sierra, before the snows. Silver-blue and so clear you could see the detail of every reflected leaf. “We’ll do everything we can to take her alive.”

A coolly Psy nod, but her hands had curled into fists.

“Lucas has her trail.” His alpha had called ten minutes ago to confirm the sighting. “I asked him to let her reach us.”

Her breath came out in a soft hush of sound. “Thank you.”

“Luc and Dezi are hanging back. They don’t want to chance being picked up by a telepathic scan.”

“That’s smart, but”—she shook her head—“I think she’s so focused on me at this point, she’s blind to anything else.”

“Yeah, that’s what Luc said.” He took a sip of his coffee, letting his gaze linger on her. She was beautiful in the muted hues between dark and dawn, would be glorious when the sun’s rays hit. “Apparently, she’s not making even an amateurish attempt to hide her trail. From what he saw while tracking her, it looks like she lost her way a couple of times, but then that internal
“In the aerie.”
“You left her alone?”
“As my mate would say—she’s a cardinal, fully capable of protecting herself.”
“So you left at least two others on watch.”
“Of course I did.” Lucas took another swallow of beer. “Why am I here in the middle of the night?”
“I didn’t call you.”
Lucas just waited.
Dorian was a sniper. He could’ve outwaited his alpha, but the truth was, he needed to talk. “Shaya’s figured out how to fix the misfire in my body, so I can shift.”
Lucas’s face went very quiet. “Well, hell.”
“Yeah.” He dropped the hand holding the beer bottle between his raised knees.
“You don’t want to?”
“I don’t know what the fuck I want.” He thrust his free hand through his hair. “All this time, I’ve done everything I could to be better, deadlier, faster.” Talin called him Boy Genius because she thought he was a compulsive overachiever. She was right. “It wasn’t enough that I was good at computers, I had to become a top-level hacker. Not enough that I got into architecture—I had to ace every exam. Hell, I even became a fucking pilot because it was a skill none of the other sentinels had. That drive—it was because I couldn’t shift.”
“Made you one tough son of a bitch, even as a kid,” Lucas agreed. “Now you’re wondering if you’ll lose that drive if you gain the ability to shift?”
“Yeah, I guess.”
“Dorian, that’s pure bullshit. We both know you’re too fucking hardheaded to ever be less than the best.” Throwing Dorian the empty beer bottle, Lucas folded his arms. “You’re scared, man.”
Dorian’s leopard growled. “And you know shit, Luc.” He got up and went into the house, closing the door behind him. He felt Lucas shift back into panther form and disappear a second later.
But as he slipped into bed beside Ashaya’s curvy body, soothing his beast with the lush warmth of her, the words of two very different men kept circling around and around in his head.
You’re scared...
people aren’t ready... to go out into the unfamiliar darkness.

Turning, he propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at Ashaya’s sleeping face.

Her eyes opened a second later. “You’re thinking too hard.” A complaint followed by a yawn.

“Sorry.” Their bond wasn’t telepathic in the true sense, but it had become obvious that they picked up thoughts from each other at random times.

“You’re still worrying over the shift, aren’t you?” Her eyes darkened. “I should’ve kept silent. You were hap—”

He pressed a finger against her lips. “When you want something so bad it hurts,” he said quietly, “and you bury it, bury it so deep that you convince yourself it no longer matters... and someone tells you you can have it, it’s terrifying. What if you take the chance and you’re wrong? What if you let yourself feel the loss and it’s this huge pain and you can’t put it back in the box?”

Ashaya kissed his finger and moved his hand so it lay over her heart. “I’m not an expert on emotion,” she said in her honest way. “Most of the time, I have no idea how to deal with the storm inside me.”

“You’re doing fine.”

“But see, Dorian, I know one thing.” She pressed her hand to his chest. “There are two huge hurts in you. You let yourself cry for Kylie but you’ve never let yourself face the other loss.”

The way she’d simply accepted Kylie’s memory as a part of their lives made him love his mate even more. “You accepted my sister,” she’d said when he’d asked her about it one night, “how can I possibly do any less for yours?”

His guilt, too, was gone. It had burned away during that same conversation—when he’d told Ashaya about Kylie’s fierce spirit. “She hated bullies,” he’d said. “She was ten years old when she saw some kids picking on another boy at school. She flew at them, scratched them up, got into trouble for fighting. But she didn’t care. She made friends with that kid, stuck with him until his family moved to another town.”

