

# **The Invisible Hand**

*Also by David Boles*

**The EleMenTs Series**

Beneath the City · The Invisible Hand · The Reckoning

**Fractional Fiction**

The Dying Grove · The Inheritance · The Kinship of Strangers

*Book Two of The EleMenTs Series*

# **The Invisible Hand**

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*For those who refuse to be invisible.*



Part One

# **Surveillance**

## Chapter 1

# Three Months Later

Spring came to the Bronx in fits and starts, winter retreating in stages, leaving behind muddy sidewalks and the first tentative buds on trees that had seemed dead for months. Elle watched the transformation through the window of the group home, tracking the changes the way she tracked everything: carefully, systematically, with the attention of someone who had learned that the world revealed its secrets to those who paid attention.

Three months since the tunnel. Three months since Marcus. Three months since they had discovered what they could do together, and three months of practicing in secret, growing stronger, learning the limits and possibilities of powers that still felt impossible even as they became familiar.

The group home had settled back into its routines. Marcus had returned to work after two weeks of recovery, his memories of that night hazy enough that he accepted the girls' explanations without pressing for details. Mrs. Washington had eventually forgiven them for their unauthorized midnight adventure, though she still watched them with an expression that mixed suspicion with something that might have been respect.

Elle's placement meeting with the Hendersons had been postponed, then postponed again, then quietly removed from the calendar. No one had explained why, and Elle hadn't asked. She had

learned not to question good fortune, not to draw attention to reprieves that might be revoked if examined too closely.

But something was wrong.

She couldn't identify it precisely, couldn't point to a specific incident or observation that justified her unease. It was more like a change in pressure, a shift in the atmosphere that her wind-sense detected without being able to name. She felt watched in ways she hadn't felt before the tunnel, observed by eyes she couldn't locate, tracked by attention she couldn't explain.

She had mentioned it to Meen and Teena, in the private language of their nighttime conversations. They had listened, had taken her seriously, had agreed to be careful. But they couldn't feel what she felt, couldn't sense the surveillance that prickled at the edges of her awareness.

Today, walking home from school, the feeling was stronger than ever.

Elle moved through the familiar streets of Mott Haven, her route memorized through months of repetition. She passed the bodega with the orange cat, passed the church with the broken sign, passed all the landmarks that had become her geography. The neighborhood knew her now, or at least recognized her: the Deaf girl from the group home, the one who walked alone, who didn't respond when people called out greetings.

She noticed the man on the corner.

He was reading a newspaper, which was strange in itself. Almost nobody read physical newspapers anymore, not standing on street corners in neighborhoods like this. He was positioned where he could see the route from the subway to the group home, where anyone walking that path would pass within twenty feet of him.

Elle didn't alter her pace. She kept walking, kept her expression neutral, kept her hands at her sides rather than signing to herself the

way she sometimes did when thinking. But she memorized him: middle-aged, average height, forgettable face, clothes that were deliberately nondescript. The kind of person designed to be overlooked.

She had seen him before. Three days ago, near her school. Different clothes, same face, same position that allowed casual observation of her movements.

She was being followed.

The realization settled into her chest like ice, cold and clarifying. Not paranoia, not imagination, but fact. Someone was watching her, tracking her movements, building a pattern of her daily life.

She reached the group home and climbed the stairs, her mind racing through possibilities. Who would surveil a thirteen-year-old foster child? The police, investigating the tunnel incident? But that case was closed, the arrests made, the contamination exposed. There was no reason to watch her now.

Unless someone had seen more than they should have. Unless the security cameras in the tunnel had captured something that raised questions. Unless whoever was watching knew about what she could do.

Elle entered the building and made her way upstairs, her hands trembling slightly as she opened the door to their room. Meen was there, headphones in, lost in an audiobook. Teena was at the desk, surrounded by papers, working on something that looked like research.

Elle crossed to Meen and touched her shoulder, then took her hand for tactile signing.

We need to talk, she signed. Something is wrong.

Meen pulled out her earbuds, her expression shifting from absorption to concern. "What happened?"

Elle explained about the man with the newspaper, about the feeling of being watched, about the pattern she had noticed over the

past weeks. She signed quickly, urgently, her hands moving through shapes that carried fear she couldn't vocalize.

Teena had stopped working, her attention fully on Elle's report. "You're sure it's the same person?"

Same face. Different clothes, different location, but the same face. He's following me.

"It could be coincidence," Teena said, but her voice lacked conviction. "The city is full of people. You might just be noticing someone who lives in the area."

He was near my school. In Manhattan. And now he's here, in the Bronx. That's not coincidence.

Meen was quiet, her blind eyes directed somewhere past Elle's shoulder, her expression thoughtful. "The tunnel," she said finally. "There were security cameras. We knew that. We hoped the footage would be lost in the investigation, but..."

"But someone might have found it," Teena finished. "Someone who saw what we did and started asking questions."

The room felt smaller suddenly, the walls pressing in. They had been so careful, so secretive, practicing only in the privacy of their room, never using their powers where anyone might see. But the tunnel had been different. The tunnel had been survival, and survival didn't allow for caution.

What do we do? Elle asked.

"We don't panic," Teena said, her voice steady despite the fear Elle could see in her eyes. "We stay calm, we stay careful, and we figure out who's watching and why."

"And if they're watching all of us?" Meen asked. "If it's not just Elle?"

The question hung in the air, unanswered and unanswerable. They had assumed their secret was safe, had believed that the chaos of the tunnel investigation had buried their involvement too deeply to be

discovered. But assumptions were dangerous, and beliefs could be wrong.

Elle moved to the window and looked out at the street below. The man with the newspaper was gone, but that didn't mean the watching had stopped. Somewhere out there, eyes were on them. Somewhere out there, someone was building a file, connecting dots, preparing for something they couldn't predict.

She felt the air around her, the currents that moved through the room, responsive to her will even when she didn't consciously direct them. She was stronger now than she had been three months ago, more controlled, more confident in her abilities. They all were.

But strength wasn't enough if you didn't know who you were fighting.

We need to be ready, she signed. Whatever comes, we need to be ready.

Meen nodded. Teena nodded.

They didn't know what was coming. They didn't know who was watching or why.

But they knew one thing: they would face it together.

The EleMenTs had survived the tunnel. They would survive this too.

. . .

End of Chapter 1

## Chapter 2

# The Letters

The letters arrived on a Tuesday, three envelopes in the afternoon mail, each one addressed to a different girl, each one bearing the return address of the Administration for Children's Services.

Mrs. Washington distributed them at dinner, her expression carefully neutral in the way that meant she already knew what they contained. Elle took hers with a sense of dread that had nothing to do with her wind-sense, a purely human intuition that official mail rarely brought good news.

She opened the envelope at the table, surrounded by the noise and chaos of the group home's communal dinner. The letter inside was typed on official letterhead, dense with bureaucratic language that took her a moment to parse.

Dear Eleanor,

We are pleased to inform you of your pending transfer to the Riverside Residence for Deaf Youth, effective thirty days from the date of this correspondence. This placement has been carefully selected to meet your unique communication and educational needs...

Elle stopped reading. She didn't need to see the rest. The words blurred before her eyes, not because she was crying but because her mind had already leaped ahead to the implications, to the separation, to the destruction of everything they had built.

Across the table, Meen was holding her own letter, her fingers tracing the raised letterhead as if touch could reveal what her eyes could not. Teena had hers open in her lap, her face pale, her hands gripping the paper hard enough to wrinkle it.

Three letters. Three transfers. Three placements that would scatter them across the city like seeds in the wind.

Mrs. Washington was watching them, her expression soft with something that might have been sympathy. "I know this is difficult," she said, her voice pitched to carry over the dinner noise. "But these placements are opportunities. Riverside has resources specifically for Deaf children, Eleanor. The Lighthouse Program in Westchester has technology and training that could help Mingzhu tremendously. And Christina, the Brooklyn facility has physical therapy services that we simply can't provide here."

She believed it. Elle could see that she genuinely believed she was delivering good news, that she was helping them, that scattering them to the four corners of the foster system was somehow in their best interests.

She didn't understand. She couldn't understand. To her, they were three hard-to-place girls who happened to share a room, not a family, not a unit, not something that would be destroyed by separation.

Teena was the first to speak, her voice carefully controlled. "When did this decision get made?"

"The transfers have been in process for several weeks. The paperwork just came through."

"Several weeks. And no one thought to mention it to us?"

"These decisions are made at the administrative level, Christina. The goal is always to find the best placement for each child's individual needs."

"And our need to stay together? Does that factor into the decision?"

Mrs. Washington's expression flickered, discomfort breaking through her professional mask. "I understand that you've become close. But you have to understand, these placements are designed to give each of you the specialized support you need. You'll still be able to stay in touch. You can visit—"

"Visit." Teena's voice was flat. "We can visit."

Elle touched Meen's arm, drawing her attention, then signed: Don't react. Not here. We need to talk privately.

Meen nodded slightly, her face composed into an expression of blank acceptance that Elle recognized as armor. They had all learned to hide their feelings from the adults who controlled their lives, to present the compliant surfaces that the system expected.

Dinner continued, the other residents oblivious to the quiet devastation happening at one end of the table. Elle ate mechanically, tasting nothing, her mind churning through possibilities and coming up empty.

After dinner, they retreated to their room. The door closed behind them, and for a moment, no one spoke. The letters sat on Teena's desk, three sheets of paper that carried the weight of bureaucratic authority, the power to dismantle what they had built.

"This isn't random," Meen said finally. "Three transfers, all at once, all separating us? After we've been stable here for months?"

"Mrs. Washington said the paperwork was in process for weeks," Teena said.

"Right around the time Elle started feeling watched."

The connection crystallized in Elle's mind, pieces falling into place with terrible clarity. The surveillance, the transfers, the timing—it was all connected. Someone had seen something, had decided they needed to be separated, had used the foster system's own mechanisms to tear them apart.

They know, she signed. Whoever is watching us, they know about our powers. They're using the system to split us up.

"That's paranoid," Teena said, but her voice lacked conviction.

"Is it? Three transfers that just happen to send us to three different boroughs? Placements that just happen to address our specific disabilities, making them look like appropriate care rather than strategic separation?"

Elle thought about the man with the newspaper, about the feeling of being observed, about the weeks of surveillance that had preceded these letters. It made a horrible kind of sense. If you wanted to neutralize three girls with elemental powers, you wouldn't attack them directly. You would use the systems that already controlled their lives, the foster care bureaucracy that could move them like pieces on a board.

We have to fight this, she signed. We can't let them separate us.

"How?" Meen asked. "We're minors. We're wards of the state. We don't have rights, we don't have lawyers, we don't have anyone who will take our side against the system."

"We have each other," Teena said. "And we have thirty days."

"Thirty days to do what?"

Teena was quiet for a moment, her eyes distant, her mind clearly working through possibilities. "Thirty days to find out who's behind this. Thirty days to gather evidence, to understand what we're dealing with. And thirty days to figure out a way to stay together, whatever it takes."

Elle felt a spark of hope, small but real. Teena was right. They weren't helpless, weren't the passive victims the system expected them to be. They had powers that defied explanation, and they had each other, and they had a month to find a way out.

Where do we start? she asked.

"With Elle's watcher. If someone is surveilling us, they're leaving traces. We find those traces, we follow them back to whoever is pulling the strings."

"And if we can't stop the transfers?"

No one answered. The possibility was too terrible to contemplate but too real to ignore. What would they do if thirty days wasn't enough? What would they do if the system won?

Elle looked at her friends, at the family she had found, at the only people who had ever truly seen her. She thought about the wind that answered her call, about the power that ran through her hands, about everything they had discovered and everything they might become.

Then we don't let them take us, she signed. Whatever it takes. We stay together.

Meen nodded. Teena nodded.

Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the windows of the group home. Elle felt it respond to her agitation, to the fear and determination that churned inside her. She pressed her palms flat against the glass, steadying herself, quieting the air.

Not yet. Not here. When the time came, she would be ready.

They all would.

. . .

End of Chapter 2

## Chapter 3

# Meen's Analysis

Meen didn't believe in coincidence.

This was a principle she had developed early, in the years after her blindness, when she had learned that the world operated on patterns and systems that most people never noticed. Coincidence was what people called connections they were too lazy to trace, relationships they were too comfortable to question. In Meen's experience, when things happened together, there was usually a reason.

The transfers were not coincidence.

She lay in bed that night, long after lights out, her mind working through the problem with the systematic precision that had become her primary tool for understanding a world she couldn't see. The letters had arrived simultaneously. The placements had been selected specifically for their disabilities. The timing aligned with Elle's observations about surveillance.

Three data points made a pattern. And patterns could be analyzed.

She began with what she knew. The transfers had been initiated "several weeks" ago, according to Mrs. Washington. Elle had first noticed the feeling of being watched approximately three weeks prior. The tunnel incident had occurred three months before that.

Timeline: Tunnel in January. Surveillance begins in March. Transfers initiated in March. Letters arrive in April.

Someone had seen something during the tunnel investigation. Someone had connected the girls to the impossible events that had occurred underground. And someone had decided to act.

But who?

The police had investigated the tunnel, had arrested Victor Asher and his Meridian associates, had closed the case with the kind of speed that suggested pressure from above. If the police had discovered evidence of the girls' abilities, they would have acted differently—investigations, questions, possibly institutionalization. They wouldn't have quietly initiated foster care transfers.

The foster care system itself had no reason to surveil them. ACS was bureaucratic, underfunded, perpetually overwhelmed. They didn't have resources to follow teenage girls around the city. They processed paperwork and made placements; they didn't conduct intelligence operations.

Which left a third possibility: someone outside the official systems, someone with resources and interest and the ability to manipulate bureaucracy for their own purposes.

Meen sat up in bed, her mind racing. "Teena," she whispered. "Are you awake?"

"I'm awake." Teena's voice came from across the room, tired but alert. "I've been thinking too."

"The transfers. They're not coming from ACS. Not really."

"What do you mean?"

"ACS doesn't surveil people. They don't have the resources or the interest. But someone initiated these transfers, someone with enough influence to make the system do what they want."

Teena was quiet for a moment. "Someone outside the system, using the system as a tool."

"Exactly. The transfers look legitimate because they are legitimate—proper paperwork, appropriate placements, everything by

the book. But the decision to initiate them came from somewhere else."

Elle stirred, her hand finding Meen's arm in the darkness. Meen felt the question in her touch and relayed the conversation in quick tactile signs.

Private organization? Elle asked. Company?

"Maybe. Someone with money, with connections, with interest in people like us."

"People like us," Teena repeated. "People with abilities."

The implication was staggering. If someone was specifically targeting individuals with unusual capabilities, that meant they knew such individuals existed. That meant they had been looking, researching, developing methods for identifying and acquiring them.

That meant the girls were not alone.

"We need information," Meen said. "We need to find out who initiated the transfers, who signed off on them, where the orders really came from."

"How? We can't exactly walk into ACS and demand to see our files."

"No. But the files exist somewhere. Digital records, paper trails, communications between offices. If someone manipulated the system, they left traces."

Elle's hands moved: Marcus. He works nights. Has access to the office.

"We can't involve Marcus," Teena said immediately. "He's already been hurt once because of us."

He owes us his life. And he knows something happened in those tunnels, even if he doesn't understand what.

Meen considered it. Marcus was a risk, but he was also an asset. He had access to the group home's administrative systems, could potentially view correspondence that wasn't meant for residents' eyes.

And Elle was right—he owed them. More than that, he cared about them, in the genuine way that was rare among the adults in their lives.

"We ask him for help," she said finally. "We don't tell him everything, but we tell him enough. We say we think the transfers are suspicious, that we want to see the paperwork, that we're scared of being separated."

"All of which is true," Teena added.

"All of which is true. And if he finds something, if there's evidence that someone outside ACS is pulling strings, we'll know we're right."

The plan was thin, speculative, dependent on Marcus's willingness to bend rules for three girls he barely knew. But it was better than nothing, better than waiting passively for the system to scatter them.

"Tomorrow," Teena said. "We talk to Marcus tomorrow."

"And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, we assume we're being watched. We're careful about what we say, where we go, how we use our abilities. If someone is tracking us, we don't give them more ammunition."

Meen nodded, though no one could see it in the darkness. She thought about the patterns she had identified, the connections she had traced, the shadow organization that was beginning to take shape in her analysis.

Someone was hunting them. Someone with resources and patience and a plan she couldn't yet discern.

But Meen had resources too. She had a mind that found patterns where others saw chaos, that built models from fragments, that refused to accept coincidence as an explanation.

She would find them. Whoever was pulling the strings, whoever was manipulating their lives, she would trace the connections back to their source.

And then the EleMenTs would decide what to do about it.

...

End of Chapter 3

## Chapter 4

# The Volunteer

Sarah Miller arrived at the Mott Haven group home on a Wednesday morning, carrying a messenger bag and a smile that reached all the way to her eyes.

"I'm here for my field placement," she told Mrs. Washington at the door. "Columbia School of Social Work. I should be in the system."

Mrs. Washington checked her computer, nodded, and welcomed Sarah with the weary gratitude of someone perpetually understaffed. "We can always use extra hands. Let me show you around."

Teena watched the introduction from her position near the common room window, tracking the new arrival with the casual attention she gave to all changes in her environment. Sarah was young, maybe mid-twenties, with a round face and dark hair pulled back in a practical ponytail. She moved with confidence, her body language open and approachable, her smile quick and seemingly genuine.

She looked exactly like what she claimed to be: a graduate student completing a field placement, earnest and idealistic and eager to help.

Something about that perfection made Teena uneasy.

Over the following days, Sarah integrated herself into the group home's rhythms with impressive speed. She helped in the kitchen, supervised homework time, organized activities for the younger

children. She was patient and attentive, never condescending, never displaying the burnout that characterized so many adults in the foster care system.

And she was specifically, persistently interested in the three girls with disabilities.

But Teena noticed something else, too. When Sarah thought no one was watching, her mask slipped. Just for moments—a flash of something raw when one of the younger kids talked about wanting to go home, a tightness around her eyes when Mrs. Washington mentioned a former resident who had aged out into homelessness. Once, Teena caught her in the hallway, staring at a wall of photos showing residents past and present, her expression not clinical but grieving.

Whatever Sarah was, she wasn't entirely pretending. Something about this place, these kids, touched something real in her. That made her more dangerous, not less—because it meant she could justify what she was doing to herself.

"You must be Christina," she said, approaching Teena during homework time. "Mrs. Washington mentioned you. I'd love to hear about your experience here, if you're willing to share."

"What kind of experience?" Teena asked, not quite managing to keep suspicion out of her voice.

"Just... how you find the placement. What works, what doesn't. What would make things better for residents with mobility challenges." Sarah's smile was warm, her interest apparently genuine. "I'm focusing my thesis on accessibility in residential care settings. Your perspective would be invaluable."

It was a reasonable explanation. It fit perfectly with her cover as a social work student. And yet Teena noticed how Sarah's questions always seemed to circle back to the same topics: the girls' routines, their relationships, their capabilities.

