

IGNITE EMBER ASTOUND

Anchor for the Changed



AISLING
COUSINS

IGNITE EMBER ASTOUND

ANCHOR FOR THE CHANGED

BOOK THREE

AISLING COUSINS

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*Dad this one gets smutty, skip chapters 7, 17, & 22
Everyone else... enjoy ;)*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am a British author; as such, my books are written in British English and use slang from across the British Isles. Be prepared for lots of 'u's where you might not be used to them and 's' instead of 'z'.

Ignite Ember Astound is a why choose romance—meaning the main characters do not have to choose between love interests. It is the last in a series that must be read in order. Please only read if you have read Lost Ember Found and Claimed Ember Bound.

It does deal with some sensitive topics, which will be listed on the following page. If you have any triggers, please read these before reading the book. Your mental health is more important than pages read. If you have any questions, please reach out to me at author.aislingcousins@gmail.com

The book has been through several rounds of editing, but sometimes errors still slip through. If you find any, please reach out to me at the above email or on social media rather than reporting to Amazon, and I will get the errors fixed.

CONTENT NOTE

- Past Abuse
- Medical Trauma
- Violence
- Conspiracy to Force Pregnancy

If you feel anything has been missed from this list, please reach out and I will update it accordingly.

RECAP

Two hundred years ago, a solar flare known as The Change unlocked a new genome within a portion of the population. This new variant of humans could wield magical energies and, over time, became known as the Changed.

During the flare, natural disasters bombarded the Earth, shifting land masses and oceans until everywhere was connected as a single continent. Humans and the Changed needed to learn how to live together in a whole new world. The Changed created the Conclave as their ruling body, while the humans adapted the previous European Union and United Nations into a new overarching government. After ten years of conflict, an agreement was reached, and a type of peace settled across the world.

Ember is the first female Anchor since the last passed fifty years ago. As an Anchor, she can channel excess magical energies from her family and those she shares a bond with. She can then return it to the Earth, absorb it to enhance her own reserves, or pass it along to those of her Sept.

Anchors are prized and revered within Changed society. The governing Conclave sees her as a tool to wield, a possession to own in hopes of increasing their standing and power.

A human branch of scientists working under the umbrella of EvoGen also holds a great interest in the Changed and Anchors. They want to harness the magical abilities and find a way to unlock the genome in themselves.

Ember is a commodity to both the Changed Conclave and the humans of EvoGen. The two sides are coming together to achieve their goals, viewing Ember as dispensable collateral.

CHARACTER RECAP

Ember Ward: an Anchor raised by human scientists at EvoGen and experimented on after testing positive for magical energies. Her twin brother, Skylar, was rescued from the same fate when they were ten. At twenty-four, she embraced her chance of escape and was reunited with Skylar and her biological father, Sam. After the Conclave identified her as an Anchor, they surreptitiously tested Ember against their elite forces. This was in the hopes they would be called to her and she would enhance their abilities, making them stronger and more formidable. In the Conclave's mind, this was a way for her to aid them without procreating. However, when this failed and the discernment crystal identified her Sept as men the Conclave could not easily manipulate, they plotted to prevent the bonding. As a result, Ember finds herself back in the hands of EvoGen. Her elemental magic affinity is with fire.

Aaron Greene: the biological nephew to Tavon Greene-Ward. After the death of his parents, Aaron and his twin, Zane, went to live with their uncle and his bond-mates, Sam Ward and Nikolai Petrov-Ward. Aaron is a foodie and makes a conscious effort to help Ember reach a healthy weight once she arrives at the house. His nickname for Ember is Fire Sprite or Sprite. His elemental magic affinity is with earth.

Zane Greene: Aaron's twin brother and biological nephew to Tavon. He's quieter than his brother, and knits to keep his hands busy. He knitted Ember a thick, oversized, chunky wool blanket she sought comfort with while being tested on in the Conclave's labs. His nickname for Ember is Peanut. He has a mild addiction to coffee. His elemental affinity is with air.

Klaus Becer: a Changed classmate at the Institute, second-ranked in the year after Skylar. A rivalry between them extends to Aaron and Zane too. Son of Jermaine Becer, the lead Representative of the Conclave. Klaus does not agree with his father or the other representatives' way of ruling and voiced this at his discernment ceremony. Ember was identified as his Anchor, and he became her first bonded. Their union disproved the rhetoric from the Conclave that bondings can only occur in the bonding caves. His nickname for Ember is Freckles, and his elemental magic affinity is with water.

Vertus Irfan: the previous head of the Shadow-Stalker unit and Commander in the Conclave military. He discovered Ember while undercover within EvoGen. While there, he identified her as his Anchor; a brief relationship developed until he was reassigned. He went rogue, disobeying orders to free her from the human scientists. After punching a Conclave representative, he was arrested. Ember agreed to testing in the Conclave's labs to free him. He is now setting up a private company to help those whose cases slip through the gaps of traditional policing. His nickname for Ember is Little Phoenix. His elemental affinity is with shadows.

Atticus James: an Instructor at the Institute, training Ember and her classmates in combat and defence. He places an emphasis on training the female students in offensive magic going against tradition and pushing their society a little closer to equality. He was also a major in the Conclave military but was promoted to commander after Vertus' arrest, and is now head of the Shadow-Stalker unit. He bonded with Ember during a dream, which was thought to be impossible. His nickname for her is Pol.

Helios: a doctor within the Conclave who was in charge of the week-long testing Ember agreed to in order to save Vertus. He caused a stir when he revealed himself as Chum, half-Changed, half-human, at Ember's discernment ceremony when he was called to her Sept. His magic—while limited to healing—is unmatched. There is nothing he has encountered that he was unable to cure. He is a member of the motorcycle club, Hounds of Charon.

Skylar Ward: Ember's twin brother, rescued from EvoGen and has spent the last fourteen years since training to qualify for the elite Conclave military's Shadow-Stalkers so he could locate and rescue his sister. His nickname for Ember is Pipes because of her powerful singing voice. Ember's childhood nickname for him was La-La. His elemental magic affinity is with water.

Samuelson (Sam) Ward: the biological father to Ember and Skylar. A lawyer for the Changed, also works with the Conclave.

Nikolai Petrov-Ward: a bond-mate to Sam. Lieutenant General for the Conclave military.

Tavon Greene-Ward: a bond-mate to Sam. Uncle to Aaron and Zane. He is The Conclave's head adjudicator, testing those of Changed descent for magical capabilities.

Sketch: President of the Hounds of Charon motorcycle club. He is Helios' identical twin brother but is covered in tattoos, unlike his brother. He is also Skylar's bond-mate.

Rui Nishimura/Ghost: a Changed classmate and friend of Skylar, Aaron, and Zane. He is the vice president of the motorcycle club Hounds of Charon.

Cloud: Rui/Ghost's identical twin minus their hair. Cloud's hair is white while Ghost's is black. He is also a member of the Hounds of Charon.

Dominic (Dom) Carmichael: the lead scientist with EvoGen who led the experimentations on Ember, trying to unlock the secrets of the Changed's powers. Assumed dead by the population at large, though, is being held by Doctor Helios.

Royce: an old school friend of Atticus' who owns a bookstore, where Ember and Atticus went for their first date and shared their first kiss.

Anya: the human cook for the Wards. Married to Keryn.

Keryn: the human housekeeper for the Wards. Married to Anya.

Stephanie (Steph) Carmichael: (deceased) was the human surrogate who carried and birthed Ember and Skylar. After the pregnancy confirmation, she fled so her husband could use the twins in his tests for EvoGen.

Jermaine Becer: Lead Representative of the Changed Conclave and Klaus' father. He wants his son to follow in his footsteps and join the Conclave and refuses to hear Klaus when he states that's not what he wants.

Lydia Chadwick: Representative of the Changed Conclave. She positions herself close to Jermaine Becer and has made no secret of her feelings for him. Her son, Mason, was one of Klaus' friends prior to him meeting Ember. While the Conclave is determined to see Ember and her Sept reproduce, Lydia is more obsessed with the idea than most.

Keith Dixon: Representative of the Changed Conclave, and Jermaine Becer's right-hand man. He escorted Ember to Klaus' discernment ceremony and took as keen an interest as Representatives Becer and Chadwick regarding Helios healing Ember's infertility.

CHAPTER I

ATTICUS

I can't help but think about how tonight is different. In a matter of moments, I'll enter the bonding caves for the official ceremony. Despite already being bonded to Ember, our union isn't yet legal.

My finger glides along the top of the high collar of my sherwani, tracing the delicate embroidery. The formal wear should be something I'm used to after all the pompous ceremonies and dinners I've attended as part of the Shadow-Stalkers. Tonight, the traditional outfit is constricting, probably because of what's to come. There is a great likelihood that I'm about to witness my former students naked and in compromising positions. I won't lie and say that's not a discomfoting prospect.

I always knew I would share any female destined for me. The knowledge there would be some level of an age gap played on my mind more than the intimate sharing. The fates and crystals blessed me with Ember, though. We're not even five years apart... but our life experiences differ greatly. I was always worried about being fifteen or more years older than my bonded. Is Ember any different? Given how sheltered she was, her contact with people who genuinely care and have her best interests in mind has been... limited. Academically, her knowledge and understanding exceed expectations, but socially? I worry she won't stand up for herself against us. Her past with EvoGen didn't allow her to ask questions, push boundaries, or experience interpersonal comfort without strings attached. It's something we all need to keep in mind until she progresses more with her therapy and healing.

Though, with how our society views and treats women, is she that different from those raised solely in our world. I've always wanted to see Changed women achieve more. For them to be given more opportunities than they've historically been allowed. But with Ember, I want—no, need her to be comfortable pushing back, defining her boundaries and sticking to them. Ember has shown signs of having a fiery disposition, and when she doesn't apologise for it, that's when I'll lose my trepidation over the power imbalance in our relationship.

“What is taking so long?” Helios grumbles, running a hand through his red hair as he paces beside the cave's entrance. “We should've been called through by now.”

“Maybe.” With a resigned sigh, I tilt my head back, resting it against the rough-hewn stone wall of the cave. “The representatives are probably trying to convince her she's rushing things. They don't want our Sept complete, for reasons yet to be unveiled.”

Vertus scoffs, and I glance over at my old commander and friend. “At least one reason is pretty clear. They want us to procreate so our power lines don't die out. What's so special about us that we *have* to father children? And why stop us bonding with Ember? Even if she can't have children.” He shakes his head. “It's another power play. An attempt to control her and us. Why they're going to this level of effort is the mystery.”

“I'm an only child. No mystery for me.” Klaus shrugs one shoulder. I straighten and look over at him in time to catch the movement and the twist of a sneer on his lips. “My father is under the illusion I'm going to follow in his footsteps. Apparently, telling him that's not what I want isn't effective in getting the message across.”

“You're already bonded to her anyway,” Aaron points out. “Same as Atticus. Not much your dad can do about it now.” The large man shifts his weight from foot to foot. An air of nervousness drifts from him as he moves his gaze back to the cave entrance. I don't know where his or Zane's relationship with Ember stands, but I know both well enough to dismiss the

notion they're here out of a sense of obligation. Does he think Ember is bonding them purely because the crystals identified them as hers? Surely he knows her better than that? Their romance may be newer due to both parties thinking of Skylar's feelings before their own, but it's clear there's an attraction between them. The conversation continues before I can piece together a delicate way to question his nerves.