“Such a big heart she had,” Ashaya had murmured. “Such a beautiful heart.”

That was when he’d heard Kylie’s laughter in his mind, seen her chiding face.
Of course I would’ve accepted her, big bro. Stop being silly and let her make you happy. Or I’ll haunt you.

He’d finally understood that his sister, with her huge heart, would never have wanted him to feel guilty about this beautiful, perfect thing called the mating bond. That simple knowledge had given him a powerful kind of peace.

But Ashaya was right; as far as his latency went, he’d never even tried for peace. “If I mourn for it,” he said to her now, releasing the vicious control that had allowed him to survive as a child without half his soul, “then I admit it’s gone forever. I don’t want to do that, Shaya. I don’t want to tell my leopard that it’s going to be trapped inside me until death. I don’t want to think of it as a separate being. I want to be complete.”

Ashaya nodded, eyes shiny. “I’ve got it almost ready to go. I thought I should be prepared in case you—”

“Let’s do it. Soon as you’ve finalized everything,” The decision was made. “That way, we’ll know quicker if it doesn’t work.”

A burst of panic in Ashaya’s eyes. “Dorian, I’m so sure but what if—”

“Then I go on,” he said. “At least we’d know that we tried. No regrets.”

A jerky nod. “No regrets.”

And he knew that the words were true. No matter what happened with the trapped animal inside his body, both cat and man were one in this moment, in this truth. Ashaya Aleine was his. And he was hers. Leopard and man. Man and leopard. All of him.
EPILOGUE

It's been three months. Dorian has forgiven me, and I'm trying to believe that it doesn't matter—he managed to make me say those very words last night. I'm blushing as I write this. The things he comes up with... it's enough to shock a scientist.

I think I hear him. Better turn this off—he keeps trying to steal it so he can read my secrets. Silly cat. He is my biggest secret.

—From the encrypted personal files of Ashaya Aleine

Dorian was not in a good mood. The cat still trapped in his body was clawing at him, his mind was full of growls and other leopard crap he didn't want to deal with, and his favorite rifle had just broken. "Shaya!"

His mate poked her head out from the tent where she'd been sitting. Taking her and Keenan camping had been his idea. Noor had tagged along. Oddly, of the two adults, it was Ashaya who was enjoying herself the most. Even the organizer only came out when she wanted to write about her experiences—in a journal she refused to let him read.

"Shh," she said, "our son is having a nap with his girlfriend." She took in his mud-splattered clothing. "Oh, dear."

He muttered a few choice words. "Towel." He'd dunked his entire body, clothes and all, in a nearby stream, washing off most of the mud, but he was soaking wet.

Making an expressive face at his tone, she grabbed a towel
from one of the packs and came out. “Stop giving in to your mean side.” She began to dry his hair while he used the other end of the towel to wipe his face.

Dropping the towel the second it was done, he snaked out an arm and slammed her to his chest. “Put me in a better mood then.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll strip naked and lie in the sun once we get home and our son is out visiting his friends. Happy?”

He grinned, his bad mood disappearing at the speed of light. “Hell, yeah.”

Her lips twitched. Ashaya was still learning to laugh but he knew when his mate was happy. Leaning in, he stole a kiss. “What if I get naked and lie with you?”

Her lips parted. “Oh, then I’d definitely be ready to do you all sorts of favors.”

God, he loved the way she reacted to him. Bending his head, he stole another kiss before she pulled back and glanced down. “You made me wet.” Her nipples stood out hard and tight against the fabric of her T-shirt.

He felt like purring, he was so damn pleased with himself for having this sexy woman for his mate. “Maybe you’d better hang it up to dry.”

“One-track mind.”

“Thank you very much.”

Smile widening, she wiggled out of his arms. “Children, remember?”

“They sleep soundly.” He thought back to the previous night, to how she’d snuck out with him. The interlude had been a whole lot of fun.

It had also been a chance to talk. Ashaya’s guilt had been eating him alive. He’d finally loved her into exhaustion and told her to stop it. “We tried, Shaya. It didn’t work. I’m disappointed but I didn’t lose anything.”

“Your hopes,” she’d begun.

“I have you. I have Keenan. I’m happy.” It was the truth. Damn but she made him happy.

“You hurt,” she’d insisted.