She noticed how Sarah's eyes tracked Elle's hands when she signed, how she watched Meen navigate the hallways, how she observed the three of them together with an attention that felt clinical rather than caring.

"She's studying us," Teena told the others that night, after lights out. "Not for a thesis. She's gathering information."

"You think she's connected to the surveillance?" Meen asked.

"I think it's suspicious that she shows up two weeks after we get our transfer letters. I think it's suspicious that she's specifically interested in us. I think it's suspicious that everything about her is exactly what a social work student should be."

Elle signed: Too perfect. Like a costume.

"Exactly. She's playing a role, and she's good at it, but she's playing a role."

"So what do we do?" Meen asked.

"We test her. We see how she reacts to things that don't fit her cover story."

The next day, Teena approached Sarah during lunch. "I have a question about your research," she said. "For your thesis."

"Of course." Sarah set down her sandwich, giving Teena her full attention. "What would you like to know?"

"You said you're studying accessibility in residential care. But you've been spending a lot of time with the three of us specifically. We're not exactly representative of accessibility challenges in general."

Sarah's smile didn't waver. "You're right that my interest has been focused. But the intersection of disability and foster care is understudied. Children with multiple marginalized identities face unique challenges."

"Multiple marginalized identities." Teena let the academic phrase hang in the air. "Is that what we are to you? Identities to study?"

"I didn't mean to be reductive. I'm sorry if it came across that way." Sarah leaned forward, her expression earnest. "The truth is, I see a lot of myself in you. I was in the system too, when I was younger. I know what it's like to feel like a case file instead of a person."

It was a perfect response—vulnerable, relatable, designed to build trust. And maybe it was even true. But the perfection of it, the way it addressed Teena's concerns while redirecting the conversation, only deepened her suspicion.

"I didn't know that," Teena said. "About you being in the system."

"It's not something I usually share. But I want you to know that I understand, at least a little."

Teena nodded, accepting the confidence, filing it away for analysis. "Thank you for telling me. I appreciate it."

She wheeled away, her mind already processing. Sarah had passed the test, technically—she had answered Teena's challenge with apparent honesty. But there was something in the way she had done it, the precision of her emotional calibration, that felt wrong.

Real people were messier. Real people stumbled over uncomfortable questions, revealed their discomfort through body language, showed the rough edges of genuine human interaction. Sarah was too smooth, too practiced, too perfect.

"She's an operative," Teena told the others that night. "I don't know for what organization, but she's not a student. She's been trained for this."

"How can you be sure?" Meen asked.

"Because when I questioned her, she had a perfect answer ready. Not a good answer—a perfect one. The kind of answer someone prepares in advance, the kind of response that's been rehearsed."

Elle signed: We should tell Mrs. Washington.

"And say what? That we think the nice volunteer is a spy? We have no proof, no evidence, nothing but gut feelings and suspicious

coincidences."

"So we gather evidence," Meen said. "We watch her the way she's watching us."

Teena nodded. It was a dangerous game—if Sarah was what they suspected, she was a professional, someone trained to detect surveillance and counter-surveillance. But they had advantages she didn't know about. Elle could sense air pressure changes that indicated approaching footsteps. Meen could track heat signatures through walls. Teena could feel vibrations in the floor that revealed movement throughout the building.

If Sarah was watching them, they would watch her back.

And if she was connected to whatever organization was trying to separate them, they would find out.

That night, after lights out, Teena lay awake feeling the building around her through the floor. Sarah was in the staff quarters, her weight shifting occasionally as she moved. Two doors down, Elle was signing something to Meen in the darkness, their hands finding each other for communication that no one else could intercept.

They were still together. That was what mattered. Whatever came next, they would face it as they had faced everything else.

Together.

. . .

End of Chapter 4

## Chapter 5

### **Tal Observes**

Talia Venkataraman had been at the Mott Haven group home for sixty-three days.

She knew the exact number because she counted. She counted everything: the steps from her bed to the bathroom (seventeen), the seconds between the breakfast bell and the opening of the dining room doors (forty-two to fifty-eight, depending on which staff member was on duty), the number of times the radiator in her room clicked during each heating cycle (between twelve and nineteen, with a mean of fifteen point three).

Counting was how she organized the world, how she made sense of a reality that often felt chaotic and overwhelming. Numbers were reliable. Numbers didn't change their meaning based on tone of voice or facial expression. Numbers told the truth.

The truth right now was that something strange was happening with the three younger girls.

Tal had noticed them on her first day, the way anyone would notice three girls who communicated in a private language of signs and touches and looks. Eleanor, who was Deaf and whose hands never stopped moving. Mingzhu, who was blind and who tilted her head at sounds Tal couldn't hear. Christina, who used a wheelchair and who watched everything with eyes that missed nothing.

They were a closed system, a unit, and Tal understood closed systems. She was one herself, her autism creating boundaries that most people couldn't cross, her mind processing information in patterns that others found strange or off-putting.

But lately, the three girls had become something more than strange.

Tal first noticed it during a fire drill two weeks ago. The alarm had gone off, the flashing lights and vibrations alerting even Elle to the emergency, and everyone had evacuated to the backyard. It had been cold, early April cold, and most of the residents had been shivering, huddling together for warmth.

But not the three girls. They had stood together near the fence, and they hadn't been shivering at all. More than that, the air around them had seemed different—warmer, somehow, and strangely still despite the wind that had been cutting through everyone else's coats.

Tal had watched, fascinated, as Mingzhu's hands had made small movements, and the temperature around them had shifted visibly, heat shimmering off her skin in ways that shouldn't have been possible.

Since then, she had been watching more carefully.

She watched Eleanor's hands, and sometimes the air moved in response, curtains shifting without wind, papers ruffling on desks she passed. She watched Mingzhu, and sometimes the temperature changed in her vicinity, warm spots appearing and disappearing without explanation. She watched Christina, and sometimes the floor seemed to vibrate slightly when she touched it, as if the building itself was responding to her presence.

These observations did not fit any model Tal knew. They suggested capabilities that were not supposed to exist, phenomena that violated the physical laws she had learned in school. But Tal trusted her observations more than she trusted models, and her observations were clear: the three girls could do things that were impossible.

The water was what convinced her.

Tal had always been sensitive to water. It was one of her earliest memories: lying in the bathtub as a toddler, feeling the water around her not just as a physical sensation but as a presence, almost a consciousness. She had never told anyone about this because she had learned early that the things she experienced were not things other people experienced, and talking about them only led to concerned looks and suggestions of therapy.

But when the three girls used their powers together—when Mingzhu warmed the air and Eleanor stilled the wind—Tal could feel the water responding. The pipes in the walls vibrated at different frequencies. The humidity in the air shifted and swirled. The water in her glass rippled without anyone touching the table.

The water knew something was happening, even if Tal couldn't explain what.

She began keeping notes in a private document on her phone, recording her observations with the systematic precision that characterized everything she did.

Day 47: Eleanor made a paper move from three feet away. No one else noticed.

Day 52: Temperature in Room 7 increased by approximately 4 degrees when Mingzhu entered. Decreased when she left.

Day 58: Christina touched the floor during the fire drill. Felt vibration through my feet. Like the building was... responding.

Day 61: Water in my cup rippled during dinner. All three girls were sitting together. Correlation unclear but noted.

She also noted the new volunteer, Sarah Miller, who had arrived on Day 56 and who asked too many questions about the three girls. Tal recognized the pattern of her questions—not random curiosity but systematic information gathering, the kind of structured inquiry that suggested a checklist rather than genuine interest.

Sarah was watching the girls. Tal was watching Sarah. And somewhere in this web of observation, she suspected, answers were waiting to be discovered.

Today, Day 63, she decided to get closer.

The three girls were in their room, which was unusual—they typically dispersed after dinner, doing homework in the common room or watching television with the other residents. But tonight they had retreated immediately after eating, closing their door, their voices (such as they were) lowered to levels that suggested secrets being shared.

Tal walked past their door, counting her steps to make the pace seem natural. Seventeen steps from the stairs to their room, eighteen if she took smaller strides. She slowed as she passed, her ears straining for any sound that might leak through the door.

She heard Christina's voice, low and urgent: "...can't trust her. Everything she does is too perfect."

And Mingzhu responding: "...watching her back. Elle's been tracking her movements all day."

Tal kept walking, her mind racing. They knew about Sarah. They were suspicious too.

The question was what to do with this information. Tal was not good at social interaction, not comfortable with the messy unpredictability of human relationships. But she was good at patterns, at connections, at seeing things that others missed.

The three girls had abilities she couldn't explain. Someone was watching them. And Tal had observations that might be useful, might be the missing piece that connected it all.

She walked to the bathroom, locked herself in a stall, and pulled out her phone. Her notes stared back at her, sixty-three days of systematic observation, evidence of something impossible that was somehow true.

She thought about the water, about the way it responded to the girls' presence, about the feeling she'd had her whole life that she was connected to something no one else could sense.

Maybe she wasn't as different from them as she had assumed.

Maybe she was part of this too.

...

End of Chapter 5

## Chapter 6

# Prometheus

The office occupied the thirty-second floor of a building in Midtown that appeared on no public directory.

Dr. Helen Vance stood before a wall of screens, each one displaying data streams that would have been incomprehensible to most observers. Surveillance footage. Medical records. Social media analysis. Financial transactions. The infrastructure of Prometheus Applied Sciences spread across the world like a nervous system, gathering information, processing patterns, searching for the anomalies that were her life's work.

The folder on her desk was labeled simply "Mott Haven." It contained three profiles, three photographs, three children who had demonstrated capabilities that validated everything she had believed since she was young.

She picked up the first profile. Eleanor Rose Hartley. Thirteen years old. Deaf since birth. Nine foster placements in six years. Documented as "difficult to place" due to communication challenges and a history of rejecting families who didn't meet her standards for accessibility.

The photograph showed a pale girl with grey eyes, her expression guarded, her hands blurred in motion. The surveillance footage captured her in the tunnel, and Vance had watched that footage dozens of times, marveling at the way air responded to her gestures, the way

wind obeyed her will.

For a moment, she thought of her mother. The way she had described the world before the medications took hold, before the institutions ground her down. The air talks to me, she had said. It tells me things.

Vance closed her eyes, pushed the memory away. Focus. These girls were not her mother. These girls could be helped.

The second profile. Mingzhu Shen. Thirteen years old. Blind since age nine, following a fire that had killed her mother. Seven foster placements. Documented as "withdrawn" and "difficult to engage."

The surveillance footage showed heat signatures spiking around her during the tunnel incident, thermal imaging capturing temperature fluctuations that should have been impossible. She had generated heat without any apparent source, had warmed hypothermic tissue through proximity alone.

The third profile. Christina Adaeze Okonkwo. Thirteen years old. Spastic diplegic cerebral palsy. Five foster placements. Documented as "noncompliant" and "resistant to authority."

The footage showed concrete cracking at her touch, the floor responding to her will, earth and stone moving in patterns that defied structural engineering.

Three girls. Three disabilities. Three elemental powers. And something more: the footage from the cave escape showed them working together, their abilities combining in ways that amplified each individual's power.

This was what Vance had been searching for. Proof that anomalous abilities were not random mutations but systematic phenomena, connected to neurological variation, capable of being identified and studied and, perhaps, understood in time to help people like—

She stopped herself. In time to help people. Period.

A knock at the door. "Come in."

Agent Samuel Cross entered, his expression professionally neutral. He was one of her most reliable operatives, a former military intelligence officer who asked few questions and completed his assignments with efficiency. But lately, Vance had noticed something in his reports, a hesitation that suggested doubt she couldn't afford.

"The operative is in place," Cross said. "Miller has established rapport with the targets and begun systematic assessment."

"Assessment of what, specifically?"

"Capabilities, limitations, trigger conditions. She's documented several instances of apparent power use, though none as dramatic as the tunnel incident."

"They're being careful."

"They're suspicious. The Okonkwo girl has been asking questions about Miller's background. They know something is wrong, even if they don't know what."

Vance nodded. She had expected this. The girls had survived the tunnel through intelligence and cooperation, qualities that suggested they would not be easily fooled. "And the transfers?"

"In process. ACS has approved all three placements. The families have been briefed and compensated. We'll have them separated within the month."

"Good. Once they're apart, we can approach them individually. Isolation will make them more receptive to cooperation."

Cross was quiet for a moment. "Doctor, I have concerns."

"About?"

"The targets are minors. Disabled minors, in state custody. If this operation becomes public—"

"It won't become public." Vance's voice was steel. "These girls represent the most significant discovery in our field's history. They're proof that anomalous abilities can be identified, that they correlate

with neurological difference, that they can be studied systematically. I've spent forty years searching for this evidence, Samuel. I'm not going to lose it because of squeamishness about proper channels."

"I understand. But the methods—"

"The methods are what they need to be." She heard the coldness in her own voice, felt a flicker of something she refused to call guilt. "The girls are invisible. The system has already failed them repeatedly. Their disappearance into 'appropriate placements' will raise no alarms, generate no investigations. By the time anyone thinks to ask questions, they'll be safely in our facilities, receiving care they could never access through normal channels."

Cross absorbed this, his expression unchanged. "And if they don't cooperate?"

"They will. They're children, alone, dependent on a system that has never served their interests. We're offering them something no one else can: understanding of what they are, training in what they can do, a community of people like themselves. They'll resist initially, but they'll come to see the value of what we're offering."

She believed this. She had to believe it, because the alternative—that she was hunting and capturing children against their will, that she was doing to them what had been done to her mother—was not something she could accommodate in her self-image. She was a scientist, a researcher, someone dedicated to expanding human knowledge. The girls would benefit from her work. Everyone would benefit.

The girls were not her mother. She would make sure of that.

"Continue the operation," she said. "Maintain surveillance, support the transfers, prepare acquisition teams for each target. I want them in our facilities within forty-five days."

"Understood." Cross turned to leave, then paused. "Doctor, there's one more thing. Miller's reports mention a fourth girl. Older, autistic,

recently placed at Mott Haven. She's been observing the targets, keeping notes. Miller thinks she may have noticed something."

Vance frowned. A variable she hadn't anticipated. "Name?"

"Talia Venkataraman. Fourteen years old. Diagnosed autistic at seven, hospitalized briefly for what was called 'psychotic episodes' at twelve. Placed in therapeutic foster care eighteen months ago."

"Psychotic episodes?"

"According to the file, she claimed she could feel water. Said she could sense it through walls, underground, in the air. The psychiatrist attributed it to delusional thinking associated with autism spectrum presentation."

Vance felt her pulse quicken. "Get me her complete file. Medical records, psychiatric evaluations, everything."

"You think she might be like them?"

"I think we may have found a fourth subject. One who's been manifesting for years without anyone recognizing what they were seeing."

Cross nodded and left. Vance returned to the screens, pulling up a new search, beginning the process of excavating Talia Venkataraman's history from the databases that held such things.

Four subjects instead of three. The classical elements: wind, fire, earth, and perhaps water.

It was almost too perfect to be coincidence.

But Vance didn't believe in coincidence either.

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End of Chapter 6

## Chapter 7

# Watched

Elle had mapped them all.

Over three weeks of careful observation, she had identified at least six individuals involved in the surveillance operation: the man with the newspaper (who she had seen three more times), a woman who appeared near her school with suspicious regularity, a car that seemed to follow predictable routes through the neighborhood, and three others whose patterns suggested coordination rather than coincidence.

She had also noticed the dead zones: areas where the surveillance seemed to drop away, gaps in the coverage that suggested limitations in resources or planning. The subway system was partially blind to them, the tunnels and crowds making consistent tracking difficult. Certain routes through the neighborhood, threading between buildings and through alleys, allowed her to move without obvious observation.

These were valuable discoveries. But they were not enough.

The watchers were professionals. They rotated their personnel, varied their positions, adjusted their patterns to avoid detection. Elle's wind-sense helped—she could feel the particular stillness of someone trying not to be noticed, the subtle changes in air pressure that accompanied attention focused in her direction—but even that wasn't foolproof.

Today, she was testing her observations.

She left school by the side entrance instead of the front, cut through the gymnasium parking lot, and emerged on a street that the surveillance team seemed to have neglected. Her route home would take her an extra twenty minutes, but it would also tell her whether she had accurately mapped the blind spots.

The first three blocks were clear. No familiar faces, no suspicious stillness, no feeling of eyes on her back. She moved quickly, her hands occasionally signing to herself as she thought, working through the implications of what she was discovering.

Then she felt it.

The air changed. Someone was watching, someone close, someone whose attention created the particular pressure she had learned to recognize. She didn't look around, didn't alter her pace, just continued walking while her wind-sense extended in all directions, searching for the source.

There. Behind her, half a block back, a man in a dark jacket who hadn't been there a moment ago. He wasn't one of the regular watchers; his face was unfamiliar. But his presence was wrong, too deliberate, too focused.

She had found a new one.

Elle's mind raced. She could lose him in the subway, could duck into a store and wait him out, could use a dozen different techniques for evading surveillance that she had developed over the past weeks. But those techniques would only confirm that she knew she was being watched, would alert whoever was running the operation that their cover was blown.

Instead, she decided to learn more.

She continued walking, taking the route she would have taken if she hadn't noticed him, leading him through the neighborhood toward the group home. She walked past the bodega, past the church, past all the familiar landmarks, and all the while she tracked him through the

air, feeling his movements, his pace, the distance he maintained.

He was good. He stayed far enough back to avoid obvious detection, close enough to maintain visual contact. He used natural cover, other pedestrians, parked cars, the rhythm of the street. If she hadn't been able to feel him through the wind, she would never have known he was there.

But she could feel him. And she was learning.

When she reached the group home, she climbed the stairs and entered without looking back. But she paused in the doorway, extending her wind-sense outward, tracking the watcher as he took up position across the street.

He would wait there for hours, she knew. He would watch the building, note who came and went, report his observations to whoever was running this operation. And tomorrow, or the next day, someone else would take his place, and the cycle would continue.

She was trapped in a web of surveillance that she could sense but not escape.

Upstairs, in their room, she found Meen and Teena waiting. They had developed their own techniques for secure communication: Elle signing, Meen feeling the shapes through touch, Teena translating aloud in a voice too soft to carry through walls.

New watcher, Elle signed. Followed me from school. Different from the others.

"They're expanding the operation," Teena said grimly. "Bringing in more people."

"Or testing us," Meen added. "Seeing if we notice, how we respond."

I didn't let him know I noticed. Just walked my normal route, came home like nothing was wrong.

"Good. We need to keep them thinking we're oblivious as long as possible."

But they weren't oblivious. They were trapped, surrounded by enemies they could sense but not confront, watched by an organization they couldn't identify, slowly running out of time as the transfer dates approached.

Elle thought about the wind at her command, the power that ran through her hands. She could disperse these watchers if she wanted to, could create enough chaos to break free of the surveillance net. But to what end? They would only come back, with more resources, more personnel, better prepared for what she could do.

The wind wasn't the answer. Not yet.

We need to find out who they are, she signed. Not just that we're being watched. Who is watching. Why. What they want.