"You're forgetting Representative Becer had a suggestion for that while Ember was staying at my lab," Helios says, his lips thinning as anger flashes behind his eyes. "He wants her to allow her Sept to have children with other Changed females. You each get a side piece to raise children with."

"What the fuck?" Klaus turns and stares at Helios. "That was a serious suggestion?"

Helios hums, staring into the depths of the cave. "Yes. Hence why I brought it up when we got approval to use the caves today. Ember looked like she was going to be sick when he mentioned it. The depressing part is, I think she'd agree if she thought it's what any of you wanted."

A sour, bitter taste burns the back of my throat as nausea sweeps through me, and my lip curls. I have no desire to have relations of a romantic or sexual nature with anyone other than Ember. If in the future she expresses an interest in motherhood, I don't think I'd be opposed. We can be parents without a blood tie; even if a child was biologically hers, it wouldn't necessarily be mine. One woman and six men—odds are against me fathering her children. Besides, despite both human and Changed society having a heavy emphasis on procreation, I don't share the sentiment. I will be happy if our family remains the seven of us. It's something we should all discuss, but societal pressure shouldn't be something that influences Ember's decision.

"Well, I don't!" Klaus echoes my thoughts on the matter as he glares at Helios. A tic forms in his clenched jaw as his nostrils flare. He glances away, staring at the crystal-lined wall, and takes a deep breath. "Kids don't interest me. If you all want kids, that's something you can discuss with Ember after you bond." Klaus crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm

not a paternal person. The fact my father is pushing so hard. That he'd disrespect the bond between an Anchor and her Sept?" He shakes his head. "It just makes me want to rail against him harder. Not just him, all of them. The way they treat the females we have is wrong. It's messed up they're so confident in their every word being followed without question that they think they can mess with something as sacred as bondings. They want us to cheat on our Anchor, for what? Kids that may or may not turn out to be strong? It can't be about producing more Anchors because Ember's genetics wouldn't be involved." His lips twist in a grimace and then he turns away from us. "I hate that I'm related to him. The whole lot of them are corrupt and deserve to be overthrown."

"Probably not the best location to say something treasonous, Klaus," I admonish, though not unkindly. "No one is disagreeing but look where we are."

"We can't make decisions about kids without Ember." Zane speaks up, pushing away from where he's been leaning against the wall. "Four of us still need to complete the bond, and then we'll have time to discuss it. We'll have new magic levels to adjust to. We've barely begun living together. Any hypothetical kids are a long, long way off."

"I agree. All of that can wait a day or two. I'd say longer, but after tonight, the pressure from the Conclave will only increase. We have a leave of absence from the Institute—" Helios' phone interrupts the conversation.

As he answers, a spike of apprehension crashes through me, drowning out any other thoughts. My blood runs cold as though a million icy daggers are piercing my skin, and adrenaline fires through my system. My magic jumps to the surface, begging to be used. The need to defend and protect overwhelms my senses, but why? There's no threat here. Or is there?

I glance over at Klaus as the racing beat of my heart smothers all other sounds in the tunnel. Sweat beads across his forehead, and his blue eyes connect with mine, the realisation hitting us at the same time. The soft glow of the crystals lighting the cavern path blur as true fear grips me.

“Ember.” Our Anchor’s name leaves our lips in a hushed whisper right before pain rips through my limbs. I grunt and fall to one knee, panting through the current of pain.

“Klaus?” Aaron calls out, and footsteps pierce through the haze of panic consuming me.

“Atticus?” Zane’s strong hands grip my biceps, hauling me back to my feet. I shake them off when I find my balance, then charge through the sound barrier and into the bonding cave’s central chamber.

“Ember!” My feet pound against the ground, churning up the soft moss covering the pathway. Clods of green mix with the soil, and I’m distantly aware of the others racing behind me as the *whomp whomp* of helicopter blades becomes clearer.

A sound that shouldn’t be here.

I knew the representatives gave in too easily to our request. We anticipated they would prevent us from cementing the bonds of our Sept, but this? A helicopter invading a sacred space, with the intention to do what? This clearly goes beyond disrupting the bonding.

“Ember!” I scream as a wave of despair threatens to overwhelm me. Gunshots pepper the ground in front of my feet, forcing me to stop. I summon a shimmering gold shield over my head, deflecting the second wave of bullets. Shadows pour out from every darkened crevice as Vertus joins me. They hover a foot above our heads, providing a modicum of cover while we assess the situation.

“What the fuck is going on?” Aaron asks, bewilderment stark in his tone. I wish I had an answer for him. “How did they get in here? The barrier—”

“Only covers the tunnel entrances, not the moon hole,” Vertus answers in a flat tone. It’s something we should have insisted be rectified. A stupid oversight on our part that could now cost us our Anchor.

“Ember?” Klaus calls out, searching the cavern for any sign of her.

But there's nothing. No glint of light hitting the beading of her lehenga choli. No glimpse of her gorgeous red curls. The floor of the cave is devoid of any presence other than our own. That can't be a coincidence, especially given the helicopter is ascending through the moon hole. We have to stop it from leaving, and my mind whirls with calculations, searching for the best way to safely ground them.

A roar of uncontained anguish and rage rips from Helios. A rock flies through the air but is nowhere near hitting the departing chopper.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Zane yells, tackling the good doctor behind me. "Ember's probably on that thing. Are you trying to kill her?"

"That *thing* also has Dominic Carmichael on board!"

My head snaps to the side at Helios' words. I want to question how he knows that, but there's no time. We've already wasted too much.

"Zane!" I shout to gain the other man's attention. "You're the best with air magic—"

"Don't even think about it!" Helios roars, a frenzied look taking over his face as he struggles against Zane holding him down.

"He's right," Vertus mutters. "Unless you hit it with perfect precision, it'll crash and burn."

I want to ground them in the safest way possible, but if they leave with Ember, her fate will be worse than a few possible broken bones.

"Think, AJ. Use your head. If that bird crashes, everyone inside dies. Helios is good, but I doubt even he can revive the dead." Clenching my jaw, I nod, acknowledging Vertus' words as he pulls back on the shadows, returning visibility.

"Well, we have to try something!" Klaus snarls, rubbing a hand over his chest where his mark to Ember is. The panic and fear from the bond mix with my own, amplifying them. Only my years of training are keeping me from being overwhelmed and irrational.

“The Institute still doing the ravine training mission?” Vertus asks.

I nod at the same time Aaron calls out, “I’m on it.” He pushes up his glasses and cracks his neck before reaching out to the helicopter. The would-be-abductors renew their gunfire, focusing on Aaron and Vertus who have their hands raised. I push more of my magic into the shield around us, deflecting bullet after bullet.

Vertus’ shadows cloud around the cockpit, obscuring the pilot’s view. The chopper sways, but they have an experienced pilot, so they maintain course.

Aaron pulls the edges of the opening of their escape route towards each other, closing the gap in agonisingly slow increments. We need assistance and to delay the helicopter long enough for Aaron’s plan to work.

“Klaus, find a way to get the others in here!” I order, thinking of the two Shadow-Stalkers we assigned to guard Ember before she entered the cave. Rui, or Ghost, I suppose I should call him, and his brother, Cloud, were also there. They’ll be able to help. Klaus thankfully doesn’t argue and sprints to the opposite entrance. Though, if the six of us can’t save our Anchor, do we even deserve her?

Vertus grunts, stumbling backwards as his shadows dispel. “They have a fucking Changed on board.”

I snap my gaze back to the helicopter, scanning the hold for any sign of the traitor aiding Dominic in stealing away my Pol. If I can pinpoint them and direct my energy to attacking them personally, they won’t be able to counter the others’ magic.

Helios finally pushes out from under Zane and grabs another rock, hurling it towards the helicopter. His frustration is palpable, and I don’t envy the half-Changed male. He doesn’t have the magic the rest of us do, and while his healing is second to none, it’s not helpful in this situation.

“Continue with your futile endeavour, and your precious Anchor will be the one to pay the price.” A disembodied voice

echoes in the cavern. “Shoot us down, block us in, and I’ll slit her throat before we hit the ground.”

“And I’ll heal her!” Every muscle in Helios’ body is tense and rigid as he clenches his jaw and fists. “Bring them down. I can heal her from—”

“Not from death, you can’t,” Aaron snaps, losing his concentration on the rocks.

The helicopter rises, climbing higher out of the cave and taking Ember with it. My magic flares, surging to the surface, and I drop the shield. With a flick of my hand, I send a tracking spell to the tail boom.

“We’ll find her,” I tell the others. “And when we do, Dominic Carmichael will wish he was back in Helios’ lab.”

CHAPTER 2

EMBER

Gunshots fade in the distance, and Dom's voice rings out, amplified by magic or some human device; I'm unsure which. Before he finishes uttering the first word, I know it's my Sept he's addressing. They know someone higher up in the Conclave is working with Dom, and possibly EvoGen. They'll rescue me. Somehow.

Dom's threats send a chill racing down my spine. Trapped in this crate, I can't see anything, and the suppressor cuffs hinder my ability to feel the bond with Klaus and Atticus. There is the faintest trickle as their emotions spike.

Their reactions are instantaneous and reassure me they won't abandon me. I focus on their anger, using it to fuel my own and keep the fear at bay. What was supposed to be a happy day has been twisted and stolen like so many others because people like Dom and the representatives can't leave me be. They don't see me as a person and only see me as a tool, a commodity to be used for their own gain.

My head thumps back against the wooden enclosure as frustration and resentment course through me. This isn't meant to be happening. I should be in the arms of one or more of my Sept. We should be cementing our bonds, strengthening the foundation stones of our relationships.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

I should never have let my guard down. It was foolish to think tonight would go our way. When the representatives kept

insisting on the archaic tradition of separate entrances, it was obvious something would happen.

We knew to be cautious, suspicious of those in power. Seeing Dom standing in the centre of the bonding cave was a shock. Him being here wasn't a variable we considered.

A failing on our part.

A current of annoyance and disappointment with myself courses beneath my other emotions. So many feelings swirl together. My mind is a vicious vortex, threatening to pull me under.

How could we fail to realise once Dom escaped Helios' grasp, he would be a threat to me. To our Sept. It was foolish to not consider he'd broker an alliance with the Conclave, or at least one representative.

Why did we never question or look into his disappearance from Helios' lab. Sitting in this box, hindsight makes everything shift into focus. Puzzle pieces fall into place. We were stupid not to realise someone at the Conclave helped him.

And now I'm back in his clutches. Panic claws at my throat, but I swallow it down, refusing to let the situation overwhelm me. If the Conclave and EvoGen are working together... Well, that doesn't bode well for my immediate future.

On their own, they've each pushed me to the brink of what my mind and body can handle. The possibilities of what they'll inflict if I don't get out of this crate are too harrowing to consider.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I strain to hear any sound beyond the rotating blades keeping us airborne. But there's nothing until the crate shifts and the sensation of rising lands like a boulder in my stomach.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes, allowing the resignation of my immediate future to settle over me like a heavy blanket. This time, though, I have the reassuring

knowledge that Vertus and Helios have found me at EvoGen facilities in the past. I know they can do it again.