“I did,” he’d acknowledged, because he couldn’t lie to her. “It hurt like a bitch when I realized the therapy wasn’t working, but then I got over it. I’m not the moping kind.”
Nalini Singh

Her face had softened. "No, you’re not. You just get out and find a way to deal."

Looking at her now, he could tell that she still wasn’t feeling completely okay with the way things had turned out, but time would fix that. "Is there any coffee?" he asked as she grabbed clothes for him from inside the tent.

"I'll make you some while you change." She threw him a sweater and a fresh pair of jeans.

He was reaching out to grab the clothing when a spasm hit his body. It was so unexpected and violent that it doubled him over. His vision shifted, the world swimming before him. He was vaguely aware of Ashaya crying out and running to kneel beside him. Her frantic hands felt odd on him, not quite as they should. His senses were so acute, everything too sharp, too bright.

His first thought was that the gene therapy had gone terribly wrong. His second was that he had to let Ashaya know he didn’t blame her. It wasn’t her fault. Just fucking fate. But he couldn’t get the words out, his vocal cords all wrong. He couldn’t even reach for her. His hands wouldn’t cooperate.

"Give in!" he heard Ashaya scream. "Stop fighting it! Dorian, please!"

Give in? What was she talking about? He had to fight, fighting was how he'd survived.

"Baby, please. Please. Please."

Ashaya never used endearments, a part of him thought. She was still learning. He liked to tease her by saying—A pulse of need, of love, came down the mating bond. It had the wet saltiness of a plea.

He couldn’t deny her. He could never deny her.

He gave in.

Agony and ecstasy, pure joy and shuddering pain. It was endless and the firefly flicker of a bird’s heart. Then it was over.

He blinked but his vision remained all wrong, his eyes too low to the ground. He opened his mouth to ask Ashaya why she was crying... but what came out wasn’t human.

Ashaya began laughing at the look on Dorian’s face. "You are so beautiful." A leopard with puzzled green eyes and the cutest expression she had ever seen. "Oh, I could just..." She reached out to stroke her hand down the fur of his back.

He made a rumbling sound that vibrated under her fingertips.
“Mom!” Keenan skidded to a stop beside her, Noor gasping beside him.

Dorian looked up and immediately lost his balance. Ashaya slung an arm around him, keeping him upright. “Slow, slow. You have to get used to it.”

Keenan bent his body, braced his hands on his knees, and looked sideways at the man he usually followed around like a solid little shadow. “Dorian? Is that you? You’re a leopard! Noor, look, Dorian’s a cat!”

Ashaya felt shock ripple through the mating bond as Keenan’s innocent exclamation finally cut through the confusion blinding Dorian. “You’re magnificent,” she whispered, cognizant of his keen hearing. “Amazingly beautiful.”

“Dorian’s a cat! Dorian’s a cat!” Keenan, her previously silent son, began running around them in circles, a giggling Noor attached to his hand.

Laughing at their antics, Ashaya pressed a kiss to Dorian’s brow. “Try to walk.”

He wobbled dangerously.

*Shit!* Dorian thought. He was like a cub, all lack of coordination and paws out of order. Okay, he thought, he was still a man inside. He could work this out.

Strokes on his back, through fur. The sensation was so different, so luscious. And then the whisper in his ear. “The leopard knows. You don’t have to cage him anymore.”

It was as if he’d just needed to hear it. The leopard took over, the man retreated. Then the two combined for the first time in his life. He felt Ashaya move away even as his body straightened. Turning his head, he leaned forward and closed his jaws very gently over her wrist.

It was a kiss.

Her face lit up in understanding. “I love you, too. Now go, run. Play.”

He released her, stopping to snap his teeth at the kids simply to hear them laugh and scamper off. Then he ran. The forest took on a thousand new colors clothed in scent, and when he chased prey, it was for the sheer joy of it. Hours passed. Night came and stars lit up the sky.

But the best part was going home... because she was waiting for him in front of a small fire. He walked out of the forest
on four feet, thought about wanting to hold her in the arms of a man, and that quickly, he was kneeling naked on the forest floor. "Hey. Kids asleep?"

She nodded and ran to him. "Oh, Dorian!"

Her joy blazed along the bond until it pulsed golden inside his heart. "God, I love you," he whispered. The words came from the heart of him, a heart that held the wild fury of a changeling—there was no man and there was no leopard. Only Dorian.
Turn the page for a sneak peak of the first book in a thrilling new series from Nalini Singh

Angels' Blood

Coming in March 2009 from Berkley Sensation!