"Marcus is working on the transfer paperwork," Teena said. "He thinks he found something, but he wants to be sure before he tells us."

"And in the meantime?"

In the meantime, we stay careful. We don't give them any more information than they already have. And we wait.

Waiting was hard. Elle had never been good at patience, had always preferred action to deliberation. But she understood the necessity, understood that moving too soon could destroy any advantage they had.

So she would wait. She would watch. And when the time came, when they finally understood what they were dealing with, she would be ready to act.

The wind outside the window stirred at her thoughts, responsive even when she wasn't consciously directing it. Elle felt it, took comfort in it, reminded herself that she was not powerless, was not the passive victim the watchers assumed.

She was an elemental. And elementals did not break easily.

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End of Chapter 7

Part Two

# **The Trap**

## Chapter 8

### **Sarah's Move**

The invitation came on a Thursday, delivered with Sarah's characteristic warmth and apparent spontaneity.

"I was thinking," she said, approaching the three girls during afternoon free time, "that we should do something special before the transfers happen. A field trip, just the four of us. There's an excellent science museum in Manhattan that has accessibility features for all of you—ASL interpreters available, tactile exhibits, full wheelchair access."

Teena felt her spine stiffen. The timing was too perfect, the offer too convenient. "That's thoughtful," she said carefully. "But we'd need permission from Mrs. Washington, and approval from our caseworkers."

"Already handled." Sarah pulled a folder from her bag—thick with forms, signatures, official stamps. "I've been working on it for two weeks. Background checks, liability waivers, medical release forms, accessibility accommodation requests. Mrs. Washington was surprised it cleared so fast, actually—usually these things take a month at minimum. But I have contacts at the agency." She smiled. "Benefits of being a social work student."

Teena caught a glimpse of the top form as Sarah flipped through the stack. The caseworker's signature—she recognized it from her own paperwork—looked almost too perfect, the loops and curves identical

to signatures she'd seen on other documents. As if someone had practiced it. Or copied it.

Mrs. Washington had mentioned it at dinner the night before, her expression slightly puzzled: "I don't know how Sarah managed all that paperwork so quickly. Usually ACS takes forever to approve off-site activities." She'd shrugged. "But everything's in order. Signed, stamped, filed."

The efficiency was impressive. It was also, Teena realized, exactly the kind of bureaucratic smoothness that required either exceptional dedication or institutional backing. Sarah had spent two weeks navigating a system designed to move slowly—and she'd done it in half the normal time. Unless, of course, she hadn't navigated it at all. Unless she'd simply... manufactured the result.

Elle caught Teena's eye, her expression carefully neutral. Meen's head was tilted slightly, listening not just to Sarah's words but to the tones beneath them, the micro-hesitations that might reveal deception.

"That's very generous," Meen said. "But why us specifically? There are other kids here who might enjoy a museum trip."

"The three of you have been through a lot together. I thought it might be nice to create some positive memories before you're separated. And honestly?" Sarah's voice dropped, becoming confessional. "I've grown to care about you. I know I'm just a volunteer, but I want to do something meaningful before my placement ends."

It was precisely the right thing to say. It addressed their suspicion, acknowledged the intimacy she had been building, and created a framework where refusing would seem ungrateful. Sarah was good at this, Teena realized. Very good.

We should go, Elle signed later, in the privacy of their room. It might be our best chance to learn something.

"Or our best chance to walk into a trap," Meen countered.

If it's a trap, we'll be on alert. If it's not, we'll have a day to observe Sarah in a different context, see how she operates outside the group home.

"And if something goes wrong?"

Then we'll handle it. Together.

They spent the next two days preparing. They developed signals—hand gestures, coughs, shifts in position—that would allow them to communicate without Sarah noticing. They practiced using their powers subtly, in ways that wouldn't be obvious to an observer. They rehearsed scenarios, contingencies, escape routes.

By Saturday morning, they were as ready as they could be.

Sarah arrived early, driving a car that seemed slightly too nice for a graduate student's budget. The drive into Manhattan was filled with her cheerful chatter—stories about her own experience in foster care, observations about the city, casual questions that the girls answered with careful vagueness.

The museum was impressive, a massive complex that promised hours of exhibits and activities. Sarah led them through the entrance, handling tickets and accessibility accommodations with practiced efficiency.

"I thought we'd start with the earth sciences section," she said, guiding them toward the elevators. "Christina, I know you're interested in geology. And there's a wonderful exhibit on sound and vibration that might interest Eleanor and Mingzhu."

She had done her research. She knew their interests, their preferences, had probably read their files and planned this trip down to the smallest detail. The thought made Teena's skin crawl.

They moved through the museum, Sarah the perfect guide, attentive and knowledgeable and seemingly genuine in her enthusiasm. She made sure Elle had access to the ASL interpreters stationed throughout the building. She described exhibits in detail for

Meen, her observations precise and helpful. She found accessible routes and elevators without being asked.

If they hadn't known better, they would have believed she was exactly what she claimed to be.

Two hours in, they reached a section of the museum that was quieter, less crowded. A small exhibit hall dedicated to some obscure branch of natural history, tucked away from the main corridors. Sarah led them inside, pointing out displays, and Teena noticed the exit.

There was only one.

Elle's hand brushed against Teena's wheelchair, a signal they had agreed on. She felt it too, the wrongness of this space, the tactical disadvantage of a room with a single entrance.

"This is fascinating," Sarah was saying, her back to them as she examined a display. "But I have to be honest with you. This trip isn't just about the museum."

She turned, and her expression had changed. The warmth was still there, but it was overlaid now with something harder, something professional.

"I know you've suspected me from the beginning. You're smart girls, smarter than most people give you credit for. So I'm going to be direct with you."

Men appeared in the doorway. Four of them, wearing civilian clothes, moving with the coordinated efficiency of people who had done this many times before.

"You need to come with me," Sarah said, and her voice was apologetic, almost sad. "There are people who want to understand what you can do, what you are. They can help you in ways the foster system never could."

Teena's hand gripped her wheel rim. Elle's fingers were twitching, ready to sign or strike. Meen had gone very still, her blind eyes fixed on some point past Sarah's shoulder.

"What if we don't want to come?" Teena asked, her voice steady despite the fear pounding in her chest.

"I really hope it doesn't come to that." Sarah's sadness seemed genuine, which made it worse somehow. "But I should tell you—we know what you can do. The tunnel footage was quite thorough. And we're prepared for it. So please, don't make this harder than it needs to be."

The men in the doorway had their hands in their jackets, the suggestion of weapons barely concealed. They were blocking the only exit, cutting off any normal avenue of escape.

But the EleMenTs were not normal.

And they had been preparing for exactly this moment.

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End of Chapter 8

## Chapter 9

# The Museum Fight

Elle moved first.

She had been ready, her hands poised, her wind-sense extended throughout the room. When Sarah finished speaking, when the trap closed around them, Elle was already acting.

She threw both hands forward, and a wall of compressed air slammed into the two nearest operatives. They staggered backward, one of them falling, the other catching himself against the doorframe. The wind howled through the exhibit hall, displays rattling, loose papers flying, the suddenly visible currents revealing the chaos Elle was creating.

"Down!" Teena shouted, and Meen dropped without hesitation, trusting the command absolutely. Teena pressed her palms to the museum floor and pushed, sending cracks racing toward the remaining operatives, the stone tiles buckling and shifting beneath their feet.

Sarah's expression flickered from surprise to something like admiration, quickly suppressed. She shouted into a radio, her words lost in the wind, calling for backup.

One of the operatives had recovered, was advancing toward Elle with something in his hand—a device that pulsed with pressure waves, disrupting the air currents she relied on to sense her environment. It was like being shoved from every direction at once, her wind-sense suddenly filled with static. She stumbled, her concentration breaking,

the wind dying around her.

Meen felt the attack through the temperature shifts it created, the heat signature of the device spiking as it powered up. She reached for that heat, pulled at it, and the device overheated, its plastic casing warping as the operative dropped it with a cry of pain.

"They know what we can do," Teena said through gritted teeth, her hands still pressed to the floor, maintaining the disruption that was keeping the operatives off-balance. "They came prepared."

Another operative threw something—a weighted net, expanding as it flew, targeting Teena's wheelchair. She couldn't move fast enough to avoid it, couldn't abandon her position without releasing the ground.

Elle caught it with the wind, deflecting it into a corner, but the effort cost her. Blood trickled from her nose, the familiar sign that she was pushing too hard, too fast.

The exhibit hall was becoming a battlefield, displays toppling, glass cases shattering, the careful curation of human knowledge dissolving into chaos. Somewhere in the museum, alarms were blaring, security rushing to respond to what they probably thought was an accident or earthquake.

Sarah had retreated toward the doorway, her professional calm cracking as she watched three teenage girls hold off four trained operatives. This wasn't what she had expected. This wasn't what anyone had expected.

"Fall back!" she shouted. "Get reinforcements! They're more powerful than the intelligence suggested!"

The operatives began to retreat, maintaining formation, their training asserting itself even in the face of the impossible. But the doorway was narrow, and they had to pass through one at a time, and that created an opportunity.

"Now!" Teena shouted.

They had practiced this. Not the specifics—they hadn't known how the trap would be sprung—but the principle. Coordinate. Combine. Overwhelm.

Elle gathered the air around them into a protective bubble, a sphere of compressed atmosphere that deflected the operatives' final attempts to reach them. Meen raised the temperature inside the bubble, creating a thermal differential that made the barrier even more effective. Teena sealed the floor beneath them, creating a stable platform in the middle of the chaos.

For a moment, they were untouchable, three girls in the eye of a storm they had created together.

Then the wall exploded inward.

Not the wall of the exhibit hall—the wall that separated this space from the main atrium of the museum. Water crashed through, a wave that shouldn't have been possible, that had no source anyone could see, that swept through the room with force and purpose and apparent intention.

The operatives were knocked off their feet. Sarah went down, gasping, scrambling for purchase as the water swirled around her. Even the girls' protective bubble was compromised, the unexpected element disrupting their coordination.

And in the doorway of the shattered wall stood a figure: a teenage girl, taller than them, with dark hair plastered to her face by the water that still swirled around her hands.

Tal.

"Run," she said, her voice flat, emotionless, precisely controlled. "There are more coming. I can feel them through the pipes. Run."

The girls didn't question. Didn't hesitate. They broke through the remains of their protective bubble and moved, Elle supporting Meen, Teena wheeling as fast as she could through water that was somehow parting around them, creating a path.

Tal fell in beside them, her hands moving in small gestures, the water responding like an extension of her body. She was controlling it, Teena realized. Not just moving water but commanding it, shaping it, using it as a weapon and a shield.

They were not alone anymore.

They ran through the museum, past panicked visitors and confused security guards, past exhibits that would later show damage no one could explain. They ran until they reached a fire exit, burst through into an alley, and kept running, putting distance between themselves and the chaos they had left behind.

Three blocks away, in a small park sandwiched between buildings, they finally stopped.

Teena was gasping, her arms burning from the effort of propelling herself through water and debris. Elle's nose was bleeding freely now, dripping onto her shirt. Meen was shivering, her temperature-regulating power apparently exhausted.

And Tal stood apart from them, water still dripping from her clothes, her expression unreadable.

"You have questions," she said. It wasn't a question itself.

"Who are you?" Teena managed.

"My name is Talia Venkataraman. I've been at Mott Haven for sixty-three days. And I've been watching you since I arrived."

"You have powers," Meen said. "Like us."

"Water. I can feel it everywhere—in pipes, underground, in the air. I can move it, shape it. I've been able to for as long as I can remember." Tal's voice was matter-of-fact, almost clinical. "The doctors called it psychosis. They medicated me for years. But I always knew it was real."

Elle signed something, and Teena translated without thinking: "She wants to know why you helped us."

Tal was quiet for a moment. "Because you're like me. Because whoever those people were, they wanted to take you, and that's wrong. Because..." She paused, something shifting in her expression, a crack in her controlled facade. "Because I've been alone my whole life, and I don't want to be alone anymore."

The admission hung in the air, raw and vulnerable.

Teena looked at Elle, at Meen, at this strange new girl who had appeared from nowhere to save them. They had been three. Now they might be four.

"We need to get somewhere safe," she said finally. "Somewhere we can talk, plan, figure out what comes next."

"We can't go back to the group home," Meen said, and her voice cracked on the words. The place had been temporary, imperfect, institutional—but it had been theirs. "They'll be watching it. Waiting for us."

"We can't go anywhere they might expect."

Tal spoke up. "I know a place. There's an abandoned building near the waterfront—the pipes are broken, water everywhere, I've been there before. I can feel it clearly, would know if anyone approached."

It wasn't much of a plan. It wasn't safe, or smart, or anything that responsible adults would approve of.

But they weren't safe anymore. They were fugitives now, targets of an organization that had resources and reach and plans they couldn't yet understand.

"Lead the way," Teena said.

Tal nodded and began walking. The others followed, four girls moving through streets that suddenly felt different—wider, maybe, or more dangerous, or both at once.

Teena found herself counting: one, two, three, four. Four girls. Four elements. Four people who had found each other in a system designed to keep them apart.

Whatever came next, they would face it together.

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End of Chapter 9

## Tal Intervenes

The abandoned building was exactly as Tal had described: broken pipes, water everywhere, a ruined shell that no one had touched in years.

They made their way inside through a gap in the fence, Teena's wheelchair navigating rubble with Meen's help, Elle scanning for any sign of pursuit. The interior was dark and damp, but Tal moved through it with confidence, leading them to a section on the second floor where the roof was mostly intact and the water damage was minimal.

"I found this place three months ago," Tal said, settling against a wall. "When I needed somewhere to practice. Somewhere no one would see."

"Practice?" Teena asked.

Tal raised her hand, and water rose from a puddle in the corner, forming a sphere that hovered above her palm. "This. I needed somewhere to understand what I could do without anyone watching."

The sphere dissolved, returning to the puddle with barely a splash. Tal's expression remained flat, controlled, but Teena could see the tension in her shoulders, the effort of maintaining composure.

"How long have you known?" Meen asked. "About your abilities?"

"Always. For as long as I can remember. Water talks to me, or I talk to it, I'm not sure which. When I was small, I thought everyone could feel it—the pipes in the walls, the rain coming before it arrived, the way the ocean moved even when you couldn't see it."

"When did you realize others couldn't?"

"When I tried to explain it to my parents. They thought I was being imaginative at first. Then, when I kept insisting, they thought I was disturbed." Tal's voice remained even, but something flickered in her eyes. "The psychiatrists called it psychotic features associated with autism. They gave me medication that made the water harder to hear, like it was speaking through static. I stopped taking it six months ago."

Elle signed a question, her hands sharp and quick: How did you know about us?

Elle reached for Meen's hand, signing the question directly into her palm—their tactile shorthand, developed over months of practice. How did you know about us?

"She wants to know how you knew we had abilities," Meen said to Tal, translating without needing Teena's help.

"I felt it. Every time you three used your powers, the water around you reacted. Pipes vibrated differently. Humidity shifted. It was like... like hearing a conversation in another room. I couldn't make out the words, but I knew something was being said."

"You've been watching us," Teena said. It wasn't an accusation, just an observation.

"I've been trying to understand. You were the first proof I had that I wasn't crazy, that what I experience is real. I needed to know more."

"And today? At the museum?"

Tal's composure cracked slightly. "I followed you. I knew something was wrong—Sarah's energy had been different all week, more focused, more purposeful. When you left with her, I followed on the subway. And when I felt the water in the museum's fire

suppression system, felt the panic in the building, I knew you were in trouble."

"So you crashed through a wall."

"I redirected the fire suppression system. The wall was... collateral damage." For the first time, something that might have been embarrassment crossed Tal's face. "I'm not always precise with large volumes."

Despite everything—the terror of the museum, the uncertainty of their situation, the overwhelming implications of what had happened—Teena found herself smiling. "That's one way to put it."

The tension in the room eased slightly. Four girls, each carrying impossible abilities, each shaped by systems that had failed to understand them, finding a moment of connection in the most unlikely of circumstances.

"We should figure out what we know," Meen said, her practical mind already working on the problem. "Sarah works for some kind of organization. They knew about our powers before today. They've been planning this for weeks, maybe longer."

Elle's hands cut through the air: Watchers. My watchers. Same people. She pointed at Tal, then made a circling gesture that encompassed them all. Connected.

"The watchers Elle's been tracking," Teena clarified for Tal. "She's saying they must be part of the same operation."

"And the transfers," Teena added. "The letters that would have separated us. It was all connected—weaken us by splitting us up, then capture us individually."

"What organization?" Tal asked. "Who has resources like that?"

"We don't know. That's what we need to find out."

They shared what they had learned over the past weeks: Elle's observations about the surveillance network, Meen's analysis of the transfer timing, Teena's growing conviction that the foster system had

been manipulated. Tal listened, occasionally asking questions, her mind clearly processing the information with the systematic precision that characterized her thinking.

"Pattern analysis," she said finally. "You're describing a coordinated operation with multiple vectors: surveillance, bureaucratic manipulation, infiltration. That requires significant resources and planning. Government agency, major corporation, or private organization with substantial funding."

"Can you narrow it down?"

"Not without more data. But I might be able to learn something through the water."

"Through the water?"

Tal's expression was difficult to read. "Water carries information. Vibrations, chemical signatures, traces of what it has touched. If I concentrate, I can sometimes sense things through it—not clearly, not like seeing or hearing, but impressions. Patterns."

"You're saying you can spy through pipes?"

"I'm saying I can try. If this organization has a physical location, if it connects to the city's water system, I might be able to find it."

It was a long shot. It was also the only lead they had.

"Do it," Teena said. "Try."

Tal nodded and closed her eyes. Her hands moved in small gestures, fingers tracing patterns in the air, and Teena could feel something shifting—not through her earth-sense but through some other awareness, some recognition that Tal was reaching beyond the confines of this room, extending her consciousness through networks she couldn't see.

Minutes passed. The others waited in silence, barely breathing, watching Tal's face for any sign of success or failure.

When she finally opened her eyes, her expression was troubled.

"I found something. A place where the water feels... wrong. Filtered differently than municipal supply, processed in ways I don't recognize. It's in Midtown, a building that doesn't want to be noticed."

"Can you give us an address?"

"Not exactly. But I can lead you there, following the water. It's like a thread I can feel, even from here."

Elle signed: It could be a trap. They might know about her now, might be waiting.

"It could," Teena agreed. "But we can't hide here forever. We need to know who we're dealing with."

"Then we go," Meen said. "Carefully. Together."

Tal stood, her hands already moving, reaching for the water in the walls, in the air, in all the hidden channels that connected this city. "Follow me."

Four girls left the abandoned building, stepping into a night that had become infinitely more dangerous than the morning. Four elements, united now, facing an enemy they were only beginning to understand.

The hunt for Prometheus had begun.

. . .

End of Chapter 10

## Chapter 11

# Flight

They moved through the city like ghosts.