Unlike before, however, they won't be the only ones working on getting me free. EvoGen trained me to be a weapon. Atticus and the Institute have only added to that education. But being with my family, making friends, and meeting my Sept has all had an effect too. My confidence and understanding of my self-worth have grown. I'm not the same meek girl I was when Dom last had me at his mercy. They don't know I'm bonded to two of my Sept already, nor the power boost that connection has given us.

Nodding gently to myself in the darkness, the fear and panic fades as I accept I am so much more than the girl either side expects. They may have some idea of what I'm capable of, but this time, I have more to live for. To fight for. Vertus calls me his phoenix, and I will rise from the ashes of whatever hell Dom has planned. If the guys can't rescue me, then I'll rescue myself.

I just need to know which facility they're taking me to. The best way I have to gauge that is to count the passage of time. Dull and monotonous but necessary if I'm going to find my way back home.

Unless I use music to track the time. I know the length of my favourite songs, and singing quietly to myself will be easier than counting seconds.

If the men on board are talking, their words don't reach me. There's nothing to help me discern where we're heading. But if I can't hear them, they're unlikely to hear me. Surrounded by the inky black darkness of the crate, I tap my feet and nod as I whisper-sing, letting the music soothe the frayed edges of my soul. Fifteen renditions of four-minute songs hit the hour mark. With each hour that passes by my count, I mark it with the flick of a finger.

One. Flick.

Two. Flick.

Three. Flick.

Halfway through my thirteenth song of this round, the air pressure shifts and my stomach drops as we descend. My timings might be wrong, but despite the accuracy, three hours and fifty minutes flight time is not an insignificant distance. I won't get back home on foot.

Once the rotor blades stop spinning, sounds of movement and conversation filter through the wooden slats of my prison. The crate sways as it is lifted from the helicopter, and then it's dropped to the ground. The sudden motion jars me in a way that makes my teeth ache, the metallic taste of blood floods my mouth, and I hiss at the sharp sting of pain that accompanies it.

The crate lid creaks as it opens, letting in tendrils of blinding sunlight and an icy breeze. With a wince, I turn my head to the side, closing my eyes and pleading to a deity that likely doesn't exist to save me. If anyone listened to my pleas, they would have answered long ago.

Pain sears through my limbs as hands grip under my arms and haul me from the box. I don't fight. What's the point? The suppressor cuffs hold my magic hostage. It's merely a flicker of a flame deep inside, unable to do anything to keep even the cold at bay. The sooner they drag me inside, the sooner I can hopefully get warm again. Besides, if I somehow get free, I have no idea where I am in the world, or which direction home is. Though, with how bright the sky is, we've likely travelled in an easterly direction and crossed at least one time zone.

Their grip tightens, probably with the expectation I'll fight them on some level. But I can be defiant in more ways than striking back. With conscious effort, I force every muscle to relax. They want to manhandle me, then they can do so with no help from me.

"She's like a wet noodle," a gruff, familiar voice complains as he continues to haul me out of the crate while I stay limp, forcing him to manoeuvre my deadweight. Though, even with the heavy beading and embroidery of my lehenga choli, I'm not a substantial mass to move, just simply awkward.

“Aren’t you one of the Changed? Use your magic to move her,” another voice says, dismissing Trex’s, the Changed nurse from Helios’ lab, complaints. “Oh, and don’t drop her off the roof. Your representative and Dr Carmichael won’t appreciate losing their most promising subject.”

Squinting my eyes as they adjust to the brightness, I try to discern where they’ve brought me. Early morning sunlight glares off the white-capped mountains surrounding the rooftop helipad. The frigid air bites my exposed skin. It’s too cold to have my stomach and lower ribs exposed.

“Come on,” Trex grunts as he drags me farther from the crate. “You have legs. Use them for something other than spreading.” He gives a humourless snort. “Though you’ll be doing plenty of that if Chadwick gets her way.”

An icy trill of trepidation runs along my spine, and I swallow the fear rising to the surface at his words. I remind myself my Sept know what’s happened. They know Dom took me, and they’ll be searching for me. The cuffs and distance are dampening the bond I have with Klaus and Atticus; it won’t lead them to me. It doesn’t need to though. Helios is obsessive enough he’ll likely have tried to chase the helicopter from the roads. He won’t rest until I’m back in his arms, and I don’t think the others are that different. They’re simply better at masking it. We’re still exploring and growing into our relationships, but each of my Sept are good men. They will come for me, and until they find me, I can either play along and be the good little test subject EvoGen and Dom want, or I can fight back. Not physically or magically, the suppressor cuffs and pheromone conditioning hinder those choices, but mentally.

I’m not the girl I was when Dom last had me in his clutches. I turn the thought into a chant and bring memories of my achievements to the forefront of my mind.

The way Helios had me combining elements isn’t something the girl Dom knew would have even attempted. I combined not only two elements but three. And I did it successfully enough to counter an attack from Representative Becer.

The old me wouldn't have dreamed of encasing a Conclave representative's head in water. Nor would she have weaponised the memories of her childhood. I've done both of those things and so much more.

More snippets of my growth from the last few months flit across my mind as Trex half carries me into the elevator. The pheromone conditioning prevents me from harming Dom with my body or magic. Does it extend to my thoughts? If I can get free of the cuffs, could I use my memories against him?

It's a kernel of hope. The minutest beginnings of a plan, but that's more than what I had a moment ago.

The lift doors slide closed, and Trex releases his hold on me, jamming his finger against the floor buttons. With a lurch, we begin our descent. The male Changed nurse turns towards me, his lecherous brown eyes trailing over the skin left exposed by my lehenga choli. The outfit that felt so special when I put it on this morning now feels too revealing.

His breathing increases until he's practically panting as he watches me and licks his lips. "Don't look so scared, Ember. No one here is going to bite..." He tilts his head to the side, a smirk curling the corners of his lips. "Unless you beg for them to. I know I wouldn't be opposed."

The lift dings, signalling we've reached our destination and saving me from finding a response.

"Come on. Try walking this time." Trex grabs my arm in a tight hold, pulling me into the stark white and grey corridor. "First stop"—he looks back at me, that smirk taking on a sinister edge—"the showers."

Trex pushes open the door with his magic and hauls me across the threshold. My footsteps stagger as I try to maintain my balance, which would be much easier in trousers instead of the long embroidered and beaded skirt. He flicks a wrist towards the far wall. "Ticktock. You don't want to keep Representative Chadwick and the good doctor waiting, do you?"

Tiles cover the wall from floor to ceiling, with showerheads evenly spaced along the width of the room. No stalls. No privacy. I turn to look back at the Changed nurse. *He can't mean to watch me. Can he?*

Trex leans back against the door, blocking anyone from entering or me from leaving. His eyebrow quirks, a slow smile tilting the corner of his lip. "Do you need my help? Is that it?" He pushes off the door and takes two steps towards me before I find my voice.

"No. I don't need help. Unless you want to remove my cuffs?" I offer my wrists to him and widen my eyes in a doe-eyed expression.

"Not a chance." He snorts, not falling for my act. Not that I thought he would, but he disengages the middle connection so I can undress without assistance. Small mercies.

Turning my back to him, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. This is fine. He's trying to make me uncomfortable. He wants me on edge and off balance. I can't give him the satisfaction of succeeding. Besides, it's not like he's not seen parts of me before. When I was in Helios' lab, they catalogued every scar. Someone performed an internal examination. Trex could have been in the room on any of those occasions.

I'll shower, keeping my back to him. He'll see my butt. Maybe some minimal side boob. The full-frontal view, my tattoo, and the softness hiding the bones that used to protrude will never be for his eye. It's the best I can protect myself, so it will have to do.

"Are there clothes for me to change into?" I ask, refusing to look at him in case my mask of indifference slips.

He hums under his breath, and his steps echo in the tiled room. "I expected more of a protest."

"A naked body is a naked body. Different proportions, sure. And there will be differences depending on the individual's gender, but ultimately, there's nothing new. Once you've seen the parts of all sexes, there's nothing shocking about seeing it again. You're a nurse. It would be considerably

inappropriate for you to view all instances of nudity in a sexual light.”

“Or you don’t care because you’re an Anchor,” he counters. “You must be used to males seeing every inch of you. It’s a shame we couldn’t have held off collecting you. Footage of an Anchor bonding her Sept would be so profitable on certain areas of the web.”

“That would be one way to seal your death,” I muse on a mumbled breath. Images flash across my mind of the ways we could use our combined magic to enact reparations on Trex or anyone else who violated our bonding like that. Helios and Vertus especially would make Trex suffer, and anyone who watched it.

“My death?” He laughs, and I glance over my shoulder as he shakes his head.

“If you think Helios wouldn’t retaliate against you for posting something like that online, you weren’t paying attention to his nature.” The flash of fear and indecision in his eyes leaves me with immense satisfaction until he collects himself.

Trex runs his tongue over his teeth and narrows his eyes at me. “If that’s what you need to tell yourself to feel comfortable. Go ahead.” He flicks a hand at the showers. “Get washed. I’ll be right here. Watching.” He pulls a phone from his pocket, twirling it between his fingers, a sick smirk on his lips. “Once you’re done, I’ll be sure to dry you off real good with my magic.”

I suppress a shudder of revulsion, but that statement explains the lack of a towel. Swallowing down my trepidation, I remove my choli. After folding it carefully, I place it in a cubby to the left of the shower wall. Then repeat the process with the lehenga. All the while psyching myself up to remove my underwear.

Delaying will make Trex feel he’s won something, so I force myself to finish stripping. Keeping my back to him, I cross the room and turn on the first shower I reach. Icy water blasts out, stinging my skin, and I suck in a gasp.

This is only the beginning. I've endured far worse without hope of reprieve, though, so I know I can weather everything Dom and EvoGen inflict until I break myself free or my Sept rescues me. And until that day comes, I have enough happy memories to get me through anything Dom and EvoGen throw at me—reading with Atticus, watching movies with Aaron and Zane, eating ice cream with Klaus, and sparring verbally and physically with Vertus and Helios.

CHAPTER 3

KLAUS

“What do you mean, she’s gone? How the fuck can you have lost my sister?” Skylar demands the moment Atticus and Vertus finish recounting the day’s events to him, his bond-mate, Sketch, and his fathers.

“We didn’t lose her—” Vertus tries to explain.

“Really? So where is she? And if your answer is ‘we don’t know,’ then that means you fucking lost her!” Skylar glares at Atticus and Vertus. “You knew they were up to something. You knew the only reason they’d push that stupid archaic rule was because it benefited them—”

“She was never alone!” Zane yells, breaking Skylar off mid rant with the uncharacteristic outburst. “There were two Hounds and two Shadow-Stalkers with her the entire time. Once she passed into the bonding cave, she should have been with us. Don’t you dare put the blame on us for this, Skylar.”

“This is no one’s fault but Dominic Carmichael and those within the Conclave who aided him,” Sam states, cutting across the conversation. When Skylar opens his mouth again, Sam levels him with a glare. Aaron sucks in a deep breath next to me when Skylar doesn’t immediately back down. Father and son hold a silent battle of wills. It’s probably well overdue, but now isn’t the time for them to adjust to Skylar growing a backbone.