Tal led them through a maze of side streets and alleys, following paths that seemed random but were guided by her water-sense, avoiding routes where pipes carried unusual vibrations, where the municipal network showed signs of increased monitoring.

"They're looking for us," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I can feel it in the system. Alerts going out, resources being redirected. We need to get off the street."

"The subway," Meen suggested. "It's hard to track people underground."

"The stations have cameras. And turnstiles that record MetroCard usage."

"We can jump the turnstiles."

"Four girls, one in a wheelchair, jumping turnstiles? We'd be noticed immediately."

Elle tapped Teena's arm to get her attention, then signed rapidly: Service doors. Emergency exits. Open from inside. She made a sliding motion with her hands, then pointed down—into the tunnels.

"The emergency exits," Teena said, catching on. "They're designed to let people out, but if we could get to one from the street side..."

It was risky. Everything was risky now. But staying on the street was worse, exposed and vulnerable and slowly being corralled toward capture.

They found a station entrance on a quiet block, the kind of auxiliary access point that most New Yorkers never noticed. Elle felt for air currents, confirming no one was approaching. Meen sensed the heat signatures of transit workers, mapping their positions. Teena touched the concrete, feeling the vibrations of trains moving through the tunnels below.

"Clear," they said, almost simultaneously.

Tal reached for the door, and water seeped from the frame, corroding the lock mechanism in seconds. The door swung open, and they slipped inside, descending into the artificial twilight of the subway system.

The platform was sparsely populated, late enough that the crowds had thinned, early enough that the truly late-night emptiness hadn't set in. They positioned themselves at the far end, away from cameras, away from the few other passengers waiting for trains.

"Where are we going?" Teena asked.

"Brooklyn," Tal said. "The building I sensed is in Midtown, but we can't approach it directly. We need to circle, come at it from an unexpected direction."

"That could take hours."

"We have hours. We have all night, if we need it."

The train arrived, a rumble that Teena felt through the floor before she saw the headlights in the tunnel. They boarded, finding an empty section, arranging themselves so they could watch all entrances simultaneously.

As the train pulled away, Teena allowed herself a moment of assessment. They were fugitives now, wanted by an organization with resources they couldn't match, cut off from everything familiar. The

group home, their rooms, their few possessions—all of it was behind them now, potentially forever.

"We can't go back," she said aloud. "Even if we escape tonight, we can't go back to our lives."

"We knew that was a possibility," Meen said. "We discussed it."

"Discussing it and living it are different things."

Elle's hands moved: We're alive. We're together. Everything else can be figured out later.

"She's right," Tal said, surprising them all. "I've been alone with this for my whole life. Hiding what I am, pretending to be normal, taking medication that made me feel like I was drowning on dry land. Whatever happens next, at least we're not alone anymore."

The train rattled through the darkness, carrying them away from Manhattan, away from the museum, away from the lives they had known. Outside the windows, the tunnel walls blurred past, the infrastructure of the city that most people never thought about.

"Tell us about yourself," Teena said to Tal. "If we're going to do this together, we should know who you are."

Tal was quiet for a moment. "I'm not good at this. Talking about myself. The doctors always said I had difficulty with self-disclosure."

"The doctors were wrong about a lot of things."

"Yes. They were." Tal's hands moved in small patterns, water vapor condensing and dispersing in the air around her fingers. "My parents are alive. Tamil father, Jewish mother. They visit once a month, but we don't know how to talk to each other anymore. I think they still hope the doctors will fix me."

"There's nothing to fix."

"I know that now. I'm not sure they ever will."

"What happened?" Meen asked gently. "The hospitalization. You mentioned it before."

"When I was twelve, I told a therapist about the water. I thought I was being honest, that honesty was what therapy was supposed to be about. Instead, they decided I was psychotic. Held me for seventy-two hours, put me on medications that made everything feel muffled and distant. When I got out, I learned not to tell the truth about what I experience."

"That's why you were watching us," Teena said. "Looking for proof that you weren't imagining it."

"Yes. And you were proof. Every time one of you used your abilities, I could feel it through the water. It was like... like hearing music for the first time, after years of being told music didn't exist."

Elle reached over and touched Tal's hand, a simple gesture of connection. Tal flinched slightly but didn't pull away.

"You're one of us now," Teena said. "Whatever that means. Whatever comes next."

"The EleMenTs," Meen said. "That's what we called ourselves. Wind, fire, earth. And now water."

"Elements," Tal repeated. "The classical four. That's not coincidence."

"Probably not. We've wondered about the connection, about why our powers map to ancient categories. But we don't have answers yet."

"Maybe we'll find some. In that building I sensed. The place where they're coordinating this operation."

The train pulled into a station, and they watched the doors, watched the few passengers who boarded, watched for any sign of pursuit. None came. The train pulled away again, continuing its journey through the underground network.

"We need a plan," Teena said. "We can't just wander around Brooklyn all night."

"I know a place," Meen said slowly. "My mother used to take me there, before she died. A church in Bed-Stuy that runs an overnight

shelter. They don't ask questions, don't check IDs. We could rest, figure out our next move."

"A shelter?"

"It's warm, it's safe, and no one will be looking for us there. We're not the kind of fugitives that people expect to find in homeless shelters."

Thin. Desperate. But it was a destination, a place where they might have a few hours to recover and strategize.

"Bed-Stuy," Teena said. "Let's go."

The train carried them deeper into Brooklyn, further from the world they had known, closer to whatever future awaited them.

Four girls in the dark, running from power they couldn't yet comprehend, toward answers they might not survive finding.

But running together. And that made all the difference.

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End of Chapter 11

## Chapter 12

# Regrouping

The shelter was exactly as Meen had described: warm, quiet, and mercifully anonymous.

They arrived after midnight, finding the church doors open and a volunteer waiting with the weary patience of someone who had seen every kind of human need walk through those doors. The volunteer, a middle-aged Black woman with kind eyes, asked no questions beyond "How many?" and "Any medical issues?"

"Four," Teena answered. "And no, we're fine."

The woman's eyes lingered on Teena's wheelchair, on Meen's unseeing gaze, on the way they moved together like a unit rather than strangers. But she only nodded and led them to a corner of the fellowship hall where cots had been set up, away from the few other occupants who were already sleeping.

"Breakfast is at seven," she said. "You're welcome to stay until then."

They settled onto the cots, exhaustion hitting them now that they had finally stopped moving. Teena's arms ached from hours of pushing through streets and subway stations. Elle's nose had stopped bleeding but the effort of the museum fight had drained her. Meen was shivering despite the shelter's warmth, her temperature regulation depleted.

Only Tal seemed unaffected, sitting cross-legged on her cot, her eyes distant, her hands making small movements as she tracked something none of them could see.

"The building," she said quietly. "I can still feel it. It's like a knot in the water system, a place where the flow is disrupted."

"Can you tell anything else?" Teena asked.

"Multiple floors. Heavy security—I can feel the water pressure in fire suppression systems that are more robust than a normal building would have. And there's something in the basement, something that uses a lot of water. Industrial processes of some kind."

"Research labs," Meen suggested. "If they're studying people like us, they'd need facilities."

"But why us?" Teena's question was the one they had all been avoiding. "What does this organization want with four teenage girls who can move elements?"

"Study us, obviously. Understand how we work, how we developed these abilities, whether they can be replicated or controlled."

"That's the benign interpretation."

"What's the malign one?"

Elle's hands moved in sharp, decisive gestures: fist to open palm, then fingers closing like a cage. Use us. Weapons. Tools. The signs needed no translation; the meaning was clear in the motion itself.

"An organization with enough resources to surveil us, manipulate the foster system, and send operatives to capture us isn't doing this out of scientific curiosity," Teena added, putting Elle's visual language into words for Tal's benefit.

The implication settled over them like a cold blanket. They weren't just subjects to be studied. They were resources to be acquired. And resources that resisted acquisition tended to be dealt with harshly.

"We need to know more," Tal said. "We need to find out what this organization is, who runs it, what their capabilities are. We can't fight what we don't understand."

"How do we find out?" Meen's voice was rough, frustrated. She hated not knowing, hated operating blind in both senses of the word. "We can't exactly walk into their building and ask questions."

"No. But I might be able to reach them through the water." Tal's voice was thoughtful, considering. "I told you I can sense things, impressions, through the water system. If I could get physically closer to the building, if I could make direct contact with their pipes..."

"You're talking about a surveillance operation."

"I'm talking about reconnaissance. Information gathering. We're not going to defeat them by hiding in shelters and running from their operatives. We need intelligence."

Teena looked at the others. Elle's expression was unreadable, but her hands were moving, forming shapes that suggested she was processing, planning. Meen was nodding slowly, her analytical mind already working through the implications.

"We should rest first," Teena decided. "We're exhausted, we're not thinking clearly. In the morning, we can plan properly."

"What if they find us before morning?"

"They won't. They're not looking for four teenage girls in a Brooklyn homeless shelter. And even if they were, Tal would feel them coming through the water, Elle would sense them through the air, I'd feel them through the ground. We have warning systems they can't possibly understand."

It was true. Their powers made them harder to surprise than any normal fugitive. Small comfort, but comfort nonetheless.

"Sleep," Teena said. "We'll figure out the rest tomorrow."

They lay down on their cots, four girls in a row, closer together than the spacing required, drawing comfort from proximity. The

shelter was quiet around them, the sounds of sleeping people and old buildings and the distant rumble of the city that never fully stopped.

Teena found she couldn't sleep. Her mind was too full, racing through possibilities and contingencies and fears she couldn't name. The day had changed everything. They weren't students anymore, weren't foster children waiting for placements, weren't anything they had been before.

They were targets. And targets had to run or fight or hide, and none of those options felt sustainable.

But there was something else, too. Something that felt almost like hope.

They had power. Real power, the kind that couldn't be taken away by caseworkers or bureaucrats or anyone else. They had each other, four girls who complemented each other in ways that felt designed. And they had proven today that they could face trained operatives and survive.

They weren't helpless. For the first time in any of their lives, they weren't helpless.

Teena closed her eyes and let that thought carry her into uneasy sleep, dreaming of wind and fire and earth and water, and the things they might become.

. . .

End of Chapter 12

## Prometheus Responds

Dr. Vance reviewed the museum footage for the fourth time, her expression betraying nothing of the fury that churned beneath.

The operation had been a disaster. Not just a failure—a disaster. Her carefully trained operatives had been overwhelmed by three teenage girls, and then a fourth had appeared from nowhere, wielding water like a weapon, tearing through walls with the casual power of a natural disaster.

Four subjects now, not three. Four elemental abilities working in concert. And all of them had slipped through her grasp.

"Tell me again," she said to Cross, who stood at attention before her desk, "how we lost them."

"The fourth subject was unanticipated. She wasn't in the group home registry, wasn't flagged by our surveillance. She must have been observing from a distance, using her abilities to monitor without being detected."

"And your team couldn't handle four children?"

"Doctor, with respect, they're not children. Not in any meaningful tactical sense. Their abilities exceeded the intelligence assessments by a significant margin. We prepared for what we had documented. They demonstrated capabilities we hadn't seen."

Vance pulled up the thermal imaging from the museum. Mingzhu Shen, generating heat spikes that overloaded equipment designed to

withstand industrial temperatures. Eleanor Hartley, creating pressure differentials that should have required hurricane-force winds. Christina Okonkwo, fracturing concrete with a touch. And the new one, Talia Venkataraman, redirecting thousands of gallons of water with apparent ease.

"The combination effect," she said, more to herself than to Cross. "When they work together, their powers amplify each other. We knew this from the tunnel footage, but we underestimated the degree."

"What are your orders?"

"Find them. They can't hide forever—four girls, one in a wheelchair, two with obvious disabilities. Someone will notice them. Someone will report them."

"And when we find them?"

Vance was quiet for a moment. The approach she had planned—quiet acquisition, gentle integration into her research program—was no longer viable. The girls knew they were being hunted now. They would resist any attempt at capture with everything they had.

"We change the narrative," she said finally. "They're not subjects anymore. They're threats."

"Threats?"

"These girls attacked a public museum. They assaulted my operatives. They demonstrated abilities that, if made public, would terrify ordinary citizens. We frame them appropriately—dangerous, unstable, possibly mentally ill. We get the police involved, the media, every resource available."

"You want to make them fugitives."

"They're already fugitives. I want to make sure everyone knows it." Vance leaned back in her chair, her mind already working through the implications. "Four disabled teenagers, escaped from foster care, displaying erratic and violent behavior. The public will be sympathetic

at first, concerned for their welfare. But sympathy fades quickly when people feel threatened."

"And when they're captured?"

"Then they'll be grateful we're offering them treatment, care, a structured environment. The transition from fugitive to patient is much easier than the transition from citizen to subject."

It was manipulation, pure and calculated. Vance knew that, accepted it, filed it away in the compartment where she kept all the compromises her work required. The ends justified the means. They always had.

"I want photos distributed to law enforcement within the hour. I want a media package prepared for release tomorrow morning. And I want teams positioned at every location they might reasonably try to reach—the group home, their schools, any known associates."

"The fourth subject, Venkataraman. Her parents are in Queens."

"Put surveillance on them. If she tries to make contact, we'll know."

Cross nodded and turned to leave, then paused. "Doctor, there's one more thing. Miller's debrief mentioned something unusual. During the confrontation, the subjects didn't just fight. They coordinated, using signals and communication systems we couldn't interpret. It wasn't random—it was tactical."

"They've been training. Preparing for exactly this kind of scenario."

"Yes. They knew the museum was a trap. They came anyway, because they wanted to learn something. And when the trap closed, they were ready."

"Speaking of Miller—what's her status?"

"Contusions, minor water damage to her equipment. She's functional but..." Cross hesitated. "She requested reassignment. Said she'd spent weeks building rapport with those girls, and when the

moment came, she couldn't—" He stopped. "She says she underestimated them. I think she means something else."

Vance's expression didn't change, but something flickered behind her eyes. Sarah Miller had been one of her best field operatives—not because she was ruthless, but because she was genuine. Her empathy was real, which made her infiltrations more effective. But that same empathy could become a liability.

"Grant the reassignment. Put her on administrative duties for now. We'll reevaluate after this is over."

The implication was clear: these weren't frightened children running blindly from danger. They were adversaries, thinking strategically, planning their moves. The museum hadn't just been an escape—it had been a test, a chance to probe Prometheus's capabilities and identify weaknesses.

They were more dangerous than Vance had assumed. Much more dangerous.

"Thank you, Samuel. That will be all."

Cross left, and Vance turned back to her screens. The footage played on loop, showing the museum fight from multiple angles, the impossible powers on display, the coordinated response that had turned her trap into a rout.

She had spent forty years searching for people like this. She had built Prometheus on the belief that anomalous abilities were real, that they could be studied, that they represented the next phase of human development.

Now she had found them. And they were everything she had hoped for and feared: powerful, intelligent, determined. Not specimens to be acquired but forces to be reckoned with.

The hunt would continue. But it would no longer be quiet, no longer subtle. The EleMenTs had made themselves known, and the world was about to learn that monsters were real.

Vance began drafting the press release.

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End of Chapter 13

## Underground

They saw their faces on the news at 7:15 AM.

The shelter had a small television in the corner of the fellowship hall, tuned to a local morning show, volume low enough not to disturb the sleeping occupants. Teena was the first to notice, her attention caught by a graphic that flashed on screen: MISSING AND POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS.

Four photographs appeared. Elle, Meen, Teena, Tal. School photos, institutional photos, images that made them look younger than they were, more vulnerable, more in need of protection.

The anchor's voice was carefully neutral, the tone of concerned authority that news programs adopted for stories involving children: "...last seen yesterday afternoon at the American Museum of Natural History, where witnesses report a disturbance involving what authorities are calling 'erratic and dangerous behavior.' The four girls are wards of the New York State foster system and are considered at risk due to documented mental health issues..."

Teena felt the ground shift beneath her, a physical response to the emotional blow. They had been expecting something like this, had known that Prometheus wouldn't let them disappear quietly. But seeing it, hearing the words that reduced their desperate survival to "erratic behavior," feeling the weight of an entire city being turned against them—

"We need to go," she said, keeping her voice low. "Now."

They gathered their few possessions—nothing, really, just the clothes they wore and the phones they had managed to keep—and slipped out through a side door before the other shelter occupants or the volunteers could connect the faces on screen to the four girls in the corner.

The morning was cold, early spring struggling against the memory of winter. They moved through the streets of Bed-Stuy, avoiding main thoroughfares, sticking to residential blocks where cameras were fewer and attention was less focused.

"Where do we go?" Meen asked. "Every police officer in the city will be looking for us now. Every citizen with a smartphone."

"Underground," Tal said. "The subway tunnels, the maintenance passages, the spaces between spaces. They can't watch everywhere."

"We can't live in tunnels forever."

"We don't need forever. We need time. Time to think, time to plan, time to find a way out of this."

They descended into the subway system through another service entrance, Tal corroding the lock with water, Elle muffling the sound of their passage. The tunnels were different in daylight hours—workers present, trains running on regular schedules, the infrastructure of the city in constant motion.

But there were spaces between the used passages, sections that had been closed for construction or abandoned after renovations, places where the city's attention didn't reach.

Tal led them through a maze of connections, following water pipes that only she could sense, until they emerged in a section of tunnel that clearly hadn't been used in years. Graffiti covered the walls, ancient spray-painted tags from artists long since moved on or forgotten. Debris littered the floor: old newspapers, broken bottles, the detritus of a city that threw things away without looking where they

landed.

"This used to be part of the old IND line," Tal explained. "They rerouted the trains decades ago, sealed off this section. But the water pipes still run through here, which means I can feel anyone approaching."

It was a tomb, essentially. A concrete tomb beneath the streets, dark and damp and forgotten.

It was also, for the moment, safe.

They settled into a corner where the floor was relatively clean, arranging themselves in a circle, their abilities extended outward to watch for threats. Elle monitored air currents. Meen tracked temperature changes. Teena felt vibrations through the floor. Tal sensed the water in all its hidden channels.

"They called us dangerous," Meen said. "On the news. They're making us into villains."

"Because villains can be hunted," Teena said. "Villains don't get sympathy. Villains don't get help."

"But we're not villains. We haven't hurt anyone."

"Those operatives at the museum," Tal said quietly. "Some of them might have been injured. The wall I broke through, the water damage..."

"We were defending ourselves. They tried to kidnap us."

"That's not how they're telling the story."

No, it wasn't. In Prometheus's version, they were disturbed children who had attacked innocent people in a public museum, who had fled rather than accept help, who might attack again if not stopped. It was a narrative that justified any response, that turned the city into a net closing around them.

"We need allies," Teena said. "People who will believe our side of the story."

"Who? We're foster kids with disabilities and mental health histories. The system has spent our whole lives teaching people not to believe us."

"There has to be someone. A journalist, a lawyer, a politician—someone who will listen."

Elle snapped her fingers to get their attention, then signed with sharp, decisive movements: Marcus. Tunnels. He knows. She made a gesture that looked like scales balancing. He owes us.

"Marcus," Teena said. "Elle's right—he saw something in those tunnels. He knows we're not making this up."

"Marcus is being watched. If we contact him, we lead Prometheus right to us."

"Then we don't contact him directly. We find another way."

They debated options, possibilities, increasingly desperate ideas for breaking through the isolation that had been imposed on them. Nothing seemed workable. Every avenue they could think of was covered, every potential ally either inaccessible or likely to turn them in.

Finally, Meen spoke up. "The building Tal sensed. Prometheus's headquarters. We keep talking about gathering intelligence, understanding what we're dealing with. What if that's not enough? What if we need to expose them?"

"Expose them how?"

"They're the ones who tried to kidnap us. They're the ones who planted an operative in our group home, who manipulated the foster system to separate us. If we could prove that—document it, get evidence—the story changes. We're not villains anymore. We're victims of a conspiracy."

"That's a big if. Breaking into a fortified building, gathering evidence, getting out alive..."

"We have powers they still don't fully understand. And we have Tal, who can reach through their walls without physically entering."

Tal nodded slowly. "I can try. If we get close enough, if I can make contact with their water system, I might be able to learn something about their layout, their security patterns. Water flows through every building. It knows the shape of the spaces it fills."

"That's... poetic."

"It's physics. Pressure differentials, flow rates, thermal gradients. Water-cooled systems run hotter when they're working hard. If Prometheus has a data center, I can feel when it's active, maybe even where it is." Tal's voice carried the conviction of someone who had thought about this, who had been planning even as she followed their flight through the city.

It was still dangerous. It might be impossible. But it was better than hiding in a tunnel, waiting for the net to close.

"Okay," Teena said. "We need a plan. A real plan, not just improvisation. Reconnaissance first, then infiltration if it's viable. We take it slow, we take it careful, and we stay alive."

"When do we start?"

Teena looked at her friends—her family—four girls who had been overlooked and underestimated their entire lives, who were now fugitives, who were about to try something that might destroy them or save them.

"Tonight," she said. "We start tonight."

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End of Chapter 14

Part Three

# **Allies**

## Reconnaissance

They emerged from the tunnels after dark, four shadows moving through a city that was hunting them.

Tal led the way, following the water-sense that guided her like a compass, threading through streets and alleys that kept them away from the heaviest surveillance. Elle monitored the air for any sign of pursuit. Meen tracked ambient temperatures, alert for the heat signatures of search parties. Teena felt the vibrations of the city through her wheels, mapping the movement of vehicles and pedestrians.

The Prometheus building was in Midtown, a glass tower that looked like a hundred others, distinguished only by Tal's certainty that it was wrong.

"There," she said, stopping in an alley across the street. "The water inside is different. Filtered differently, pressurized differently, routed through systems I don't recognize."

Teena studied the building from their hidden vantage point. It looked normal: lobby lights visible through glass doors, a security desk with a guard reading something on his phone, occasional figures moving through the upper floors. Nothing that screamed secret organization hunting children with supernatural powers.

"How do we get closer?"

"We don't. Not physically, not tonight." Tal's eyes were distant, focused on something none of them could see. "But I can reach. The water main that supplies the building runs beneath the street. If I can tap into that..."

"Do it. But be careful."

Tal knelt on the pavement, pressing her palms flat against the concrete. Her eyes closed, and the air around her seemed to shift, becoming heavier, more humid. Water vapor condensed on nearby surfaces.

The others formed a protective circle, their senses extended, watching for any sign that they had been detected.

Minutes passed. Tal's breathing deepened, slowed, became something that seemed closer to meditation than consciousness. Water seeped up through cracks in the pavement, gathering around her hands, responding to her focus.

"I'm in," she whispered. "I can feel their system. It's... complex. Multiple redundant supplies, isolation valves, contamination sensors. They're worried about someone doing exactly what I'm doing."

"Can you get past the sensors?"

"They're designed to detect chemical or biological contamination. Not... this." Her voice was distant, distracted. "I'm reaching deeper. There's a data center in the basement, water-cooled like I thought. Massive. The thermal load is enormous—servers running constantly, generating heat that the cooling system struggles to manage."

"What can you learn from that?"

"Scale. This isn't a small operation. The infrastructure goes deep, spreads wide. Multiple floors, redundant systems, the kind of setup that costs millions." Tal's expression shifted, became troubled. "And there's something else. A secondary system, isolated from the main building supply. Medical-grade filtration. The kind you'd use for... for human subjects."

The implication settled over them like ice water.

"Can you tell anything else? Security patterns, schedules?"

"The cooling load varies on a cycle. Lower at night, higher during business hours, but there's activity around the clock. And..." Tal paused, concentrating harder. "There's a fluctuation every few hours. Coordinated across multiple systems. Like a shift change, but for the whole building."

"Guard rotations?"

"Maybe. Or data backup cycles. I can't tell what they're doing, just that they're doing something on a schedule." Tal's hands pressed harder against the pavement. "The isolated system—the medical one—it runs hottest between two and four AM. Whatever they're doing with human subjects, they do it when the rest of the city is asleep."

The horror of it settled over them like a cold fog. Prometheus wasn't just an organization with an office. It was a facility, a research complex disguised as a corporate building, with infrastructure designed for long-term containment.

"Is there any way in?" Teena asked, keeping her voice steady despite the churning in her stomach. "Any vulnerability?"

"The water supply has a maintenance access point in the basement. Emergency shutoff, in case of contamination. If someone could reach it physically..." Tal's hands pressed harder against the pavement. "And there's something else. The isolated medical system connects to the main building through a single junction. If that junction failed, they'd have to open emergency vents. Create gaps in their environmental controls."

"You could cause that failure?"

"I could. But it would only buy minutes before they compensated. And we'd need someone inside to take advantage of it."

They didn't have anyone inside. They were four teenage girls hiding in tunnels, with no resources, no allies, no way to turn infrastructure intelligence into actual evidence.

They waited, the alley quiet around them, the city flowing past oblivious to the impossible act being performed beneath its streets. Elle watched the building's entrance, tracking the movements of security personnel. Meen monitored the thermal signatures of anyone approaching their position. Teena felt the ground, alert for the heavy footfalls of tactical teams.

Finally, Tal opened her eyes. Her face was pale, drawn, the effort of what she had done visible in the trembling of her hands.

"I have a map," she said. "Not everything—their security is too good for me to sense every detail—but enough. I know where their data center is. I know where they keep... subjects. I know the rhythms of their operations."

"Enough to plan an infiltration?"

"Maybe. If we had more people. If we had someone on the inside." Tal's voice was hollow with exhaustion. "But we're four girls with powers they've been studying for decades. They've probably planned for exactly what we can do."

"What people? Who would help us?"

Elle held up her phone, then mimed typing, then made a sweeping gesture like words spreading outward. Reporter. Truth-teller. Someone who fights. Her signs were emphatic, certain.

"A journalist," Teena interpreted. "Someone who exposes corruption."

"How do we contact them without being caught?"

Silence. They had intelligence now, a sense of what they were fighting, but no way to use it. No evidence that would convince anyone. No proof except their own impossible abilities, which would only confirm that they were exactly what Prometheus claimed:

dangerous anomalies that needed to be contained.

"Marcus," Teena said slowly. "He's not being watched the same way we are. He could deliver a message for us—something physical, no digital trail."

"A letter," Meen said, catching on. "Old school. We write down everything we know, find a journalist who might listen, and Marcus delivers it to their home address. No phones, no email, nothing Prometheus can intercept."

"How do we find a journalist's home address?"

"Public records. Speaking engagements, voter registration, property ownership. If Marcus can get to a library computer without being followed, he can find what we need."

It was still risky. It meant trusting Marcus with everything, meant exposing him to danger he might not understand. But it was safer than buying phones that could be traced, safer than sending messages through systems Prometheus might control.

"I'll write the letter," Tal said. "I can explain what we are, what Prometheus is, without sounding crazy. I've had practice—years of trying to describe water-sense to people who thought I was delusional."

They retreated from the alley, moving back toward the safety of the tunnels, carrying with them knowledge that changed everything. They knew what Prometheus was now. They knew what it could do. They knew they weren't the first, and they wouldn't be the last.

But knowing wasn't the same as proving. And proving wasn't the same as surviving.

For the first time since the museum, Teena felt something that wasn't hope but was at least direction. They had a target now. They just needed to find a way to hit it.

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End of Chapter 15

## James Lightfoot

James Lightfoot had been an investigative journalist for twenty-three years, and in that time, he had received a lot of strange tips.

Anonymous emails claiming government conspiracies. Midnight phone calls from paranoid whistleblowers. Encrypted messages that led nowhere, or worse, led to elaborate hoaxes designed to waste his time and damage his credibility.

He had learned to be skeptical. He had learned to verify everything three times before publishing. He had learned that the best stories were often the ones that seemed too crazy to be true.

This tip was different.

It had arrived as a handwritten letter, slipped under the door of his apartment building—not his office, his home. That alone suggested someone who knew how to avoid digital surveillance. The handwriting was careful, deliberate, and the content made his pulse quicken as he read it.

The letter was unsigned, but a note at the bottom read: Delivered by a friend who cannot be seen with us. He works at the group home where we lived. He found your address in the public record—you gave a speech at Columbia last year. Please help us.

Four names: Eleanor Hartley. Mingzhu Shen. Christina Okonkwo. Talia Venkataraman. He recognized them immediately—the four foster children all over the news, described as

mentally unstable runaways who had caused a disturbance at a museum.

The letter told a different story. It claimed the girls had been targeted by an organization called Prometheus Applied Sciences, that the museum incident was an attempted kidnapping, that the foster system had been manipulated to separate them. It claimed the girls had abilities that defied explanation, and that Prometheus had been hunting people like them for decades.

The letter included no evidence. Just names, claims, and a request: investigate Prometheus, expose their operations, help four children who had no one else to turn to.

It should have gone straight into his file of crank mail. Instead, James found himself at his computer, searching.

He started with Prometheus Applied Sciences. The company had a website, a LinkedIn presence, public filings that suggested a legitimate research organization focused on cognitive science and neurological disorders. But digging deeper revealed inconsistencies: funding sources that were difficult to trace, employees with backgrounds in intelligence and security, a pattern of acquiring facilities in locations that corresponded to documented "missing persons" cases.

He found former employees who had signed non-disclosure agreements, lawyers who had handled settlements that were sealed by court order, journalists who had started investigating Prometheus and then suddenly stopped, their stories never published, their interest never explained.

The picture that emerged was disturbing. An organization operating in the shadows, using legitimate science as cover for activities that no ethics board would approve. Children who had disappeared from the foster system. Adults who had been institutionalized for claiming impossible abilities. A trail of human

wreckage hidden behind corporate firewalls and legal intimidation.

James worked through the night, pulling records, making calls, building a case file that grew thicker by the hour. By morning, he was convinced: the letter deserved investigation. Prometheus was hiding something. And four teenage girls were in serious danger.

The question was how to find them.

The letter had included no return address, no way to respond. Whoever had sent it was being careful, protecting themselves and the girls they were trying to help. But James had spent decades finding people who didn't want to be found. He had sources in the foster system, contacts in NYPD, connections throughout the city's infrastructure of social services and law enforcement.

If the girls were still in New York, he would find them.

And when he did, he would listen to their story—really listen, without the assumptions that had shaped every other account he had read.

Their survival might depend on it.

. . .

End of Chapter 16

## The Response

Marcus had delivered the letter three days ago. Since then, they'd been monitoring Lightfoot through public sources—his social media, his byline activity, any sign that he had received the letter and taken it seriously.

What they found was promising. Lightfoot had started digging. He'd put out feelers through his network, asked questions about Prometheus Applied Sciences, begun building a file. The letter had worked.

Now they needed to make direct contact.

The burner phone had cost them twelve dollars from a bodega in Queens—most of the cash they had left. It was a risk, but a calculated one. Marcus couldn't arrange a meeting; he was being watched now too, after his trips to the library had drawn attention. The phone was their only option.

"He got the letter," Teena said, studying the cheap phone in her lap. "He's investigating. But he doesn't know how to reach us."

"How do we know he's not working with them?" Meen asked.

"We don't. But his reputation is solid. Twenty-three years investigating corporate corruption, multiple awards, known for protecting sources. If he'd been compromised, we'd have seen signs by now—Prometheus would have moved on his leads, shut down his inquiries. Instead, he's still digging."

Elle signed: We could be walking into a trap.

"We could. But we're already trapped. At least this way, we choose the terms."

They debated for an hour, weighing risks against potential rewards. The argument went in circles: the danger of exposure versus the danger of continued hiding, the possibility of rescue versus the possibility of betrayal.

Finally, Teena made the call. She kept it brief—who they were, what they wanted, a meeting place and time. Lightfoot's voice on the other end was cautious but interested.

"I've been hoping you would reach out," he said. "I have questions. A lot of questions."

"So do we. Midnight, Brooklyn waterfront, Pier 7. Come alone."

She hung up before he could respond.

"Now we wait," Meen said.

They chose the meeting location carefully: an abandoned pier surrounded by water that Tal could control, with clear sightlines that Elle could monitor, accessible to Teena's wheelchair but defensible if necessary. Midnight, when the area would be deserted, when darkness would provide additional cover.

The hours before the meeting passed slowly, tension building as the time approached. They reviewed their contingencies, practiced their coordination, prepared for scenarios ranging from peaceful conversation to violent confrontation.

At 11:45, they arrived at the pier, positioning themselves in a configuration that maximized their defensive capabilities. Tal stood at the water's edge, her hands already reaching into the harbor, ready to raise a wall of water at a moment's notice. Elle was positioned to feel any approaching threat through the air. Meen tracked heat signatures across the entire area. Teena stayed in the center, the hub around which they rotated.

At midnight exactly, a figure appeared at the end of the pier.

James Lightfoot was older than they had expected, mid-fifties, with grey hair and a weathered face that suggested decades of stress. He walked slowly, hands visible, posture deliberately non-threatening.

"I'm alone," he said when he was close enough to be heard. "No weapons, no backup, no tricks. Just me and a notebook."

"Stop there," Teena said. "That's close enough."

He stopped, studying them with an expression that mixed curiosity with something that might have been compassion. "You're younger than I expected. The news reports said teenagers, but..." He shook his head. "How old are you? Thirteen? Fourteen?"

"Old enough to be hunted," Teena said. "Old enough to fight back."

"Yes. I can see that." He held up his notebook. "I've been investigating Prometheus since I got a tip about you. What I've found is... extensive. Decades of suspicious activity, hidden under layers of corporate structure and government complicity. But I don't have proof. I have patterns, I have disappeared people, I have settlements that were sealed. What I don't have is evidence that would hold up in court—or in print."

"We can give you evidence," Teena said. "We can show you what they're hunting."

"Your abilities?" His voice was careful, neither skeptical nor credulous. "I've heard rumors. Seen the footage from the museum, though I can't authenticate it. I need to see for myself."

"You will. But first, you need to understand what Prometheus is. What they've done. What they'll keep doing if no one stops them."

Elle stepped forward, drawing Lightfoot's attention. She pointed at herself, at the other girls, then made a dismissive gesture—the sign for worthless, disposable. Then she pointed at him, made a questioning gesture, and finally touched her temple. Why believe us? We're

nothing. Crazy foster kids.

Lightfoot watched her hands, his expression shifting. "You're asking why I would believe you," he said slowly. "Why I would trust four girls the system has already discredited."

Elle nodded once, sharply.

Lightfoot was quiet for a moment. "My daughter was in the foster system. Before I adopted her. She had experiences that no one believed, things that happened in placements that were supposed to be safe. I learned to listen when no one else would."

It was the right thing to say. Maybe too right, too precisely calibrated to their vulnerabilities. But there was something in his voice, a roughness that suggested genuine emotion rather than calculated manipulation.

"We'll tell you our stories," Teena said finally. "But you need to understand what you're getting into. Prometheus has resources we can't match. They've already framed us as dangerous, turned the city against us. If you publish this story, they'll come after you too."

"Let them try." Lightfoot's jaw tightened. "I've been threatened before. By corporations, by politicians, by people with a lot more power than some shadowy research company. I'm still here, still publishing, still doing my job."

He sat down on a weathered crate, opened his notebook, and looked at them with the patience of someone who had spent decades coaxing difficult stories from reluctant sources.

"Start from the beginning," he said. "Tell me everything."

And they did.

. . .

End of Chapter 17

## Cross's Conscience

Samuel Cross stood in the observation room, watching the footage from the museum for what felt like the hundredth time.

The screen showed Eleanor Hartley creating wind from nothing, her hands moving like a conductor directing an invisible orchestra. It showed Mingzhu Shen generating heat that overwhelmed equipment designed for industrial applications. It showed Christina Okonkwo fracturing concrete with a touch, the floor responding to her will like a living thing.

It showed children. Frightened, desperate children, fighting for their lives against trained operatives who had been sent to capture them.

Cross had been a soldier. He had done difficult things in service to causes he believed in, had followed orders that troubled him because he trusted the people giving them. But this was different. This was hunting children through a city that had been turned against them, using the apparatus of the state to terrorize teenagers whose only crime was existing.

He pulled up the file on the fourth subject, the one who had appeared from nowhere. Talia Venkataraman. Fourteen years old. Diagnosed with autism at age six. Hospitalized twice for "psychotic episodes" that, in retrospect, were probably her water abilities manifesting in ways no one understood.

The psychiatric notes made his throat tighten. Patient insists she can "hear" water. Displays distress when contradicted. Recommendation: increase antipsychotic medication.

Cross thought about his younger sister, Rachel. She had heard things too, had insisted on perceptions that everyone around her dismissed as delusion. The doctors had medicated her into compliance, had taught her to doubt her own mind, had turned a vibrant, curious girl into someone who second-guessed every thought she had.

Rachel was forty-three now, living in a group home in Connecticut, still taking medication that kept her "stable" by making her someone other than who she had been. Cross visited her twice a year. Each time, he saw less of the sister he remembered.

If Rachel had been born different—if her perceptions had been real, the way Tal's were—would anyone have believed her? Or would she have ended up like this girl, hunted and captured and turned into a research subject?

He closed the file. His hands were shaking.

He had expressed his concerns to Vance. She had dismissed them, had spoken about the greater good, about scientific advancement, about the need to understand anomalous capabilities before they fell into the wrong hands.

As if Prometheus's hands were the right ones.

"Agent Cross." Vance's voice came through his earpiece. "Report to my office."

He found her behind her desk, surrounded by screens displaying surveillance feeds, news reports, social media analysis. The hunt for the EleMenTs had become a citywide operation, coordinated through law enforcement channels that didn't know they were serving Prometheus's interests.

"We have a lead," Vance said. "The subjects purchased a burner phone in Queens—they wore disguises, but we cross-referenced

activation timing with surveillance patterns we'd been tracking and narrowed it to a three-block radius. Then we pulled tower data for every call made from new devices in that area. One call went to James Lightfoot, investigative journalist at the Herald."

Cross felt his stomach tighten. "They've contacted the media."