“My father will know something. Even if not about Ember’s abduction directly, he’ll know about Chadwick’s whereabouts,” I say, pulling attention back to the matter at

hand. “She has to be one of the main people involved. She was with Ember at the entrance, but when I went to get help from the Shadow-Stalkers, Rui, and Cloud, she wasn’t there. And no one has seen her since.”

“Have you spoken to him yet?” Tavon, Aaron and Zane’s uncle, asks. His shoulders sag as I shake my head.

“No. He’s dodging my calls. That’s not out of character for him, though,” I admit. “I’m going to go down to his office in the morning.”

“Why aren’t you going now?” Skylar demands. “You’re already bonded to her, right? Why are you even wasting time asking him shit? Just use the bond to find her!”

“If it was that fucking easy, Skylar, we would have done it! Do you think we want to be standing around here with our thumbs shoved up our arses, all the while Ember is suffering fuck knows what?” I clench my fists at my sides, trying to rein in my emotions. He might not have the best opinion of me, and that’s fair, given our history, but to think so little of Aaron and Zane... Even Atticus deserves better than the attitude Skylar is throwing out at us. “I can barely feel her!” I slam a fist against my chest. “We don’t have a location. We don’t have any evidence that EvoGen took her, or that the Conclave is working with them. You want to scorch the Earth until we find her? Well, so do we!”

“Enough!” Nikolai raises his hands, stepping between us. “This isn’t helping anyone. We’re all upset. Going ‘scorched earth’ is likely to do more harm than good at this point. We have no evidence as to who orchestrated her abduction. We have your word and nothing else.” He holds up a hand, halting the inevitable responses from the rest of us. “I believe you, I do, but we can’t go to the Conclave, the public, or the media with only your word. We all want Ember home. To do that, we need all the information possible *and* a location.” He turns his gaze to Vertus and Atticus. “We’re going to treat this like a typical hostage rescue. There hasn’t been a ransom, so we rule out monetary gain as a motive.”

“I think the motive is very clear, given who we know is involved.” Helios regards Ember’s family and our bond-group with a shrewd gaze. “Dominic, and by extension, EvoGen, want a Changed they can experiment on. Once word was out that a female Anchor had appeared, their interest in her would only have increased. The Conclave want superior and stronger Changed for the future generations. EvoGen has Ember’s eggs. It’s not a wild guess to theorise that the deal was made in exchange for those eggs.”

“It’s creepy when you go all clinical and detached like that. Just FYI,” Sketch, Helios’ twin, speaks up for the first time since everyone arrived.

“Thank you for that addition to the conversation, brother. Your insight, as ever, is astounding.” Helios rolls his eyes.

Sketch shrugs as Skylar paces behind one of the sofas. “If we know that’s what they’re going to do, we should leak it to the media—”

“Again, we have no proof. And if we did, what good would it do us? I’m not saying the public doesn’t have a right to know about the level of corruption.” Nik holds his hands out, palms up. “They do. But the most likely outcome is riots, looting. People will be scared at what the implications are for them. If the Conclave and EvoGen are so blatant about abducting an Anchor, who else will they abduct?”

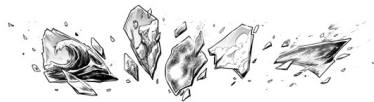
“There has been an increase of missing persons cases among the Chum,” Sam admits. He grimaces and glances at Helios and Sketch. “Sorry. That term is so common, I forget it’s been twisted into a slur.”

The two half-Changed dismiss his words. “Meh, Changed. Human. Mash them together and get Chum. It makes sense,” Sketch says. “We’ve been called worse.”

Atticus clears his throat and redirects the conversation. “I don’t think any of us would disagree with the prospect of seeing a governmental reform. However, I think to achieve that, we need Ember home. And to do that, we need a plan as well as intel. The tracking spell I attached to the helicopter dissipated. We know they had a Changed on board, and they

must have removed it. All I know is they were heading east. Which doesn't narrow locations down." Atticus removes his glasses and rubs a hand over his face. "Ember managed to dream walk once before. I'm hopeful she'll be able to do so again. Then she can give us details of her location," he states, returning his glasses to their perch on his nose.

"So one of us will always have to be asleep?" I ask and continue before he can answer. "We have no idea if she's in the same time zone as us. And there's what, twelve? Thirteen of them? We can't guarantee or predict when she'll be allowed to sleep." My observation ignites a new round of disagreements and voices talking over one another.



Representative Chadwick has vanished like a phantom in the night. No one has told me where she's gone, or how long she'll be away. My father hasn't answered a single one of my calls, and I've more than had enough. This isn't something I'm willing to let him brush aside.

The door to my father's office bangs against the wall. His assistant splutters protests I ignore as I stride up to the ornate desk that gleams like a mirror from the amount of polish it's absorbed. Slamming my hands down on the surface between the neat stacks of paper, I level my father with an icy glare.

"Where. Is. She?"

Jermaine Becer sighs and leans back in his overly cushioned chair. He can act as though he has all the time in the world, but I'm not leaving here without answers.

"I thought my silence on the matter made it clear, Klaus. I have no idea where your Anchor is. Honestly, I think you should be taking this as the blessing it is. Find another female Changed to bond with. One that can give you a future."

I glare at my father. Again, with this bullshit rhetoric that the only viable future is one where I have children. How many

times, and in how many ways can I tell him I don't want that before he listens? There is no one else for me but Ember. She's more than just my Anchor. She's a breath of fresh air. She lights up my life, moving it from storm-cloud grey to a fluorescent rainbow. Life without her wouldn't be worth living, which is why I'm here. No matter how long it takes, we will get her back. Our Sept will not rest until Ember is back in our arms. The tracker Atticus attached to the helicopter failed us, meaning our next best lead is Lydia Chadwick. And if anyone knows her whereabouts, it's my father or Representative Dixon.

"I'm not asking about Ember," I snarl and pull down the front of my jumper to reveal her mark burnt into my skin. Father's eyes widen at the sight, but I don't let him cut me off. This time, his ridiculous notion that I'll follow in his footsteps, join the Conclave, and become a parent have gone too far. "I'm already bonded to my Anchor. So there will be no other female. Ever. I belong to Ember—heart, body, and soul. I'm asking about Lydia Chadwick. Where is she?"

His brows furrow as his cool-blue eyes regard me with an air of confusion. "Why are you asking for Lydia?"

"Because she was the one with Ember at the entrance to the bonding caves. And she conveniently hasn't been seen by anyone since."

"That's your reasoning for barging into my office?" He huffs out a breath and straightens the cuff of his shirt, focusing on that tiny imperfection to his appearance before deigning to respond further. "Representative Chadwick has taken a short sabbatical with her family. You can schedule an *appointment* with her assistant. Though, might I suggest, instead of hounding Conclave representatives, you use your bond to locate your wayward Anchor?"

"Oh, yes. *Of course.*" I slap the palm of my hand to my forehead. "How silly of me." Dropping my hand, I lean over the desk until I'm encroaching on his side. "If that would return Ember to us, we would have her back already. The bond is being suppressed, and every instinct in my body is

screaming that Chadwick had something to do with what happened.”

“She probably got cold feet. Ms Ward was incredibly sheltered—”

“Cold feet wouldn’t have panic and fear racing down the bond.”

“Klaus. That’s exactly—”

“It wouldn’t have a helicopter in the cave. It wouldn’t have humans shooting at us with guns. And it damn well wouldn’t have included Dominic Carmichael!” I slam my palms down, and my father stares at me, his jaw a little slack. “All of which you would know if you ever answered your damn phone!”

Without a word, he pushes to his feet and strides to his office door. “Irena, hold my meetings. Something’s come up.” He closes the door on the poor stuttering assistant and returns to his desk. A small burst of magic has a second comfortable wing-backed chair appearing, and he sits in it, waving to the one beside me. “I think it’s time I listen to your account of events, rather than the report on my desk.”

Pushing aside the sensation I’m walking headfirst into a trap, I do as he asks.

He listens, not interrupting or showing any outward expression in response to my words. The lack of any reaction at all niggles at me. Why is his stoic, bland mask so firmly in place?

“It strikes me as odd that you changed your mind on approving our request to use the bonding cave after being so vehemently opposed to it. Add in how close you’ve always been with Lydia, and...” I shrug. “I’m sure you can see why I’m suspicious. From where I’m standing, it looks like you were in on it. Have Ember stolen away, and you remove the perceived obstacle in getting me to follow in your footsteps.”

He pushes to his feet, circling the chair, and heads to the dry bar in the corner.

“If I were to take a seat on the Conclave eventually, I don’t think you’d approve of me any more than you do now.”

“What makes you say that?” He doesn’t look at me, focusing instead on pouring himself two fingers worth of whiskey.

“I wouldn’t prevent those of mixed blood from having a discernment ceremony. I wouldn’t protect another representative to save face with the public. If I had suspicions of misconduct of any kind, I’d have it investigated. There should probably be a force whose sole purpose is to monitor the representatives. You’re not above the law simply because you make them.”

He watches me from the corner of his eye as he takes a long sip. Nodding slowly to himself, my father retakes his seat. “You have it all figured out then.” He waves a hand, encompassing his office. “Yet won’t step up and perform your duty. Your other fathers liked to talk in hypotheticals too, but they shirked the responsibility when the time came to act. There’s more of them in you than I had hoped.” He murmurs the last sentence into his glass.

“What do you mean?” I frown, studying his face. “They died in an accident, before Mum even got sick... What responsibility did they shirk?”

He blinks, his blue eyes meeting mine, and something shutters behind them. “Nothing.” He stands once more and brushes at an imagined crease in his shirt. “Your evidence of Lydia’s involvement is circumstantial at best. She’s away on Conclave business, which is more than I should be telling you. Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to get back to. Our society doesn’t run itself.”

Gritting my teeth at the blatant dismissal, I stand and turn to leave.

“Oh, and when you next visit your mother, don’t show her that disgusting fake mark. It will only upset her more.”

“There’s nothing fake about my bond with Ember. And how would you know what would upset Mum? You never visit her.” I don’t wait for his reply before storming out of his office. The door slams behind me, making poor Irena jump. I should apologise, but I have a representative to track. Lydia

Chadwick knows where Ember is, and I'm not resting until I find her.

CHAPTER 4

HELIOS

The elevator to the Conclave labs beeps and flashes red as I send another blast of my signature to it. Footsteps approach behind me. Taking a deep breath, I steal my emotions for the forthcoming interaction. It wouldn't do to unleash my pent-up wrath on the wrong person. No, it's best to hold out until those responsible are the ones in the direct path of my ire.

“Sorry, sir. The representatives ordered your access to the labs be revoked, err, given your status.”

“Is this their way of telling me I'm fired for being Chum?” I ask the security guard. Slowly, I turn my head to regard the nervous-looking male. He barely looks of age. Possibly a recent graduate from the Institute, green around the gills. Thus, he should be easy to manipulate. “There are personal belongings I wish to collect. Would you be able to escort me?”

The pathetic fool's shoulders sag with obvious relief. With a nod, he steps forward and activates the lift with a swipe of his hand. “Of course, sir. Er, thank you for understanding, sir.”

I wave off his comment. “Please, no ‘sir.’ If I'm no longer a doctor here, then I'm simply one of the masses. No need for an honorific.” I force a smile, years of practising medicine have allowed me to perfect a pleasant expression on demand, regardless of my true thoughts and feelings.