"It appears so. Lightfoot has a reputation for corporate investigations. If they convince him to publish, if he starts digging into our operations..." Vance's expression was cold, calculating. "We need to accelerate the timeline. Capture the subjects before Lightfoot can build a case."

"And Lightfoot himself?"

"We'll deal with him appropriately. Discredit his sources, challenge his evidence, make it clear that publishing this story would be career suicide."

"And if that doesn't work?"

Vance met his eyes. "Then we'll find other methods."

Cross understood. Lightfoot wasn't just an obstacle to be managed. He was a threat to be neutralized, by whatever means necessary.

"Doctor, I have to express concern about this approach."

"Your concerns have been noted, Agent Cross. They're not relevant to the operational priorities."

"Killing a journalist is not an operational priority. It's a crime that would draw exactly the kind of attention we're trying to avoid."

"No one said anything about killing anyone." But Vance's tone suggested otherwise. "We have many tools available for handling problematic individuals. Death is rarely the most effective option."

Cross thought about the files he had seen, the records of Prometheus's previous subjects. Some had been institutionalized. Some had disappeared into research facilities. Some had simply... stopped existing, their records erased, their families compensated for

their silence.

These were not the actions of a legitimate research organization. These were the methods of people who believed they were above the law, above accountability, above the basic ethical constraints that governed civilized society.

"I need time to consider my position," Cross said.

Vance studied him, her pale eyes revealing nothing. "You have until morning. We move on the subjects at dawn, with or without your participation."

Cross left her office and walked through the building, past the labs and offices and security checkpoints that made up Prometheus's hidden empire. He had given years of his life to this organization, had believed in its stated mission of understanding human potential.

But understanding was not what Prometheus was doing. Prometheus was hunting, capturing, experimenting. Prometheus was treating human beings as resources to be exploited rather than people to be respected.

And now they were going to escalate, were going to silence a journalist and capture four children, were going to do things that Cross could no longer pretend to support.

He thought about the footage, about the girls fighting desperately against overwhelming odds. He thought about Eleanor's hands, moving like speech made visible. He thought about Christina, unable to walk but somehow making the earth itself respond to her will.

He thought about what he was willing to do, and what he wasn't.

By the time he reached his car, he had made a decision.

He was going to find the EleMenTs before Prometheus did. But not to capture them.

To warn them.

...

End of Chapter 18

## The Interview

They talked until dawn began to lighten the sky over Brooklyn.

The girls told Lightfoot everything: the tunnel discovery that had started it all, the powers that had emerged, the weeks of practice and growing strength. They told him about the surveillance, the transfer letters, the museum trap. They told him about Tal's arrival, the escape, the days of hiding in tunnels while the city searched for them.

Lightfoot listened, asked questions, filled page after page of his notebook with the cramped handwriting of someone who had spent decades documenting stories that mattered.

"The powers," he said finally, when they had finished. "Can you show me?"

They exchanged glances. Demonstrating was dangerous, created evidence that could be used against them. But Lightfoot needed to believe, needed to understand that what they were describing wasn't metaphor or delusion.

Elle raised her hand and created a miniature whirlwind, visible in the dust and debris that lifted from the pier's surface. Meen touched a nearby piece of driftwood and made it glow with heat, smoke rising from its surface. Teena pressed her palm to the pier and made the boards groan, shifting slightly beneath their feet. Tal reached toward the harbor and a column of water rose, impossibly, defying gravity and physics and everything the world claimed was possible.

Lightfoot watched, his expression cycling through disbelief, wonder, and finally a kind of grim acceptance.

"This changes everything," he said quietly. "Not just the story, but... everything. If you can do this, if there are others like you, the implications for..."

"We're not the story," Teena interrupted. "Prometheus is the story. What they've done, who they've hurt, the systems they've corrupted. That's what matters."

"You're both the story. You can't separate what you are from what they've done to you." Lightfoot closed his notebook. "But you're right that the focus needs to be on their crimes. The powers are extraordinary, but extraordinary doesn't justify hunting children."

"So you'll publish?"

"I'll write the story. But I need to verify as much as possible, build a case that can withstand the attacks Prometheus will launch. That takes time."

"We don't have time. They're hunting us right now."

"I know. Which is why we need to get you somewhere safe while I work." Lightfoot stood, stretching muscles that had stiffened during hours of sitting. "I have contacts. People who help sources stay hidden during sensitive investigations. I can arrange protection."

"We can protect ourselves."

"Against a city full of police looking for you? Against an organization with the resources Prometheus has demonstrated? You're powerful, but you're also four teenagers with no money, no support, no place to sleep."

He was right, and they knew it. Their powers made them formidable in direct confrontation, but they couldn't fight an entire city, couldn't sustain a war of attrition against an enemy with unlimited resources.

"What kind of protection?" Meen asked.

"A safe house. Outside the city, outside Prometheus's immediate surveillance network. You'd stay there while I build the story, until we're ready to go public."

"And if something goes wrong? If Prometheus finds us there?"

"Then we have a problem. But it's a smaller problem than the one you have now, hiding in tunnels, running from every police officer and concerned citizen who spots you."

They debated, as they always did, weighing the risks against the alternatives. The safe house meant trusting Lightfoot completely, putting their fate in the hands of a man they had just met. But continuing to run meant exhaustion, eventual capture, the slow inevitable closing of every escape route.

"Okay," Teena said finally. "We'll try it. But we're not prisoners. If something feels wrong, if we decide to leave, you won't stop us."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Lightfoot pulled out his phone. "I'll make some calls. We can move tonight, after dark."

He walked to the end of the pier, speaking quietly into his phone, arranging the logistics of their extraction. The girls watched him, four teenagers who had placed their lives in a stranger's hands because they had no better options.

"Do you trust him?" Meen asked quietly.

"I don't know," Teena admitted. "But I trust that he wants the story. And right now, our survival and his story need the same thing: Prometheus exposed."

It was thin comfort. But it was something.

The sun rose over Brooklyn, painting the water gold and pink, and somewhere in the city, their enemies were still searching, still planning, still preparing for the confrontation that was inevitably coming.

But for the first time in days, the EleMenTs had an ally. And that changed the equation in ways they were only beginning to understand.

...

End of Chapter 19

## Chapter 20

# The Warning

Cross found them as they were preparing to leave the pier.

He came alone, as he had planned, approaching slowly with his hands visible and his posture deliberately non-threatening. Even so, he felt the air around him shift, felt a sudden spike in temperature, felt the pier itself seem to tense beneath his feet.

"Stop right there," the girl in the wheelchair said. Christina Okonkwo, he knew from her file. The one with the earth ability.

"I'm not here to hurt you." Cross raised his hands higher. "I'm here to warn you."

"You're one of them." The tall one, Talia. Water was rising from the harbor behind her, coiling like a serpent preparing to strike. "I can feel Prometheus on you. The building, the filtered water, everything."

"I was one of them. I'm not anymore."

"Why should we believe you?"

It was a fair question. Cross had spent years doing Prometheus's work, had participated in operations that these girls would rightly consider unforgivable. He had no right to their trust.

"You shouldn't believe me," he said. "Not based on my word alone. But you should listen, because what I have to say could save your lives."

They didn't attack. They didn't run. They waited, four girls with impossible powers and every reason to destroy him, giving him a

chance to explain.

"Prometheus knows about your contact with Lightfoot. They've been watching him for weeks—ever since he started asking questions about them. When the burner call hit his phone, they tailed him here. They're planning to move at dawn, a coordinated strike to capture all four of you."

"We're leaving tonight," Christina said. "Lightfoot has a safe house arranged."

"They know about that too. Vance has been monitoring Lightfoot since he started investigating. She knows about his safe house network, has probably already positioned teams to intercept you."

The journalist, who had been standing at the edge of the group, stepped forward. "That's impossible. My security protocols—"

"Are good. But Prometheus has been doing this for decades. They've infiltrated law enforcement, intelligence agencies, media organizations. Your protocols weren't designed for an adversary like this."

Lightfoot's face went pale. "Then we're trapped."

"No. You have something they don't expect: me." Cross lowered his hands slowly. "I know their operational protocols, their team compositions, their surveillance networks. I can help you evade them, get out of the city, find somewhere actually safe."

"Why?" The blind girl, Mingzhu. Her head was tilted, listening not just to his words but to something beneath them. "Why would you betray your organization?"

It was the question Cross had been asking himself since he left Vance's office. The answer was complicated, wrapped up in years of service and doubt and the slow erosion of beliefs he had once held firmly.

"Because what they're doing is wrong," he said finally. "Because hunting children isn't science, it's predation. Because I spent twenty

years believing I was protecting people, and now I find out I was helping monsters."

"That's convenient. A crisis of conscience just when we need saving."

"It's not convenient. It's been building for months, since the tunnel footage, since I saw what you were and what Prometheus wanted to do with you." Cross met Christina's eyes. "I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to use me. Let me help you escape, and then forget I exist."

The girls conferred silently, using their strange communication system of signs and touches and looks. Cross waited, knowing that his fate—and probably his life—depended on their decision.

Finally, Christina spoke. "You said they're moving at dawn. How do we get past them?"

"The surveillance network has gaps. I helped design it, so I know where they are. If we move now, through specific routes, we can get out of the city before they realize we're gone."

"And the safe house?"

"Compromised. We need somewhere else, somewhere Prometheus doesn't know about."

"I might have an option," Lightfoot said slowly. "A place I've never used, never connected to any of my other operations. It would take time to set up, but..."

"Then we buy time. Get out of the city, go to ground somewhere temporary, and let Lightfoot arrange the real safe house." Cross checked his watch. "We have maybe six hours before dawn. That's enough, if we move smart."

The girls looked at each other again. Whatever silent communication passed between them, it resulted in a decision that Cross could see in the way their stances shifted, their powers pulling back from combat readiness.

"Okay," Christina said. "You lead. But if this is a trap, if you're leading us into an ambush..."

"Then you'll kill me. I understand." Cross turned toward the pier's exit. "This way. And stay close. The first checkpoint is three blocks from here."

They followed him into the pre-dawn darkness, four girls with elemental powers, a journalist with a story to tell, and a man who had just betrayed everything he had spent his life serving.

It was, Cross reflected, probably the most dangerous thing he had ever done.

And possibly the most important.

. . .

End of Chapter 20

## Chapter 21

# The Flood

They almost made it.

Cross led them through Brooklyn's pre-dawn streets, threading between surveillance points, using routes that only someone who had helped design the network would know. They moved in silence, the girls using their powers subtly—Elle dampening sound, Meen tracking heat signatures, Teena feeling for approaching footsteps through the pavement, Tal monitoring the water systems that ran beneath every street.

But something felt wrong to Tal. The water was harder to read than usual, its voice muffled, as if she were listening through a wall that hadn't been there before. The museum surge had cost her more than she'd admitted—she could feel the edges of her connection fraying, the mechanism that let her touch the water was straining under loads it had handled easily days ago.

She said nothing. They needed her. She would hold together as long as she had to.

They had reached the edge of the surveillance zone, could see the bridge that would carry them past Prometheus's primary coverage area, when everything went wrong.

Tal felt it first: a massive disruption in the water system, fire hydrants across the neighborhood suddenly losing pressure, the flow redirected toward their location. The warning came later than it should

have—her frayed senses almost missing the pattern until it was already closing around them. "They found us," she said. "Someone is manipulating the water grid."

"That's impossible," Cross said. "Prometheus doesn't have—"

"They have something. Sensors, remote controls, I don't know. But they're cutting off our escape routes."

Vehicles appeared at both ends of the street, black SUVs that disgorged tactical teams with the coordinated efficiency of people who had done this many times before. They wore no insignia, carried no identification, moved like shadows that had learned to kill.

"Back!" Cross shouted, but there was nowhere to go. Buildings on both sides, teams in front and behind, the trap closing with the precision of a mechanism designed for exactly this purpose.

"We fight," Teena said. It wasn't a question.

They had practiced this, had prepared for exactly this scenario. But practice was different from reality, simulation different from a street suddenly full of people who wanted to capture them or worse.

Elle moved first, raising a wall of wind that sent the nearest team staggering backward. The force was stronger than anything she had demonstrated before, fueled by fear and desperation and the knowledge that failure meant capture.

Meen followed, generating heat that turned the street into a furnace, making the tactical teams fall back, their equipment overheating, their coordination disrupted by conditions they hadn't been trained to handle.

Teena pressed her hands to the pavement and the street itself revolted, cracks spreading in all directions, asphalt buckling, the carefully maintained infrastructure of the city becoming a weapon against those who would use it.

But the teams kept coming. They had been prepared this time, had learned from the museum, had equipped themselves with

countermeasures that blunted the girls' powers. Heat-resistant suits. Pressure-compensating helmets. Seismic dampeners that reduced the effect of Teena's earth manipulation.

And they were focused on one target above all: Tal.

"They want the water elemental," Cross realized. "She's the key. If they can neutralize her..."

That was when they made their move on Meen.

In the chaos of battle, while everyone's attention was on Tal and the water rising around them, two operatives approached Meen from her blind side—literally. She felt the heat of their bodies too late, turned to defend herself, but they had studied her. They knew her range, knew her reaction time, knew exactly how to get inside her guard.

The tranquilizer dart hit her in the neck. She had time for one startled cry before her legs buckled.

"MEEN!" Teena screamed.

The operatives were already retreating, one carrying Meen's unconscious body over his shoulder, the other providing cover. They moved toward a waiting van that had hung back from the main assault, positioned exactly for this purpose.

Elle threw everything she had at them—a focused blast of wind that should have knocked them flat. But the operative carrying Meen was wearing some kind of gyroscopic harness that kept him upright despite the pressure. They had come prepared for her too.

"They planned this," Cross said, his voice grim. "This isn't improvisation. This is a targeted acquisition."

The van door slid open. The operatives were almost there.

"Tal!" Teena shouted. "The van! Stop the van!"

But Tal was holding the water shield that protected them all. She couldn't do both—couldn't shield them and stop the van, couldn't save everyone at once.

"I can't—" Her voice cracked. "If I drop the shield—"

"Drop it," Teena said. "Get Meen. We'll handle the rest."

It was a terrible gamble. Without Tal's water shield, they were exposed to the full assault. But without Meen, they weren't complete. They weren't the EleMenTs.

Tal made her choice.

The shield collapsed. Water that had been protecting them surged toward the van, hitting it like a battering ram, knocking it sideways, shattering windows, flooding the interior. The operatives stumbled; the one carrying Meen lost his grip.

Meen's body hit the pavement. She was still unconscious, still vulnerable, still twenty feet away with tactical teams between them and her.

"Cover me," Teena said, and before anyone could stop her, she was moving.

Her wheelchair wasn't built for this. Her arms were already burning. But she pushed anyway, propelling herself toward Meen while Elle and Cross provided covering fire—wind and bullets clearing a path through operatives who hadn't expected a girl in a wheelchair to charge them.

She reached Meen, grabbed her under the arms, and started dragging her back toward the others. It was awkward, agonizing, impossible—she couldn't push her chair and carry someone at the same time. She ended up half-falling out of her chair, crawling across the wet pavement, pulling Meen with her through sheer desperate strength.

"I've got you," she gasped. "I've got you, Meen. Stay with me."

Meen's eyes fluttered. The tranquilizer was already wearing off—her elevated body temperature was burning through it faster than the operatives had anticipated. "Teena...?"

"We're getting out of here. Just hold on."

Cross reached them, helped Teena back into her chair, lifted Meen. They made it back to the group—barely. Meen was conscious but unsteady, her heat flickering erratically as she fought off the drugs. Teena's palms were bleeding from the pavement.

They had lost precious time. The tactical teams had regrouped. The trap was closing again.

Tal stood at the center of the street, her hands raised, water rising from every available source—hydrants, gutters, the condensation on windows and cars. The liquid formed a barrier around the group, a shifting wall of H2O that deflected attacks and blocked approaches.

"I can't hold this forever," she said through gritted teeth. Blood was trickling from her nose, and her hands were shaking. "They're fighting me for control of the system. Someone at Prometheus is trying to override my connection."

"Then don't hold it," Teena said. "Release it. All at once."

"That could hurt people."

"They're trying to capture us. They'll do worse than hurt us if they succeed."

Tal hesitated, the moral weight of what she was being asked to do visible in her expression. She had spent her whole life being told her abilities were delusions, had only recently accepted that she could actually do the impossible things she had always believed she could. And now she was being asked to use that power as a weapon, to potentially harm people who, whatever their intentions, were still human beings.

"Do it," Cross said. "I'll take responsibility. Whatever happens, it's on me."

Tal closed her eyes. Her hands dropped to her sides.

And the water exploded outward.

It wasn't a wave, wasn't a flood, was something more like an eruption—thousands of gallons released simultaneously from every

pipe and hydrant and reservoir within a two-block radius. The tactical teams were swept off their feet, their vehicles pushed aside like toys, the entire street transformed into a churning river that carried everything with it.

Tal screamed. The sound was raw, involuntary, torn from somewhere deep inside her. She had never moved this much water, never held this many connections at once, never felt so completely submerged in her own power. It was like drowning from the inside out, her consciousness dissolving into the flood she had unleashed.

Then Meen was there, gripping her arm, the contact burning hot against Tal's skin. The heat cut through the dissolution, gave her something solid to hold onto. She pulled back from the water, felt her edges reform, felt herself become Tal again instead of just current and pressure and flow.

In the chaos, the girls ran. Cross led them through the deluge, his knowledge of the terrain guiding them even through the transformed landscape. Teena's arms were burning from pushing through the standing water, her wheels catching on debris, but she kept going. Elle was half-carrying Meen, who had depleted herself warming Tal. They reached the bridge, crossed it, emerged on the far side where Prometheus's surveillance coverage was thinner.

Tal collapsed the moment they stopped. Her legs simply gave out, dropping her to the wet pavement, her eyes rolling back, her body seizing once before going still.

"Tal!" Teena wheeled toward her, but Meen was already there, hands on Tal's forehead.

"She's hypothermic," Meen said. "Her body temperature dropped when she connected to the water. I'm warming her, but she needs rest. Real rest."

Behind them, the flood began to subside, the water draining back into systems that Tal was no longer controlling. The tactical teams

would regroup, would pursue, would eventually track them down again.

But for now, they had escaped. Barely.

"Where do we go?" Meen asked, her voice exhausted. She was shivering too, having given her heat to Tal.

Before anyone could answer, sirens split the air—multiple vehicles, converging fast. Helicopter rotors beat somewhere to the south, searchlights sweeping across the flooded streets.

"Under the bridge," Cross said. "Now."

They scrambled into the shadows beneath the overpass, pressing themselves against cold concrete as emergency vehicles screamed past. Tal was barely conscious; Meen and Teena half-carried, half-dragged her into cover. Elle stirred the air in tight spirals around them, dispersing their body heat into the surrounding currents, while Meen—despite her exhaustion—pulled warmth away from their skin, matching them to the ambient temperature of the concrete. It was crude camouflage, but it might blur their signatures enough to fool a helicopter's thermal camera.