He bobs his head once more and is blissfully silent as we wait for the lift to arrive and take us down to the basement labs. Neither of us says a word as we descend into the hidden depths of the Conclave's headquarters. The only rooms lower

than the labs are the cells on the other side of the building. I wonder if the representatives will attempt to make me a resident of theirs before I leave? And whether I'll deserve my stint in prison or not. The likelihood is I will, but I hope they'll attempt to lock me in a marginally more pleasant cell than they gave Vertus. Any prolonged stay here will only hinder our efforts to rescue Ember, so for now, I suppose I should be on my best behaviour.

No sooner has the thought crossed my mind, than the elevator doors open, revealing a small contingent of black Conclave military uniforms and Representative Dixon.

“Seize him! Under subsection nine of the Misuse of Magic Act, you, Helios...whatever your true name is, are found guilty of impersonating a Changed. And of hindering the abilities and health of your patients while practising healing magic and medicine without a licence.” Dixon rattles off his little list, and I wait for him to finish.

“I have a licence. It's on record, and a copy is in my office. I also never claimed to be a full-blooded Changed. You did no due diligence on my parentage, not even so far as to *ask* me if both my parents were Changed.” Scanning the group before me, I fight a smile upon realising the backup Dixon brought are none other than the Shadow-Stalkers. They have a job to do and procedures to follow, but I'm aware there's no love lost between them and the representatives. Something to bear in mind and possibly use to my advantage. “If you'll excuse me, I have some personal effects to collect. Though, by all means, feel free to accompany me to ensure I only take that which is mine.”

“You're taking a very calm approach to losing your job, *Mister* Helios.” Dixon folds his arms over his chest. His lips lift into a smug smile. The pompous fool genuinely thinks he's the cat who's caught the canary.

I bark a laugh, throwing my head back and shaking it. Dixon's words shouldn't surprise me, especially the snub of not calling me doctor. “Representative, you met me at the lift doors with a contingent of security. Looking more closely now, I can see the Shadow-Stalker emblem. Exactly how did

you envision I would act since you felt the need to have elite soldiers as your guards?”

The portly man’s face flushes puce, whether from embarrassment or anger, I’m not sure. I’d bet it’s a mixture. “After an investigation into your practices, it is clear you are an unhinged male. We’ve had numerous complaints lodged against you from former assistants. Allegations of a hostile work environment, bullying, and harassment. There was no predicting how you would respond to the end of your employment. Despite simply being a Chum, you have caused havoc and disruption to the order of Changed society—”

“To Changed society? Little ol’ me, a disruption to an entire society’s system?” Crossing my arms over my chest, I exaggerate, peering down my nose at the representative. “And how have I done that?”

“You stole a spot in the Anchor’s Sept! And most heinously, you failed to fix her so she can be bred!”

Rage courses through me, and without thought, my hand lashes out, closing around his throat. In a blink, I have Dixon pinned to the wall. His toes scrape the ground as the Shadow-Stalkers shout demands for me to release him. Yet no one reaches for their magic. How peculiar.

“Ember is *mine*. She always has been, and she always will be. The Earth will wither and die like the plant infected by a blight at my feet before I allow you to treat her like a broodmare.”

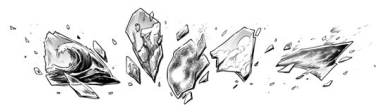
“You’re. Too. Late,” Dixon gasps out around my hand, confirming what I already suspected. At this point, I’ll be more surprised if we discover a single sitting representative isn’t aware or involved in Ember’s disappearance.

My nostrils flare as I clench my jaw while fear grips my heart. Before releasing my hold on the representative, I send a tendril of probing magic into his body. With a coaxing nudge, it locates every malignant cell in his body and encourages it to multiply. I may not be able to prove in a court of law the part he’s played in Ember being separated from me, but that doesn’t mean I won’t have justice.

“We shall see, Representative. Though, thank you for confirming that the Conclave worked alongside EvoGen and Dominic Carmichael in setting up Ember’s abduction.” I wave a hand behind me at the Shadow-Stalkers and my escort. “In front of witnesses too.” Stepping back, I straighten my clothes and the representative’s blazer. “Now, then, shall we finish this little tête-à-tête at my old office and lab? I would like to collect my belongings and return home.” The rest of the Sept will undoubtedly be interested to learn that Chadwick wasn’t working alone. Dixon hasn’t offered me any leads to Ember’s whereabouts yet, but the day is still young. Once we have our Anchor home and safe, perhaps it will be time to do something about the Conclave and the blatant corruption flowing through them.

I pass by the Shadow-Stalkers and motion the security personnel who came down with me to open the doors. A smile curls my lips as Dixon demands an explanation for why the elite soldiers don’t apprehend me.

“Apologies, sir. There was a high risk of our magic hitting you or using Helios as a conduit to you,” the blonde one responds. I should make the effort to learn their names after this. “Also, sir, the last time we encountered you in a similar situation, you wrote me up for disciplinary action because you were, in fact, not in danger.” The door seals shut behind me, cutting off Dixon’s blustering response. Yes, I definitely need to make the effort to learn their names. Vertus and Atticus may be correct in claiming the Shadow-Stalkers as our allies despite who signs their paycheques.



Pulling up our driveway, I take a moment to appreciate how the split-level property wraps around the trees. Ember likened it to an elaborate treehouse rather than a home, but it’s ours. There’s a hollowness to returning with knowing she’s not here to greet me. After parking, I stare up at the stairs and balcony terraces connecting the five levels.

I've been part of the Changed world for years, and I'm still surprised with how quickly we completed the purchase for this place and moved in. The fact it came with furnishings helped, and once Ember's home, she can put her stamp on the upper pods. Until then, we're all working on making the house a space we're all comfortable in.

It's been a smoother transition than I expected. The majority of our focus is on finding a lead to Ember's whereabouts, but still, I anticipated we would lash out at one another with tensions high as we each worry about what she's being forced to endure. Instead, we're coming together in a strange familial way.

Climbing out of the car, I make my way into the ground-floor pod that has been renovated into offices for Vertus' new venture. His setup isn't what interests me today, though, and I descend the newly crafted stairs into the subbasement lab space Aaron recently finished excavating for me.

The soft glow from the magical light orbs gives the space an eerie quality. There's a vibe of a mad scientist's lair, similar to Frankenstein or Jekyll. If I can develop similar breakthroughs to them, I won't complain.

"Electrics will be hooked up to the mains tomorrow. We can bring the boxes down now, though, clear out the conference room for Vertus and his team." Aaron wipes his hands on a small cloth as he speaks, casting an appraising eye around the room.

"I have more in the car." When he and Zane look at me with confusion, I elaborate. "My equipment and papers from the office and lab at the Conclave. I am officially fired for having mixed blood."

"Huh, well, that didn't take them long." Zane tilts his head to the side. "Is that the reason they gave for firing you? Pretty sure Sam could put a case together for wrongful termination or something."

"I have no need to be there. Besides, the representatives are many things, but failing to cover themselves with suitable laws is not a flaw they have. I believe the official papers will

say I'm unqualified for the post. It's irrelevant. I only had the position because of Ember."

"And you'll have a lab here to work from instead." Aaron cleans his glasses before replacing them and looking around the room he's carved out for me. "Do we need to build in a cell or something? Will you make a habit of holding patients like Dom here? Or will all future patients be volunteering for your treatments?"

I pause, considering his question. It has merit. Ember was with EvoGen for twenty-four years; Dominic and Stephanie Carmichael won't be the only ones to have caused her harm. The silence stretches until both twins are staring at me.

"Seriously? You have to think about it that hard?" Zane asks.

"It's a question that deserves thought. But, no, I don't think patients like Dominic Carmichael will be brought here. I can use my lab at the Hounds compound for that. It will probably be individuals linked to them needing my attention. There's little need to expose Ember to them."

Zane and Aaron share a look, one I know well from being a twin myself. It's a look loaded with meaning. They're more soft-hearted than I am, possibly than Vertus and Atticus are too. That's something Ember needs, people to plan for her comfort. I know they were responsible for the knitted blanket and stash of snacks in her bag when she stayed in my lab. Ember is the calm to my storm, and the Greene twins are that for her. Or they will be once the bonds are complete.

Aaron sighs, pulling me from my musings, and nods to Zane.

"Well, that's better than having to plan for blood clean up regularly," Zane says and points up the staircase. "Need a hand bringing stuff down from the car?"

A warmth of acceptance fills me. Something I haven't experienced outside my inner circle within the Hounds. "Yeah, I'd appreciate that."

As we head up to the ground floor, I can't quite contain the smile curling my lips.

CHAPTER 5

VERTUS

Opening the door to the ground-floor pod, I lean against the frame, watching as the black Land Rover pulls to a stop. All four Shadow-Stalkers climb out, and Ellis lets out a low whistle as he takes in the property before turning to face me.

“When you said there’d be space for everyone, you weren’t kidding.”

“Why would I have been?” I wave him off before he can respond. “Never mind. We’ll do a tour a bit later. Ember claimed the first-floor pod for you four—if you join my venture, that is. We could do a lot of good, and we wouldn’t be limited to only helping Changed.”

“No pressure, huh?” Nox asks, tilting his head back. His lips move, forming numbers as he counts the levels. “The views up there must be amazing.”

“Yeah, the views were one of the selling points. Ember likes the reminder that she’s free...Well, was free.” I rub a hand over the back of my neck.

“She’ll be free again. You’ll find her, V, and if we can help, we will. You know that,” Ellis states, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Get her home, and then the real work will begin. Finding any other Changed or Chum who have been taken to further the humans’ thirst for magic. That’s what you’re wanting to do still, right?”

I nod in answer to Trey’s question. “Probably wouldn’t word it quite like that, but yeah.”

Footsteps sound behind me, and before I can step out of the doorway, Helios prods me in the back. Rolling my eyes, I move aside to let him, Aaron, and Zane pass. When the doctor notices my old team, his eyes narrow. *What's his problem now?*

“Are they here for you, or am I under arrest?” His icy tone and rigid posture as he adjusts his stance and flexes his fingers are more than enough to clue me into how serious he is.

“Why the fuck would you be under arrest? Fuck’s sake, Helios. What did you do now?” I run a hand through my hair. The half-Changed doctor is the biggest wild card in our Sept. Which is a role I envisioned filling. Not that I’m upset about losing it, but the male brings new headaches every day, it seems.

“Nope. Not here to cuff you or anything remotely like that. We are here to offer assistance in locating your Anchor, however,” Ellis clarifies and ruffles his blue hair. “Got a meeting room set up yet?”

“In a sense,” I hedge, throwing a quick glance in Helios’ direction as he and the twins unload his car. “It’s currently a temporary storage space for our resident doctor. Who apparently has even more boxes of shit to move in.”

“I wasn’t going to let it all go to waste in the Conclave’s basement when I can put it to good use here.”

Go to waste? Put it to good use? What the hell is he on about now?

“Go easy on the guy, Irfan. He lost his job today and somehow evaded being arrested after grabbing Dixon by the throat and slamming him into a wall,” Ristevski says, answering my unasked questions in his accented voice.

I’m disappointed I don’t experience more of a reaction to the news. It’s depressing I’d already subconsciously accepted that Helios would lose his job. The corruption and prejudice of the Conclave is so ingrained in me, I never thought to question it. They’re fools to fire him because of something beyond his control. So what if one of his parents were human? He’s still

the best healer ever recorded, and that's before completing the bond with Ember and boosting his powers.

"Which is weird if you think about it, right, Doc?" Nox says, pulling me from my thoughts as he raises his voice to make sure Helios hears him.

When Helios doesn't answer, simply grabbing a box and following the twins back into the pod, I sigh and wave Trey, Ellis, Ristevski, and Nox to enter.

"Why don't you enlighten us to your thought process, Nox? What was weird?" I ask.

"Yes, Blondie," Helios remarks with a pompous air. "Enlighten us."

"Well, this get-together sounds fun," Klaus states as he and Atticus join us.

"Gang's all here." Corporal Nox waves his palms and fingers in a jazz-hands motion. I fight the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose or whack the young air specialist across the back of his head. Sergeant Trey beats me to the latter. "Ow. Okay, okay. Getting to the point. Dixon was out of line with his comments. But there was no reason for him to say them other than to garner a reaction."

"Garner a reaction? Since when do you word shit like that?" Ristevski scowls at Nox at the same time Helios explodes.

"Of course I reacted! He was claiming Ember will be used as a broodmare. He's lucky I'm a patient male and didn't go for an immediate permanent solution to his utter disrespect."

There's something about Helios' wording that gives me pause. Whatever meaning is hiding in the phrasing eludes me though, and I make a mental note to circle back to it later. If he's done something that could cause issues for us retrieving Ember... Well, it's good thing he can heal himself.

"That's my point," Nox adds hastily. "He deliberately antagonised you but didn't order us to arrest you. And while we *technically* could have apprehended you with our magic

without risking him, there was nothing to stop him from using his magic to defend himself. But he didn't."

"What are you on about, Nox?" I ask, frowning at the fact I'm missing something he thinks is obvious.

"Why didn't Dixon use his magic to get himself free? Helios had him by the throat, pinned against the wall. Why didn't Dixon do something? He just took it. It doesn't make sense unless he doesn't have the magic to fight back—"

"A Conclave Representative without magic?" Klaus interrupts. "That's the theory you're going with?"

"Well, when you put it like that, it sounds dumb. But there has to have been a reason for him to react like a human. If he has magic, why didn't he use it? What did he gain?"

"Cancer," Helios answers in a voice devoid of emotion or inflexion, and without looking up from the lab equipment he's been putting back together since he brought the last box in.

"Err... Care to elaborate on that?" Aaron questions.

"Dixon had several cells presenting with stage one mesothelioma"—he glances over at us—"a form of lung cancer. Instead of healing him, I simply encouraged their growth rate."

"What the fuck? You can do that?" Nox blinks rapidly at my future bond-brother before pinning the doctor with a wide-eyed stare and gulping. "I thought your magic was *healing*."

"It is. I just simply chose to multiply the cells one would normally not."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and shake my head. That answers the question I had about his word choice earlier. Encouraging the cancer to spread is a permanent "solution" and not immediate. It's done, and it's unlikely to be traced back to him. Besides, I doubt any of us, other than Ember, could change his mind and convince him to reverse the damage. Still, the prospect he can use his magic like that is unsettling.

“Remind me to never piss you off,” Klaus mutters, side-eyeing Helios. I’m inclined to agree with that sentiment, but I can’t deny Helios’ actions remove one avenue of our split focus.

“Well, one less member to worry about,” I say, pulling my phone from my pocket. “I’ll tell Source to exclude Dixon from their research.” I pull up the hacker’s contact details, wording the message as the conversation continues around me.

“What research?” Trey asks.

“I hired Source and the hacker in Helios’ club, Resource, prior to what should have been our bonding ceremony to look into the representatives. After all the pushback we had, they were too amiable about giving us access to the cave. Their primary goal shifted to tracking Ember before they got too far into it. But Source is still looking into the entire Conclave, gathering any evidence of incriminating acts they’re involved with as a secondary focus. We’ll need the leverage at some point. There’s little chance once we get Ember back that they’ll leave us alone. The intention is to stockpile their deepest, darkest, shadiest secrets and use them as bargaining chips as and when needed.”

He stares at me for a beat as he processes my words. “You’re going to blackmail our government?”

“Essentially?” I ask and nod. “Yes. We wouldn’t be the first group in history to do it. I’d rather see them completely removed from power. We’ve known they’re a bunch of corrupt bastards, but it’s more than fudging numbers on their expenses. If they’re willing to do this to us—and Ember’s an Anchor, that makes her high-profile—what are they willing to do to get their own way with lower-profile matches? For now, though, I’ll settle for bribing them to ensure we can live peacefully.”

Ellis whistles. “That is a noble goal, my friend. I’d love to see someone new in power, but my mama always said there’s no such thing as an honest politician. I don’t see a full coup ending well for you.”

“Maybe not.” Atticus spreads his hands in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “But we have to try.”

“If the evidence is great enough, Ember won’t want to sit on it. She’ll want to use it to bring about a reform, and people will listen to an Anchor. They always have in the past,” Zane points out, and I nod. The thought had crossed my mind.

“Very astute of you, young Zane.” Helios sets down his tools and smirks at the burly twin.

“Fuck off, Helios. You’re four years older than us. That’s hardly life changing.”

“Depends on the life you’ve lived.” The good doctor makes a valid point. I think the others realise it too, as no one utters a word for a few minutes.

“When do you next hear from the hackers?” Ellis asks me, steering the conversation back to my missing Phoenix.

“Tonight. I have a chat scheduled with Source. I’m still trying to convince them to do a call, but apparently, I haven’t earned that level of trust yet.”

“Hackers are, by default, very private. It will be a while before you get to hear a voice. And even then, it will likely have a voice scrambler applied. That’s how Resource works, anyway. He adds a robotic cadence. He’s shown me others that can make you sound like pre-Change celebrities. It’s creepy,” Helios says with a shudder.

“Wouldn’t he be extra cautious, though?” Nox questions. “Given he’s a patched Hound and a hacker? Double the illegal stuff, double the need for anonymity?”

Helios shakes his head from side to side in a noncommittal way. He’ll neither confirm nor deny the work his brother’s motorcycle club does to earn their keep. I suppose that’s fair. Until the bonds are complete, any of us could be called to give evidence against him and the Hounds.

An alarm sounds, and Zane gets to his feet. “Time for my sleep shift.”

CHAPTER 6

EMBER

Pain skitters through my nerve endings. Every extremity aches or stings from the aftermath of another day of experiments. I'm sure there have been murmurings of increasing the electrical charge Dom has been subjecting me to over the last two weeks. Given the comments Trex made that first day, I thought EvoGen and Dom would do different tests on me. So far, it seems to be a repetitive pattern of taking blood samples and then seeing how much pain I can endure and for how long. It's making me wonder whether they're waiting for something? Someone?

There are a few new faces since I was last under the control of EvoGen that have come in and out of the facility. Some barely glance in my direction, but others stand on the other side of the Perspex glass and watch. Like I'm a caged animal in a zoo. They probably view me as one too—an animal, that is. The people here will never view me as a person. If they did, I wouldn't be treated like I am.

“Come on, Ember. Shower time.” Trex grins at me from the doorway. The daily routine still leaves an uncomfortable chill inside me. A deep-seated revulsion that grows with every day I'm here, as he watches me wash away the evidence of their experiments.

I push up from the floor, clambering slowly to my feet and waiting a moment for the dizziness to pass. Straightening my spine, I take a steadying breath and walk over to the traitor. “Lead the way.”

He narrows his eyes at me. It's clear he's waiting for me to break. His frustration grows each time he doesn't get the reaction he craves. He'll be waiting a long time yet. I've weathered enough storms and torment in my life. I've perfected bending like a willow tree. My fingers will scrape across the surface of rock bottom, but I'll never make it my home.

The dance of undressing and revealing as little of my body to Trex as possible is almost becoming second nature after the past fortnight. Cold water stings as it hits my raw skin once I turn the shower on. I stand with my head bowed until the last vestiges of pink disappear down the drain.

Dom has avoided doing anything on my abdomen, which I'm grateful for. I'd hate for Klaus' beautiful artwork to be destroyed. Even if Helios could heal any damage inflicted to it, the memory would always be there. Forever burnt into my mind for me to relive.

"Hurry it up. Unless you're actually going to give me something interesting to watch."

Glancing over my shoulder, I take in the challenge burning in his eyes. "There's nothing interesting about me," I reply, turning the water off and stepping back towards the pile of clean clothes.

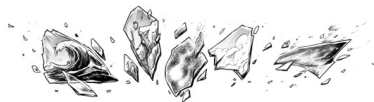
"Oh, Ember, we both know that's not true." His magic brushes over my skin, and I suppress the shudder of revulsion as it dries me. "You wouldn't be here if it were."

I don't respond as I pull on the scrub-like pyjamas. What is there to say? He's not wrong. The interest Dom and EvoGen had in me before was purely self-serving. Now, it's not just the fact I'm Changed, but that I'm an Anchor. That's a new level of power to unlock, and not just for humans. If the Conclave could "grant" Anchor status to any Changed of their choosing...The idea of Mason Chadwick or Felix Crannick having the ability to syphon magic from others is a harrowing thought.

Trex escorts me back to my room. "Get some rest, little Anchor. Tomorrow, things are going to kick up a notch. You're

gonna need all your stamina.”

The two half-glass walls allow me to track his progress after he locks the door. Once I can no longer see him, or any other EvoGen staff, I climb into bed. The thin mattress does nothing to soothe my aching muscles. Closing my eyes, I reach along my bonds with Atticus and Klaus, desperate to feel anything from them. A silent tear slips free when all I’m met with is empty silence.



A soft, hazy, cloudlike quality takes over my dream, twisting it from reliving the nightmares of my past to an ocean view. A lightweight white summer dress replaces the scrubs I fell asleep in, my bare toes dig into the white sand, cooling my skin. Tension leeches out of me, and I stroll towards the sea.

Waves lap against the beach, revealing hidden treasures of shells and flotsam. The only thing that would improve the peaceful tranquillity of the setting would be sharing it with my Sept. It’s been weeks of fruitlessly hoping I’ll see them in my sleep. Glancing down, I rub at my wrists. The suppressor cuffs never join me in my dreams, but there’s an ache to the joint reminding me of their presence in the real world. If I can break them and hinder their effectiveness, I’m positive I can reach one of my guys through dream walking.

Closing my eyes as the breeze stirs the skirt of my dress around my calves and blows my curls across my face, I picture each of my Sept. The way the sunlight would catch on the blonde in Atticus’ short curls and bring out the green in his hazel eyes behind his glasses. He’d sit on the sand, one arm around my waist, quietly reading while the others play some beach sport. Vertus and Klaus would get competitive. They’d probably appoint themselves team captains. Light vs dark. Helios would antagonise everyone in his unique way, and Aaron would play peacekeeper. Then when no one was paying full attention, Zane would sneak the win right from under them all.

A smile pulls at my lips as the image grows vivid. I can almost convince myself they're here. That I can hear them laughing and joking.