For ten agonizing minutes, they crouched in darkness as the city's response machinery descended on the flood zone. Fire trucks. Police cruisers. An ambulance. The helicopter made three passes overhead, its searchlight sweeping dangerously close to their position.

"They're not looking for us specifically," Cross whispered. "Not yet. They're responding to the flood. But that won't last."

When the immediate wave of responders had passed, Cross led them through a drainage culvert that ran beneath the highway—a concrete pipe barely wide enough for Teena's wheelchair, filled with two inches of standing water that Tal, even in her depleted state, instinctively pushed aside. They emerged in a construction lot three blocks from the bridge, screened from the main roads by equipment and materials.

"North," Lightfoot said. He had stayed with them through the chaos, had somehow kept his notebook dry, was already thinking about the story he would write. "I know a place in Westchester. Old farmhouse, no digital footprint, completely off the grid."

"How far?"

"Thirty miles. We'll need transportation."

Cross pointed to a parking lot visible in the growing light. "I can get us a car. Give me ten minutes."

He walked away, leaving them huddled behind a stack of concrete barriers: four girls—one barely conscious, one shivering, one bleeding from pushing her chair too hard—and one journalist, all soaking wet and barely functional.

"That was..." Teena started.

"Too much," Meen finished. "We can't do that again. Not without killing one of us."

When Tal finally stirred, twenty minutes later, she couldn't remember her own name for almost a minute. Her first coherent words were: "I hurt people. I felt them being swept away. Some of them might be..."

"They would have done worse to us," Elle signed, and Teena translated without thinking.

"That doesn't make it okay."

"No. It doesn't. But it makes it survivable." Teena reached out and touched Tal's arm. "We're alive. We're free. And when this is over, when Prometheus is exposed and we're safe, you can spend the rest of your life deciding how to feel about what you did. But right now, we need to keep moving."

Tal nodded slowly, accepting the logic even if she couldn't accept the morality. She tried to stand and nearly fell again; Meen caught her, and they leaned on each other, two girls who had given too much keeping each other upright.

Cross returned with a nondescript sedan, and they piled in—four girls, a journalist, and a defector—beginning the journey to whatever safety awaited them beyond the city's reach.

The sun rose as they drove, painting the sky in colors that felt like a promise.

Or possibly a warning.

. . .

End of Chapter 21

Part Four

# **Exposure**

## The Safe House

The farmhouse had been abandoned for twenty years, but someone—Lightfoot, presumably—had prepared it for exactly this kind of emergency.

They arrived as the morning sun climbed higher, the car's tires crunching on a gravel driveway that had been cleared of weeds recently enough to suggest maintenance. The building itself was weathered but solid, a two-story structure with a wraparound porch and windows that had been boarded from the inside.

"It's not pretty," Lightfoot said as they climbed out, "but it's safe. No utilities registered to any traceable name, no digital footprint, no connection to any of my published work. I keep it for situations exactly like this."

The interior was basic but functional: beds, a functional kitchen, a bathroom with running water that came from a well rather than the municipal system. There were supplies—canned food, bottled water, medical kits—stacked in a closet that suggested someone had thought carefully about what fugitives might need.

"Rest," Cross said. "I'll take first watch. We need to establish a security perimeter before we can relax."

The girls collapsed onto beds and couches, the exhaustion of the past days finally catching up with them. They had been running on adrenaline and fear, and now that they had reached something like

safety, their bodies demanded the rest they had been denying themselves.

Teena couldn't sleep, despite her exhaustion.

She lay on a bed in one of the upstairs rooms, feeling the house around her through her earth-sense. The foundation was solid, the walls well-constructed, the kind of building that had been made to last. But she could also feel the emptiness of it, the years of abandonment, the dust that had settled into every crack and corner.

"You should rest." Meen's voice came from the doorway. She had always been able to navigate unfamiliar spaces with uncanny accuracy, and this house was no exception.

"Can't. Too much to think about."

Meen crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "The flood?"

"Everything. The flood, the escape, Tal's guilt, Cross's betrayal of his organization. We went from hiding in tunnels to having allies in less than twenty-four hours. It feels too fast."

"It was too fast. We were reacting, not planning. That's dangerous."

"I know. But what choice did we have?"

"None. That's the problem." Meen's voice cracked slightly. She hated this—hated feeling helpless, hated that her careful analysis couldn't predict or prevent what had happened. "We've been reacting since the museum. Running, hiding, responding to whatever Prometheus throws at us. We need to start acting instead."

"How?"

"Lightfoot's story. That's our weapon." She was warming to the idea, her voice steadying. "If we can get the truth out, if people know what Prometheus has done, then they can't operate in shadows anymore. They become the hunted instead of the hunters."

"That assumes people will believe us."

"They'll believe evidence. And we have evidence—Cross's testimony, Tal's knowledge of their infrastructure, the testimony of four witnesses with demonstrable abilities." She reached out and found Teena's hand. "We can prove what we are. That's more than most whistleblowers ever have."

"And a Prometheus defector," Teena added. "Cross could corroborate everything."

"If he's actually on our side."

"You don't trust him."

Meen was quiet for a moment. "I trust that he helped us escape. I trust that he put himself at risk. But I don't trust his motivations. People don't abandon organizations they've served for decades because of sudden moral awakening. There's usually something else."

It was a fair concern. Cross had been convenient, almost too convenient—appearing at exactly the right moment, offering exactly the help they needed. It was the kind of coincidence that Meen's analytical mind found suspicious.

"We keep watching him," Teena said. "Use him for what he can offer, but don't depend on him."

"Agreed."

They sat in silence for a while, two girls who had been through more in the past week than most people experienced in a lifetime. Outside, the Westchester countryside stretched in all directions, peaceful and ordinary and utterly disconnected from the invisible war being fought in its midst.

"We're going to win this," Teena said finally. "I don't know how, I don't know when, but we're going to win."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because we have to. Because we've already survived things that should have destroyed us. Because we're not just fighting for ourselves anymore—we're fighting for everyone like us, everyone Prometheus

has hurt, everyone who might be hurt in the future."

Meen reached out and found Teena's hand, squeezing it gently. "Then we rest. We recover. And tomorrow, we start planning how to take them down."

Teena squeezed back, drawing comfort from the connection.

Tomorrow, they would fight.

But tonight, they would rest.

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End of Chapter 22

## Chapter 23

# Vance's History

Dr. Helen Vance stood in her office, watching the sun set over Manhattan, and remembered how it had all begun.

The flood in Brooklyn had cost her four operatives hospitalized, two vehicles destroyed, and any chance of a quiet acquisition. The subjects had escaped, had allied with a journalist who couldn't be easily silenced, had somehow turned one of her own agents against her.

It was the worst operational failure of her career. And it forced her to confront questions she had been avoiding for years.

She had been six years old when she first understood that her mother was different.

Margaret Vance had been a schoolteacher in rural Minnesota, a respected member of the community, a woman everyone described as kind and patient and thoroughly ordinary. But Helen had seen things that no one else noticed: the way plants seemed to grow toward her mother, the way animals calmed in her presence, the way the weather sometimes shifted when her moods changed.

She had asked her mother about it once, when she was eight. Margaret had gone pale, had made Helen promise never to mention it again, had been distant and frightened for days afterward.

Three years later, Margaret Vance had been committed to a psychiatric hospital after a "psychotic episode" that Helen, even at

eleven, suspected was something else entirely. She had visited her mother once, in a room that smelled of disinfectant and despair, and had seen a woman who had been broken by treatments designed to cure an illness she didn't have.

Margaret died in that hospital six months later. The official cause was heart failure. Helen always believed it was something more like despair.

That loss had shaped everything that followed. Helen had become a scientist, determined to understand what her mother had been, to prove that anomalous abilities were real and could be studied without fear or persecution. She had built Prometheus on the foundation of that belief, had gathered resources and allies, had created an organization dedicated to understanding the impossible.

But somewhere along the way, understanding had become acquisition. Research had become control. The goal of helping people like her mother had been corrupted into a system for hunting and capturing them.

She told herself it was necessary. The world wasn't ready to know about people like the EleMenTs, wasn't capable of responding with anything other than fear and persecution. Better that Prometheus control them, study them, protect them from a society that would destroy what it didn't understand.

But was that really protection? Was locking children in research facilities, conducting experiments on unwilling subjects, hunting teenagers through city streets really different from what had been done to her mother?

The answer, she knew, was no. She had become exactly what she had set out to fight.

The realization didn't change anything. She was too deep now, had done too much, had built an organization whose momentum couldn't be stopped by one person's moral awakening. Prometheus

would continue, with or without her conscience.

But she found herself hoping, in some small corner of her mind, that the EleMenTs would succeed. That they would expose what she had built, would tear it down, would create the world she had once dreamed of—a world where people like her mother, like these girls, could exist openly without fear.

She wouldn't help them. She couldn't, not without destroying herself and everything she had created. But she wouldn't fight as hard as she might have, wouldn't use every resource available, wouldn't do the terrible things that ensuring their capture would require.

Let them run. Let them expose her. Let the world finally learn what was possible.

Her phone rang. One of her analysts, reporting on the search for the escaped subjects.

"We've lost their trail north of the city," the analyst said. "The defector knows our methods too well. He's avoiding every surveillance point."

"Continue monitoring. They'll surface eventually."

"And when they do?"

Vance was quiet for a moment. "Observe and report. No direct action without my authorization."

It wasn't what she would have ordered yesterday. Yesterday, she would have demanded immediate capture, would have authorized whatever force was necessary.

But yesterday, she hadn't allowed herself to remember her mother.

"Understood, Doctor."

The call ended, and Vance turned back to the window. The sun had set completely now, the city lights spreading across the landscape like a galaxy fallen to earth.

Somewhere out there, four girls were hiding, planning, preparing to fight.

She hoped they were ready.

Because the battle that was coming would determine not just their future, but the future of everyone like them.

And Helen Vance, for the first time in decades, wasn't sure which side she wanted to win.

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End of Chapter 23

## Chapter 24

# Building the Case

Two weeks in the safe house taught them something important: hiding was harder than fighting.

The farmhouse was secure, but security bred isolation, and isolation bred tension. Four girls with elemental powers, a journalist with a deadline, and a defector with guilt—all trapped together in a space that had never been designed for long-term occupation.

Tal spent the first three days barely conscious. The flood in Brooklyn had cost her more than any of them had realized—not just energy but something deeper, some fundamental connection to herself that had frayed when she dissolved into the water. Meen kept her warm, literally, her hands pressed against Tal's skin for hours at a time, feeding body heat into a girl who had become hypothermic from the inside out.

"She pushed too hard," Cross said, watching from the doorway. "The abilities have limits. Exceed them, and there are consequences."

"What kind of consequences?"

"I've seen subjects who lost fine control permanently. Others who couldn't access their abilities for months. One who..." He stopped. "She needs rest. Real rest. Time for whatever mechanism drives these powers to rebuild itself."

By the fourth day, Tal could sit up. By the sixth, she could walk. By the tenth, she was practicing with her powers again—but carefully,

in small doses, stopping the moment she felt the familiar edge of dissolution creeping back.

"I can feel the water again," she said one morning, her hands cupped around a glass. "But it's different now. Quieter. Like it's waiting for me to be ready."

They developed routines to survive. Morning training sessions where they practiced their powers, pushing their limits, learning new applications for abilities they were still discovering. Afternoon strategy meetings where Lightfoot presented his progress and they debated how to proceed. Evening meals cooked in rotation, because even fugitives had to eat, and the act of preparing food together provided a semblance of normalcy.

Cross proved more useful than expected. He provided detailed intelligence about Prometheus's operations, their structure, their vulnerabilities. He explained the organization's history, its evolution from legitimate research into something darker, the compromises that had accumulated until they became indistinguishable from crimes.

"Vance isn't evil," he said one evening, when the conversation had turned to their primary adversary. "Not in the way you might think. She genuinely believes she's helping people like you. The problem is that belief has been corrupted by decades of operating without oversight."

"That doesn't excuse what she's done," Teena said.

"No. It doesn't. But understanding her might help you defeat her."

Lightfoot's story was taking shape. He had contacted his editor, carefully, using protocols that Cross assured them would be difficult for Prometheus to trace. The Herald was interested—more than interested. They were preparing to devote significant resources to the investigation, pending verification of the key claims.

"They want proof," Lightfoot explained. "Not just documents, which could be forged. Not just testimony, which could be dismissed

as delusion. They want something undeniable."

"We've demonstrated our powers," Meen said. "Multiple times."

"To me, yes. But I can't prove what I've seen. We need something that can be documented, verified, presented in a way that no reasonable person could dismiss."

They debated options. A public demonstration, which would draw attention but also expose them to capture. A controlled laboratory test, which would provide scientific credibility but require finding scientists willing to participate. A media event, which would reach the largest audience but could be spun by Prometheus as manipulation or fraud.

In the end, it was Tal who proposed the solution.

"The water system." She spoke slowly, working through each thought before voicing it. "Municipal sensors. Pressure gauges. Flow meters. They record automatically. If I—" She paused, counting something on her fingers. "If I manipulate water in ways those sensors can detect, there's a permanent record. Numbers. Data. Undeniable."

"Prometheus could claim you hacked the sensors."

"Not if..." Another pause, longer this time. "Multiple locations. Simultaneous. Witnesses seeing what instruments record. Something impossible. Obviously impossible." Her voice was gaining certainty now. "Water flowing uphill. A river reversing. Proof."

It was ambitious. It was dangerous. It was exactly the kind of dramatic gesture that could either vindicate them completely or destroy any credibility they had built.

"When?" Teena asked.

"Next week. Yonkers. Public water facility. Close enough to reach, far enough they won't expect us." Tal's clipped phrases were coming faster now. "Lightfoot brings cameras. Witnesses. We give them proof."

Elle stood up and gestured at all four of them, then held up four fingers. She pointed at each girl in turn, made a sign like an explosion,

repeated it four times. All of us. Four demonstrations. Four impossible things.

"She's right," Meen said, feeling the energy in the room shift. "One demonstration could be a trick. Four simultaneous impossibilities? That's undeniable."

"Four demonstrations, four witnesses to each other, documented evidence on multiple platforms." Lightfoot was nodding, his journalist's instincts engaging with the plan. "It could work. It's risky, but it could work."

Cross looked troubled. "Prometheus will know. The moment you go public, they'll know where you are. They'll come for you."

"Let them come," Teena said. "We've been hiding, running, reacting. It's time to force them to react to us."

"One thing," Meen said. "The messaging. When we demonstrate, what do we actually say? 'We're real'? 'Prometheus hunted us'? Something neutral?"

Teena thought about it. "No. We go big. We go scary. 'Water obeys me.' 'Earth obeys me.' Something that can't be dismissed as a trick, something that forces people to grapple with what we actually are."

"That'll terrify some people. It'll confirm everything Prometheus has been saying about us being dangerous."

"Good." Teena's voice was hard. "We are dangerous. That's the point. We're not asking for permission to exist. We're proving we exist and daring them to do something about it. The people who would have feared us quietly will fear us openly—but the people who might help us? They'll know we're worth helping."

The decision crystallized something in the room, a shared determination that had been building since the museum, since the flood, since they had arrived at this farmhouse to hide from enemies they couldn't yet defeat.

They were going to stop hiding.

They were going to fight.

And in one week, the world was going to learn that the impossible was real.

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End of Chapter 24

## **The Demonstration**

The Yonkers Municipal Water Treatment Facility sprawled across thirty acres of land along the Hudson River, a city-operated complex of tanks and pipes and buildings that processed millions of gallons every day.

The council member had made it possible. She sat on the Yonkers City Council's infrastructure oversight committee, which meant she had standing to request facility tours—and the authority to bring "consultants" along. The tour had been scheduled for 6 AM, before the full day shift arrived, framed as a routine inspection of the new filtration systems. The facility manager had been told to expect a small group; he hadn't been told what they were actually there to see.

Lightfoot had arranged the rest: two scientists from Columbia who specialized in hydrology, willing to observe something they'd been told was "unusual" without being given details. A camera crew from an independent documentary company, working under an embargo agreement that would lift the moment the footage went public.

"You understand that what you're about to witness may seem impossible," Lightfoot told the assembled witnesses as they gathered on the observation platform overlooking the main treatment tanks. "I'm asking you to suspend disbelief and observe carefully. What matters is what you actually see, not what you think should be possible."

The scientists exchanged skeptical glances. The council member looked uncomfortable. The camera crew was already filming, capturing everything for whatever story might emerge.

Tal stood at the edge of the main treatment tank, a massive concrete basin that held hundreds of thousands of gallons of processed water. Her hands were at her sides, her expression focused, her entire being concentrated on the connection she was about to demonstrate.

"Ready?" Teena asked from her position nearby.

"Ready."

Tal raised her hands.

The water in the tank responded.

It rose in the center, forming a column that climbed ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet into the air. It shaped itself into a sphere, defying gravity, suspended above the tank with no visible support. Then it began to move, flowing in patterns that spelled out words visible to everyone watching: WATER. OBEYS. ME.

The scientists stood frozen, their expressions cycling through disbelief to shock to the desperate calculation of people trying to find a rational explanation for something that defied rationality.

"That's not possible," one of them said. "The physics alone..."

"Watch," Lightfoot said.

Tal brought her hands together, and the water column collapsed, splashing back into the tank. Then she turned toward the smaller processing pools, the ones that fed into the municipal distribution system.

"I can feel every pipe from here to the city," she said. "Every valve, every junction. Watch the pressure gauges."

She made a gesture, and gauges throughout the facility spiked simultaneously, their readings jumping by fifteen percent across the board. Another gesture, and they dropped. Another, and they cycled through a pattern that couldn't possibly be coincidental.

"She's controlling the entire system," the other scientist breathed. "From here. Without touching anything."

"Now the others," Teena said.

Elle stepped forward. She raised her hands, and the air around the treatment facility came alive—not wind, exactly, but movement, visible currents that swirled around her like a living thing. She directed them toward the documentation team, a gentle breeze that lifted their hair and rustled their clothing, demonstrable and undeniable.

Meen was next. She approached one of the metal railings and touched it, and the witnesses watched in amazement as frost formed on the surface, ice crystallizing in patterns that spread from her fingers. Then she reversed the effect, the frost melting, the metal glowing red with sudden heat, steam rising from its surface.

Finally, Teena. She pressed her palms to the concrete beneath her wheelchair, and the ground shuddered. Not an earthquake—something more controlled, more intentional. Cracks formed in the concrete, spreading in patterns that spelled out the same message Tal had written in water: EARTH. OBEYS. ME.

The demonstration lasted ten minutes.

When it was over, the witnesses stood in silence, their worldview fundamentally altered, their understanding of what was possible expanded beyond anything they had previously believed.

"How?" the council member managed finally.

"We don't know," Teena said honestly. "We just know that we can, and that there are people who want to capture us, study us, use us. That's why we're here. That's why we needed witnesses."

"The organization pursuing them is called Prometheus Applied Sciences," Lightfoot said, pulling out his notebook. "They've been hunting these girls for months, manipulating the foster care system, using private military contractors to track and capture them. I have documentation of their activities going back decades."