"Ember?" Zane's voice calls from behind me. It's almost tangible, like he's truly here. Goosebumps pebble along my arms as my toes curl in the sand. Something about his tone always elicits a carnal reaction within me. If only he were here...

"Ember!"

Whipping my head around, I brush the hair from my face and stare up at the hulking giant of a man. My breath catches in my throat as I scan every inch of his broad form. The desperate hope in his amber eyes is too real. I've never seen that expression on his face. My imagination couldn't manufacture it, could it?

Which would mean he is real. Somehow, he's here. Despite the suppressor cuffs. Despite the distance. Somehow the man who has become my silent rock of comfort has found me.

"Zane?" I mean to whisper his name but emotion gets the better of me and it comes out on a choked sob.

I'm not alone anymore.

He races towards me, feet slipping in the soft sand. I barely make it three steps before I'm engulfed in his embrace. Swept up in his arms, his head bows down to mine as our lips meet in an urgent, passionate kiss, full of longing and the need for comfort. It's more than I thought it would be. Hungrier and all-consuming. I'd imagined my first kiss with Zane to be soft, maybe a little hesitant on both our behalf.

Heat blooms in the very core of my being. My magic swirls, dancing almost in celebration of finally feeling safe for the first time in three weeks. Had anyone asked me to choose which of my Sept would dream walk to me, I could never have picked. Each brings something different to our group, but this feels right. Zane being the one to reach me, to hold me, to soothe me is perfect.

I wrap my legs around his waist, not wanting any distance between us, but also wanting answers. Breaking the kiss, I lean back. “How? I’m so grateful. But how are you here?”

“Not a clue. But I’m not complaining.” His amber eyes scan every millimetre of my face. “Are you okay? Do you know where you are? We’ll come find you. Vertus has two hackers searching, and Helios’ club—well, I guess it’s Skylar’s club now too—they’re searching for you. Klaus went to his dad, and it’s...I don’t know, Peanut. Something is going on there. But any clues you can give me, I’ll relay them, and we’ll come bring you home.”

So many words from the man who normally speaks so few.

“I-I’m not sure. I’ll tell you what I can.” Chewing on my bottom lip, I gather my thoughts, mentally collating every detail that might help them.

Zane lowers us to sit on the beach, cradling me in his lap. Never letting me out of his grip. “How bad is it? Have they hurt you?”

“Nothing major. Blood tests, and things like that. I think that might change tomorrow...” If I tell him the full truth, he’ll only worry, and I don’t want to mar our time with details neither of us can change. And there’s not much I can tell him about what’s waiting for me. Trex’s comments have been ominous, but they don’t align with the experiments so far. The darkness of my reality will not contaminate this precious time alone with Zane.

“Okay.” He doesn’t sound convinced, but he doesn’t press me for more. “What can you tell me about where you are?”

I bite my lip and nod. “Um, well, first, I think I need to say I did try to use my magic. The pheromonal conditioning is still in place though. I couldn’t—I tried—”

“Hey, Em, no.” Zane cups my cheeks in his large hands and presses a kiss to my forehead, his beard tickling my skin. “No one blames you for what happened. None of this is your fault. It’s EvoGen and Dominic Carmichael and the arseholes working with them.”

“Trex. One of the nurses from Helios’ lab. He’s here. Representative Chadwick too.”

“Yeah, we figured she was involved. I’ll let Helios know about the nurse. I’d almost pity the fool, but that haunted look in your eye when you said his name?” I glance away briefly. “Yeah, that tells me that any vengeance Helios claims will have been earned ten times over.”

I hum, not wanting to ruin this time together by telling him what’s been happening. “Dom was waiting in the cave. He had suppressor cuffs, and I’ve been wearing them constantly since. They put me in a crate, so I don’t know direction or anything about the flight except it was roughly four hours. I counted seconds—or my approximation of a second, so I might be off—I counted enough for it to have been three hours and fifty minutes. But it’s probably not accurate.”

“It’s more than we had. It gives us something more solid to work with. What else can you tell me? Any detail will help.”

“It’s colder here than home. There are mountains, and we’re at a higher altitude. The peaks don’t feel out of reach. Does that make sense?” He nods, and the reassurance eases some of the apprehension I’ve been holding since walking into the bonding cave. “The local staff, caretakers, kitchen workers, not the scientists, all have an accent. It’s got a harsh edge to it?”

“Not a facility they had you at before, then?”

I shake my head in answer. “No. Or if it is, it’s from before I was ten. My memories aren’t as clear from those early years. I do remember finding the music therapy room and seeking refuge in there a lot.”

“That how you know how to play all the instruments in the music room?” he asks, brushing a stray curl behind my ear.

“Partly. Mostly, it’s magic. I hear a tune in my head and send it to the instrument. I had piano lessons for a few months. All of that stuff stopped after our birthday. Then once Skylar was rescued...” I’m unsure how to finish the sentence, or even what I wanted to say. I shrug and drop my gaze from Zane’s

face. It's not that I expect him to pity me, but I don't want to colour the moment with the need for sympathy. He hums, pulling my head beneath his chin, hugging me and simply existing in the moment. No pressure for me to say more, yet somehow conveying he'll always be a listening ear should I need one. The crystals gave me a gift when they matched me with him and the rest of my Sept.

“Harsh edge to their accents. Cold. Mountains. About a four-hour flight.” He lists off each point I made, rediverting the conversation. “Do any of the signs have words using a different alphabet? Could you be far enough east to be where Russia used to be?”

“I haven't seen anything like that. But I haven't really seen any signs either.”

CHAPTER 7

EMBER

We sit in contemplative silence for a few minutes after I finish telling Zane everything that could help them find me. A part of me can't believe he's here. The cuffs should have prevented my magic from connecting to his, especially without a bond and the distance between our physical bodies. Yet, here he is. I'm curled up in his lap, wrapped around him like a koala.

If this is possible, what else can we do?

"I-I want to try something," I say, not quite meeting his gaze. "You can say no. It might be too soon, but given we were going to—"

He presses a finger against my lips. "What do you want to do?"

It takes every ounce of courage and resolve in me to meet his eyes. I can't bring this up without letting him see how much it means. Not just from a magical point, but for our evolving relationship too. "They've had me wearing magic suppressor cuffs, but I'm here. You're here. The last time something like this happened, I...Well, I bonded with Atticus." The last words rush out in an almost incoherent garble, and I hold my breath waiting for his response.

Will he think I'm only asking because it's convenient?

What if he thinks I don't genuinely want a bond with him? Maybe I should have said more. I'm not the most forward or flirtatious. We were going to bond at the caves though, so that means he wants me, right?

He wouldn't have kissed me like he did or be cradling me if he didn't have feelings for me too. You don't kiss someone like that if you don't care for them, do you?

Zane clears his throat, the sound saving me from my spiralling thoughts.

“You want to bond with me?” I can't read his expression, but there's a trace of hope, I think, in his tone. It could be surprise, though.

If it's surprise, please let it be the good kind. Not the panicked “run for the hills” kind.

“I want to try. It might not work, but if I can be here—sharing a dream with you—then maybe my magic, or *our* magic, is stronger than the cuffs. We're not physically together, so it might not be a success—”

He ducks his head, swallowing my words with a kiss. His teeth nip at my bottom lip before his tongue glides along it. One large hand cradles the side of my face, his fingers intertwining with my loose curls.

“Officially being part of your Sept would be an honour, Ember.” He rests his forehead against mine, and my eyes drift closed as he continues. “You are by far the kindest, most compassionate, empathetic person I've ever met, and you have the biggest heart. Watching you come out of your shell, finding confidence, pushing back against Vertus.”

My eyes snap open at the mention of another of my Sept's name. Zane's smile stretches across his handsome face as his eyes glaze with the recollection of a memory.

“Sometimes you're a contradiction. There's the shy, sheltered side to you that makes all of my protective instincts scream. And just when I think I need to step in, you pull something amazing, like teleporting to the house.”

“I keep trying to teleport home,” I whisper, fear of disappointing him and the others gripping me and strangling my words.

Zane leans back and grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger. He tilts my head until I can't look anywhere but at

him. “We know if you could get home to us that easily, you would’ve. We’ll find you, Peanut. We won’t rest until we do.”

He presses another sweet kiss to my forehead, then my nose and both cheeks, until he finally reaches my mouth. The male of few words, who’s said so much tonight, pours even more into his kiss. I grip the fabric of his T-shirt as I answer every flick and caress of his tongue with my own. Zane drops his hand from my face to join the other at the small of my back. His fingers work the fabric of my dress up over my thighs and hips until it bunches around my waist.

With a pointed thought, my dress and his T-shirt vanish. He breaks the kiss, leaning back with a raised eyebrow before taking in my exposed flesh. Heat and lust shroud his gaze, then the hard lines of his abs distract me. His body looks as though one of the great masters could have chiselled it from marble.

His hands run up past my hips until he cups my breasts. “So beautiful.” Zane dips his head forward, licking one nipple and then the other before looking up at me. “You’re sure?”

“Yes.” I nod, and the rest of our clothing disappears, leaving us naked. “I want this, and not just because of the situation. You’re thoughtful and kind. I feel safe with you. And your presence—even the faintest reminder of it—is comforting to me. When I was in Helios’ labs, I cuddled the blanket you made me every night.” My cheeks heat at the admission. “When the crystal confirmed the call, my only concern was Skylar. Well, him and you not wanting me—”

“Only a fool wouldn’t want you, Ember.” His magic wraps around us, caressing my bare skin as it lifts us into the air. We’re suspended, just high enough that my toes can still touch the sand as I straddle Zane. “Everything you’ve been through. Woman, you are strength personified. Your resilience and compassion blow my mind. I know Aaron feels the same way. We’re in awe of you.” He grips my waist, moving me until his hard length presses against my inner thigh as he leans back, his spine parallel with the sandy ground below. “That doesn’t mean we’ll put you on a pedestal and pander to you. I know you well enough to know you’d hate that.”

I can't stop the laugh from escaping me, though it quickly turns to a moan as tendrils of air stroke along my limbs and circle my nipples. With a gasp, I lean forward, adjusting my position and resting my hands on his broad chest.

"Yeah, if you make noises like that, I might pander to you." He grins up at me, grinding his hips and lighting me up with pleasure.

Waves crash against the shore, giving a melodic backdrop to our bonding. We're miles and miles apart in reality, but I desperately want this to work. I want to be connected to this man—to all my men.

Zane's air magic plucks at my nipples, drawing a hiss from my lips at the mixture of pleasure and pain. He reaches between us to stroke across my clit with the pad of his thumb. My lips part on a soft gasp before a startled squeak escapes as he pulls me further up his chest.

"As much as I want to sink inside you and have you claim me as your own, we're not rushing this." He manoeuvres his arms under my thighs, shifting my position until my legs dangle over his shoulders. Turning his head, his beard tickles the soft skin as he presses open-mouthed kisses in an alternating path until his neck is straining in an attempt to reach my pussy. "You're going to sit on my face, and once you're relaxed and soaked, then and only then will we progress to cementing our bond. And even if the magic doesn't take, we'll know we belong to one another."

His words barely register in my lust-filled mind before he lifts me and places me against his mouth. The texture of his beard only heightens every sensation coursing through me as he practically devours me like a man starved.