"This is..." The scientist shook his head. "This changes everything. If people can actually do this, if there are others like them..."

"There probably are," Tal said. "Prometheus has been finding and acquiring people with abilities for years. We're just the ones who escaped."

The camera crew was still filming, capturing every word, every reaction. Whatever doubts the witnesses had brought with them had been obliterated by what they had seen.

"What do you want us to do?" the council member asked.

"Tell the truth," Teena said. "When people ask what you saw today, tell them. When Prometheus tries to discredit us, tell them what you witnessed. When the story breaks, be there to confirm it."

"You're going public."

"We have to. It's the only way to make ourselves safe—make what we are so visible that capturing us becomes impossible."

The witnesses nodded slowly, processing the enormity of what they were being asked to do. They had come as skeptics, expecting to see tricks or delusion. They would leave as believers, carrying a truth that would reshape their understanding of reality.

"Thank you," Lightfoot said to the girls. "This is what we needed. This is what the story needed."

But Teena was already looking past him, her earth-sense tingling with something she didn't want to feel.

"We need to go," she said. "They're coming."

In the distance, the sound of helicopters.

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End of Chapter 25

## The Confrontation

The helicopters came from the south, three of them, unmarked, moving in formation toward the treatment facility.

"How did they find us?" Meen demanded as they ran for cover.

"It doesn't matter," Cross said. "What matters is getting out."

But there was no obvious exit. The facility was fenced, surrounded, and the helicopter teams were already deploying around the perimeter. Whatever route they had used to enter was now blocked.

"The river," Tal said. "If we can reach the water..."

"We'd still have to get past their cordon."

"Not if I give us cover."

She turned toward the Hudson, extending her hands, reaching for the massive volume of water that flowed past the facility. The river responded, rising, forming a wall of fog that spread across the treatment plant like a living thing.

"Go!" Teena shouted to the witnesses. "Get out while they're focused on us!"

The camera crew hesitated, then ran, carrying footage that would soon be broadcast across the world. The scientists followed, and the council member, all of them fleeing toward the facility's main entrance while the fog provided cover.

"What about us?" Meen asked.

"We fight our way out." Teena pressed her hands to the ground. "Together."

They moved as a unit, the formation they had practiced in the farmhouse, their powers coordinated to maximum effect. Elle created wind barriers that deflected the operatives' approach. Meen generated heat that made their equipment malfunction. Teena fractured the ground beneath their feet. Tal surrounded them all in a cocoon of water and mist that obscured them from targeting.

They reached the river's edge and found the way blocked.

Dr. Helen Vance stood on the concrete embankment, flanked by operatives, watching them with an expression that mixed admiration with something like regret.

"That was quite a demonstration," she said, her voice carrying clearly despite the chaos around them. "I wondered if you would ever reveal yourselves publicly. I'm almost proud of you."

"Let us go," Teena said. "This is over. The footage is already out, the witnesses are gone, the story will be published. You can't suppress it anymore."

"I know." Vance's expression didn't change. "I'm not here to suppress anything."

"Then why?"

"To offer you a choice." She gestured, and her operatives lowered their weapons, not standing down but no longer actively threatening. "You can continue running, fighting, living as fugitives from an organization that will never stop hunting you. Or you can come with me, willingly, and let me help you understand what you are."

"Help us? You've been hunting us for months!"

"I've been trying to protect you. The world isn't ready to know about people like you. What you just did, the demonstration, the footage—it's going to create panic. People are going to be afraid, and afraid people do terrible things."

"So you want to hide us? Lock us away for our own good?"

"I want to teach you. Train you. Help you control abilities that are clearly powerful but not fully under your command." Vance's voice was earnest, almost pleading. "I've spent my entire life studying people like you. I know more about anomalous abilities than anyone alive. Let me share that knowledge."

Elle moved to the front of the group. Her hands formed careful, deliberate signs—not the rapid-fire communication she used with the others, but something slower, designed to be read. She pointed at Vance. Made a sign for mother. Then crossed her arms in front of her body—like us—and finally made a gesture like something crumbling, falling apart. She looked Vance directly in the eyes.

Your mother was like us. You let them destroy her.

Vance's composure cracked, just for a moment. "How do you know about that?"

"Cross told us," Teena said. "He told us everything."

"Samuel." Vance's eyes found the defector, standing with the girls, having chosen a side. "I should have expected this. You always were too sentimental."

"Not sentimental. Just not willing to keep pretending that what we've been doing is right."

The standoff stretched, both sides waiting, the fog swirling around them, the river rushing past.

"This is your last chance," Vance said finally. "Come with me now, and I promise you'll be treated with dignity. You'll have resources, training, a community of people who understand what you're going through. Refuse, and you'll spend the rest of your lives running from people far less sympathetic than me."

Teena looked at her friends—her family. Elle's hands were moving, signing something that only Meen could feel. Meen's expression was thoughtful, analytical, processing options. Tal was

focused on the river, maintaining their escape route, waiting for the signal.

"No," Teena said. "We're not your subjects. We're not your resources. We're people, and we're going to live as people, openly, in a world that knows we exist."

"The world will hate you."

"Maybe. But at least we'll be free."

Vance's expression hardened. "Then this conversation is over."

She raised her hand, and the operatives began to move forward.

"Now!" Teena shouted.

The river erupted.

Tal unleashed everything she had, drawing water from the Hudson in quantities that made the flood in Brooklyn look like a trickle. She had been warned. She knew the cost. But some things were worth paying for.

The water crashed over the embankment, sweeping away operatives, overwhelming defenses, creating chaos that not even Prometheus could have predicted.

Something inside her snapped—she felt it, the same dissolution she had experienced in Brooklyn, but worse this time, faster. The water was pulling her apart, absorbing her consciousness into its vastness. She was the river, was the harbor, was every drop of moisture in the air, and she was losing the part of her that remembered being Tal.

No. The thought was distant, fragmented. Come back.

Meen's hand found her arm, burning hot, an anchor of pain that cut through the dissolution. Elle was there too, wind wrapping around her like a cocoon, pressure that reminded her body where its edges were. And Teena—Teena was holding her other hand, steady and solid, earth-connected.

Tal gasped, pulled herself back from the edge, felt her consciousness coalesce into something recognizably human.

In that chaos, the EleMenTs ran.

They plunged into the river, Tal's power protecting them from the current, carrying them downstream faster than any pursuit could follow. But her control was ragged, flickering—she couldn't hear the water the way she usually did, couldn't feel its patterns and pressures. She was moving it through sheer will rather than connection, and she knew that couldn't last.

Behind them, Vance stood on the ruined embankment, watching them go, her face unreadable.

The helicopter teams tried to follow, but Elle created wind shears that made flying impossible. The ground teams tried to parallel their course, but Teena sent tremors through the earth that blocked every approach.

They escaped.

Again.

But Tal collapsed the moment they reached shore, and this time she didn't wake up for two days. When she finally opened her eyes in the Connecticut apartment, the first thing she said was: "I can't hear the water anymore. It's just... silent."

The others exchanged worried looks. The silence might be temporary—a healing process, Cross suggested, the mechanism resetting itself. Or it might be permanent.

Either way, the cost had been paid.

But the footage was already spreading across the internet. The witnesses were already talking. And nothing would ever be the same.

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End of Chapter 26

## The Story Breaks

The story hit the internet before it hit the newspapers.

Lightfoot had prepared for this, had coordinated with his editors to release online first, maximizing impact before traditional media cycles could catch up. The headline was simple: **THE ELEMENTALS: TEENAGE GIRLS WITH IMPOSSIBLE POWERS HUNTED BY SHADOW ORGANIZATION.**

The footage from the treatment facility was undeniable. Multiple camera angles showed Tal raising water into the air, Elle creating visible wind currents, Meen generating heat that registered on thermal cameras, Teena fracturing concrete with a touch. The witnesses gave recorded statements confirming what they had seen.

The internet exploded.

Within hours, the story was trending globally. Every news network was covering it, every social media platform was discussing it, every corner of the digital world was grappling with the same impossible question: Could people actually do this?

Prometheus tried to respond. They released statements calling the footage fake, the witnesses manipulated, the entire story a coordinated hoax. But the denials rang hollow against the weight of evidence, and each attempt to discredit the story only drew more attention to it.

The girls watched from a new hiding spot, an apartment Lightfoot had arranged in Connecticut, far from the chaos they had created.

"They're calling us the ElementAls," Meen said, scrolling through her phone's screen reader. "With the capital A-L. It's becoming a hashtag."

"ElementAls. I guess that works." Teena was at the window, watching the street below for any sign of pursuit. Old habits died hard.

Elle signed: People are scared. The comments... some of them want to help us, but a lot of them want to capture us, study us, hurt us.

"That was always going to happen," Tal said quietly. "Vance was right about that, at least. People fear what they don't understand."

"The 'OBEYS ME' thing isn't helping," Meen added. "A senator went on cable news this morning and quoted it as evidence we're 'declaring dominion over natural forces.' He's calling for emergency legislation."

"Good," Teena said, though her voice was harder than she felt. "We knew that would happen. Better they fear us openly than dismiss us quietly."

"But they also rally to defend things they see as persecuted. Listen to this." Meen held up her phone, her screen reader's synthesized voice filling the room. "There are protests starting. People demanding that the government protect us instead of hunting us."

It was true. The story had fractured public opinion, with some calling for the girls' capture and others demanding their protection. The debate was fierce, passionate, exactly the kind of polarized conflict that Teena had feared.

But within the chaos, something else was happening. Other people were coming forward.

"This one," Meen said, her voice suddenly sharp. "A woman in Oregon claims she can make plants grow faster. A man in Japan says he can see heat signatures without instruments. A teenager in Brazil says she's been hiding abilities for years."

"Could be attention-seekers," Teena said.

"Could be real. We proved it's possible. Now others might feel safe coming forward."

The implications were staggering. If there were more people like them, if they had been hiding for years or decades, if the story had given them permission to reveal themselves... the world was about to change in ways no one could predict.

Lightfoot called that evening, his voice tired but triumphant.

"The story is having more impact than I dared hope," he said. "Congressional hearings are being scheduled. The FBI has opened an investigation into Prometheus. Multiple countries are demanding explanations."

"And us?" Teena asked.

"That's more complicated. You're technically still fugitives—the original charges haven't been dropped. But public opinion is shifting so fast that the authorities are hesitant to move against you. No one wants to be seen persecuting the victims."

Elle grabbed Teena's arm, signed one word with fierce intensity: No. Then she held her phone up to the speaker.

"She says we're not victims," Teena said, but Elle was already typing, the message appearing on screen: NOT VICTIMS. SURVIVORS.

"I know," Lightfoot said. "But that's how the narrative is playing, and right now, that narrative is protecting you."

The conversation continued, covering logistics and next steps and the complex dance of public relations that would determine their future. When it ended, the girls sat in silence, absorbing the magnitude of what they had accomplished.

"We did it," Meen said finally. "We actually did it."

"We're not done," Teena said. "Prometheus is still out there. Vance is still out there. The system that let them operate is still intact."

"I know. But we took the first step. We showed the world what's possible. Everything else builds on that."

Elle reached out and touched Teena's hand, a gesture of connection that said more than words could.

Whatever comes next, she signed, we face it together.

"Together," Teena agreed.

"Together," Meen and Tal echoed.

Four girls, four elements, four parts of something larger than any of them alone.

The world knew about them now. The world would have to deal with them.

And the EleMenTs were just getting started.

. . .

End of Chapter 27

## Aftermath

Three weeks after the story broke, Teena sat in a conference room at the Herald's Manhattan offices, surrounded by lawyers, journalists, and representatives from three different government agencies.

The meeting was one of many she had attended since going public. Congressional staffers wanting briefings. FBI agents wanting statements. Lawyers negotiating the complex legal terrain of four underage fugitives who had become international celebrities—and who half the country wanted protected while the other half wanted imprisoned.

Beside her, Elle and Meen and Tal sat in similar postures of carefully maintained calm. They had learned to navigate these meetings together, each contributing what she could: Elle watching body language for signs of deception, Meen analyzing the logical structure of proposals, Tal counting exits and tracking patterns in the room's movement, Teena serving as spokesperson and strategist.

Cross had testified before a closed-door congressional committee, providing documentation of Prometheus's operations. His testimony had triggered investigations, but the wheels of government moved slowly. Arrests were beginning—mid-level operatives, a few corrupt officials—but the people at the top had lawyers, connections, time to prepare their defenses. The organization that had hunted them was wounded, not destroyed.

Vance had disappeared.

Her office had been raided, but she wasn't there. Her apartment had been searched, but she had already gone. Cross believed she had prepared for this possibility years ago, had maintained escape routes and hidden resources against the day when everything collapsed.

She was out there, somewhere, watching them. Waiting.

"The DA has declined to prosecute at this time," the lead attorney announced, shuffling papers. "Given the ongoing federal investigation and the questions about whether your actions constituted self-defense against an illegal conspiracy, the state has determined that pursuing charges would be premature."

"That's not the same as dropped," Meen said. "Declined to prosecute 'at this time' means they could change their mind."

"Correct. The legal situation remains... fluid. There are people in the government who see you as victims. There are also people who see you as threats—individuals with dangerous capabilities who attacked public infrastructure and caused millions in property damage. The debate is ongoing."

Teena felt the weight of that reality settle over her. They had won a battle, not a war. The story had shifted public opinion, but opinion was not law, and law was not safety.

"What about our foster placements?" Meen asked. "We're still minors. We still need somewhere to live."

"That's being negotiated. Several proposals are under consideration—a group residence with appropriate security, private guardianship arrangements with individuals who have been vetted by multiple agencies. But every proposal comes with conditions. Monitoring. Restrictions on power use. Cooperation with government research programs."

"Research programs," Tal repeated, her voice flat. "Like Prometheus."

"Not like Prometheus. Transparent, ethical, subject to oversight." The attorney paused. "At least, that's what they're promising. Whether you trust those promises is another matter."

"What about staying together?" Teena asked. "That's not negotiable. Whatever arrangement you make, we stay together."

The attorney exchanged glances with the government representatives. "That's... complicated. Some proposals would keep you together. Others argue that concentrating four individuals with your abilities in one location presents unacceptable security risks."

"Then those proposals are rejected."

"You may not have the leverage to reject them. You're minors. You're wards of the state. The law gives you limited authority over your own placement."

The words hung in the air, a reminder that for all their power, they were still children in a system designed to control children. They could move water and wind and earth and fire, but they couldn't move bureaucracy.

The meeting continued, covering details of legal protection, media management, and the countless other complications that came with being the most famous—and most controversial—teenagers in the world. When it finally ended, the girls retreated to a private room, away from the cameras and the questions and the relentless attention.

"This is our life now," Tal said quietly. "Public. Visible. Everyone having an opinion about what we are and what should be done with us."

"It's better than hiding," Teena said. "Better than running."

"Is it? Before, we had enemies who hunted us. Now we have enemies who want to regulate us, control us, use us. The cage is bigger, but it's still a cage."

Elle reached out and touched the window, then made a frame with her hands—bars. But she was smiling, just slightly. She pointed at her

own eyes, then at the imaginary bars. Now we see them. She made a gesture like grasping something. See them, fight them.

Elle took Meen's hand and traced the signs into her palm—bars, visible, fight. Meen nodded slowly. "She's saying at least now we can see what we're fighting. The bars are visible. That makes them something we can push against."

It wasn't hope, exactly. It was something harder, more realistic. They had traded one set of problems for another, had exchanged the terror of being hunted for the exhaustion of being scrutinized. But they were alive. They were together—for now. And they had options they hadn't had before.

"There are others," Meen said. "People with abilities, coming forward because of us. Some of them are asking for help. Some of them are being targeted by people who saw the story and decided to find their own 'elementals' to study."

"Prometheus wasn't unique," Teena said. "There will be others like them. Government programs, corporate interests, criminals who see opportunity."

"Then we help the ones who need help. We protect the ones who need protection. We build something that can push back against all of it."

"That's a lot of responsibility for four teenagers who can't even control where they live."

"We've never been able to control where we live. That's what being in foster care means. But we can control what we do with what we have."

They sat in silence for a moment, contemplating the future they had never expected to have. Behind them, the world was still churning with the revelations they had unleashed. Half of it saw them as heroes; the other half saw them as monsters. Ahead of them, challenges they couldn't yet imagine were waiting.

But they were together. And they were no longer invisible.

The window offered a view of Manhattan, the city that had been their battlefield, their prison, and might yet become their home. Somewhere out there, Vance was planning her next move. Somewhere out there, politicians were debating their fate. Somewhere out there, other people with abilities were hiding, hoping, afraid.

Elle raised her hand, and a gentle breeze stirred the papers on the table.

Meen reached out, and warmth spread through the room.

Teena pressed her palm to the floor, feeling the building's structure, its strength, its solidity.

Tal turned toward the window and rested her hand against the glass, near the pipes that ran through the wall. She used to feel them singing—pressure and flow and the vast circulatory system of the city. Now there was only silence, and the faint memory of what she had lost.

It might come back. Cross said the mechanism sometimes healed itself. But for now, she was just a girl who remembered being something more.

Four elements. Four girls. Four reasons to believe that the impossible was just the beginning.

The story wasn't over. They had won the right to exist publicly, but they hadn't won safety, hadn't won acceptance, hadn't won the freedom they deserved. That fight was just starting.

And the EleMenTs would be ready for whatever came next.

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End of Chapter 28

End of Book 2: The Invisible Hand

## Coming Next

### **The Reckoning**

*Book Three of The EleMenTs Series*

One year after going public, the EleMenTs have become symbols in a national debate about powered individuals. As Congress prepares to vote on the Protection and Integration Act—a bill that would require registration and monitoring of all people with abilities—the four teenagers are called to testify before the Senate.

Agent Vance, their old enemy from Prometheus, returns with shocking evidence: the registration program isn't new. It existed in the 1980s, and Meen's mother was one of its first subjects.

As the vote approaches, the girls uncover the truth behind Verdant Agricultural Holdings, the shell company funding both Prometheus and the congressional push for registration. The final battle isn't fought with elemental powers but with testimony, evidence, and the courage to face a nation that fears what it cannot control.

*The conclusion to The EleMenTs Series.*

## **Also by David Boles**

### **The EleMenTs Series**

Beneath the City (Book One)

The Invisible Hand (Book Two)

The Reckoning (Book Three)

### **Fractional Fiction**

The Dying Grove

The Inheritance

The Kinship of Strangers

### **Other Fiction**

The Wound Remains Faithful: A Tragedy of Nora

## **About the Author**

David Boles holds an MFA from Columbia University, where he studied dramatic writing at the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies. He is the founder of David Boles Books Writing & Publishing, established in 1975, and a member of the Dramatists Guild, the Authors Guild, and PEN America.

His work spans fiction, drama, and nonfiction, including the Fractional Fiction series and collaborations with Janna Sweeney on American Sign Language education. He is the winner of the Mari Sandoz Award.

He lives and works in New York City.

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