Any lingering insecurities fade at his obvious enthusiasm. My fingers push into his short tight coils of hair as his tongue dives into me. Air magic continues circling and plucking my nipples, and I lose all inhibitions and rock my hips—riding his face, chasing the climax his actions promise to deliver.

There's not a part of me left that doesn't believe Zane wants me as much as I want him. But the need to reassure him

takes hold as the first sparks of what promises to be a life-altering orgasm ignite within me.

Calling my fire, I send out the faintest tendril, skirting up his legs. Only enough to enforce the illusion of me licking my way to his cock. I add in a drop of water magic, as I weave the warmth around the head of his dick. Zane growls between my thighs and sucks hard on my clit, sending me over the edge into an explosive orgasm that pulls his name from my lips in an unintelligible scream.

By the time I come down, he's shifted our position. His feet are planted in the sand, his hands cradling my arse as he leans over me. Capturing my mouth in a heated kiss, he drives his cock into my pussy. The taste of myself on his lips has a possessive part of me purring. He's in control, showcasing his strength as every thrust of his hips has me bouncing against him.

One finger breaches the tight ring of muscle of my arse, and I reach out, grasping at his chest as fire burns beneath my skin. His hips snap, burying his cock deep within me, and with a satisfied roar, he succumbs to his own climax. The feel of him twitching as he comes is the final push to send me over the cliff into my second orgasm.

My hand on his chest heats, a glow emanating from deep within my skin. A sharp hiss leaves his lips, and I glance up, taking in the tense line of his jaw.

"Fuck," he grunts, pulling his hips back and driving into me harder and faster than before. The magic curls between us, weaving into a tight pattern. The surrounding air shimmers with a golden light as pleasure coils tighter and tighter within me until it explodes. My vision gives way to a sunburst of light as my orgasm crashes over me and the bond snaps into place.

Somehow, I manage not to move my hand from his skin.

"It worked." I look from my cooling hand to Zane's face. A radiant smile greets me, crinkling his eyes as his bright amber gaze flicks from my hand to my face and back again.

“It did. I’m yours. Forever and always.”

CHAPTER 8

ATTICUS

Mountains. Cold. Almost four hours away by flight. Where are you, Pol? Where did they take you?

I stare at the maps spread across the tables in my office. Researching Ember's possible whereabouts inside the Conclave wasn't my smartest decision, but I needed to get out of the house. The thought of visiting Royce and his collection of books and knowledge was tempting. My friend is an obvious choice to help piece together the details Ember relayed to Zane. And yet, when I got into my car, I found myself driving the familiar route to the Conclave headquarters.

I'm viewing it as fate's guidance. There must be something I'm overlooking. That *we're* overlooking. Perhaps today is the day someone in this place slips and provides me with vital, irrefutable proof where my bond-mate is. I'll even settle for Royce finding another one of his ambiguous prophecies, though I can't bring myself to pin much hope on them. This is my life, not an epic fantasy tale from before The Change. No, I need to focus on reality. Just because I believe in fate and live in a world with magic, doesn't mean a prophecy will arise to save us all.

Multiple footsteps echo in the corridor as the common room door opens. I don't look up. My office door is open, and if one of the Shadow-Stalkers needs me, they'll let me know. Returning my gaze to the maps, I run a finger across the continent and place a pin on every mountainous location within the helicopter's maximum range. It's still too many possibilities, but I haven't accounted for the time travelled yet.

That will remove the pins closest to the bonding cave. Progress is too slow and involves far too much mathematics for my liking. But if a few equations get Ember back in my arms quicker, then the headache they cause is well worth it.

“Sergeant, we need a report on the status of the new recruits.” My head snaps up at the sound of Representative Chadwick’s voice. When did she get back? What does that mean for Ember? Can I gain details of where Ember is from her?

“I wouldn’t know, Representative,” Sergeant Trey, my second-in-command, answers. “None are being put forward for elite evaluation—”

“What do you mean, *none*? My son is among the recruits. You’re not suggesting that you find him lacking? Your own commander trained him!” With each sentence, her voice becomes more shrill until the sound makes me wince. I can’t imagine how it sounds to Trey; I’m at least a room away from her.

“I’m not aware of any names for this year’s recruits, ma’am. We’re only notified when someone shows promise and aptitude towards an elite team.”

With a sigh, knowing I need to intervene, I compose myself. Slipping on a neutral mask, I step out of the office into the common room. “Representative Chadwick, welcome back.” I incline my head in greeting. “What seems to be the problem? Anything I can help with?” I keep my tone amicable, there’s no need to give her reason to suspect I know of her involvement with Ember’s abduction. Not that I have any proof to bring a case against her. Yet. Perhaps that is all about to change.

“Commander James...” There’s a hesitancy to my name, as though she’s unsure of speaking with me. That’s only more proof in my mind that she knows where Ember is. If only I could pluck the coordinates right from her mind without her noticing. “Why is my son not being evaluated for the vacant position on your team?”

“I couldn’t speak for his results in the basic training so far, ma’am. However, I can give you an educated guess based on my observations during classes at the Institute?”

She stares at me, as though her eyes will dig out all my secrets. When I don’t immediately provide her with the details she wants, Representative Chadwick flaps her hand back and forth. “Well? Out with it, Commander.”

“Mason was an adequate student. He, however, did not apply himself as fully as he could have. Instead of focusing on the areas of magic where he was inefficient, he instead chose to focus on brute strength and raw power. Both are useful tools in a soldier, but an elite needs to be able to hold back. We have to know when finesse is more vital to a mission’s success. We must always work as a team despite personality differences. Mason, unfortunately, like some of his friends, had a penchant for bullying others. Students he deemed below him. Whether due to magical abilities, class, or gender. Unless there has been a drastic shift in attitude since his discernment ceremony, I cannot imagine him being selected for any of the elite squadrons.”

Throughout my evaluation, the representative’s face shifts from smug-parental pride to shock. Anger and denial. By the end, she’s physically shaking with what I assume is suppressed rage. “How. Dare. You!”

“*Possibly a tad too honest there, AJ.*” Trey sends through a mind message. I glance across at him, lifting one shoulder in a minute shrug. Perhaps he’s right. Personally, I think I pulled my punches.

“You work for *me*, Commander James. And *I* am telling you that you *will* invite my son and his friends to the elite evaluation. Mason *will* be a Shadow-Stalker, or you won’t have a job.”

“I see. Very well.” Trey’s mouth drops as he stares at me in shock from behind Chadwick. I keep my gaze on the representative. Her lips twist into a triumphant smile. Her smugness is palpable over the belief that she has the ability to make me submit to her whims. It’s all too clear now that if I

want to bring about a real change for our society, I can't do it from within. The corruption runs too deep, and my every step towards reform will be hindered by navigating the ridiculous power plays of the representatives. It's time to cut the strings that make the Conclave view themselves as my puppet master. "I tender my resignation effective immediately. My office and room in the barracks will be emptied and cleaned out by the end of the day."

Her eyes widen, and she sucks in her cheeks, twisting her face to resemble someone sucking on a lemon. "Fine!" Turning, she levels Trey with a sharp look. Behind him, the door opens, and Ellis, Ristevski, and Nox walk in, their jovial camaraderie falling away when they spot the representative in our space. "Sergeant Trey, I hereby promote you to the rank of commander. You are now in charge of the Shadow-Stalkers. With two positions to fill within your team, I expect to hear a report on how my son and Felix Crannick rank in their elite evaluation."

"What did we miss?" Nox asks, his eyes bouncing from me to Trey and back again.

"Thank you, Representative." Trey bows his head, and the insufferable woman looks over her shoulder at me with a malicious glee. "However"—her head snaps back to look at Trey—"I must decline. I do not feel I could do the position justice, especially if new recruits for our team are being dictated by someone with no combat experience. We go into dangerous, life-threatening situations often. I need to be able to explicitly trust my teammates. I couldn't do that if we manipulated the recruitment process as you're suggesting."

"Corporal Ristevski—"

The representative gets no more words out before the large Shadow-Stalker shakes his head and holds up his hands. "I was looking to resign my commission anyway," he says. "I have no desire to step on the toes of my previous commanders. I respect Irfan and James far too much to steal the job they did so well."

Chadwick turns to face Ellis, and he reiterates similar feelings and thoughts to those Trey and Ristevski have stated. Before she can move on to Nox, the blonde air-magic specialist is shaking his head and refusing the promotion too.

Chadwick stomps a foot, her face a mottled purple as her anger rises, flushing her cheeks. “You all want to resign? Then you are all making a huge mistake! There is no job as prestigious as being Commander of the Shadow-Stalkers, and *all four of you* are turning it *down* with some sense of misguided loyalty when your loyalty should be to the Conclave and to the Changed people.”

I fold my arms across my chest, levelling her with a steely gaze. How dare she talk about loyalty? My magic unfurls inside me, and I send a tendril towards her. Truth-seeing is not one of my strengths. Vertus has always been the one to conduct the interrogations in that manner, but if it means gaining an insight into Ember’s whereabouts, then I will take the risk.

“Representative, I am surprised you feel that way given the part you have played in my bond-mate’s disappearance. Surely, having a complete Sept with an Anchor is more beneficial to the Conclave as a whole and the Changed people than handing her over to her abusers and the humans who wish to see us, as a race, fall? What exactly do you get by working with Dominic Carmichael and EvoGen to abduct Ember from her bonding ceremony? You talk about loyalty to our people, to our race, and yet you violated the sanctity of the bonding caves by not only allowing a human entrance but also coordinating the loss of a complete Sept for the first time in over fifty years. If that is the sort of direction the Conclave and the representatives are leading us, then I, for one, most assuredly want no part of it.”

CHAPTER 9

AARON

“No, I don’t think there’s any need for that.” Zane rolls his neck, looking up at the ceiling as he listens to whoever he’s talking to on the phone. He glances over at me as I enter the conference room we’ve set up as a war room of sorts. I’d have preferred to be closer to the main kitchen, but this is the better space for setting up all the maps. The far wall is the perfect spot to display all the details we’ve gathered of the facilities Ember could be held at. “Yeah, if we find anything else out, we’ll let you know.” Zane pauses and nods. “Yeah, I know, T. She’s stronger than any of us have ever given her credit for. Don’t count her out. We’ll find her, but she might save herself first.” He winces, pulling the phone away from his ear. “Got it. Bye.” He hangs up and tosses the phone on the table before rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes.

“Uncle T?” I ask, already knowing the answer. My twin simply grunts in confirmation. “You tell him about bonding with Ember?”

“Not exactly.” He drops his hands, giving me a sheepish look. “Talking to our uncles about sex with their daughter...” He grimaces, and I wrinkle my nose.

“Yeah, when you put it like that, it sounds incestuous and taboo. Even though it’s not.”

“Exactly.” He pulls his hat off and runs a hand over his short black hair. “We’re not blood related, and we didn’t grow up together. I doubt the crystal would have matched us if we were actually related. But it’s different to going into the bonding cave, ya know? If I said, ‘Oh hey, by the way, Ember

and I completed our bond last night, but she's still who knows where. Isn't magic weird?' They'd either book me for a psych eval or demand details—”

“Probably both,” I tell him, earning a glare.

“Yeah, well, neither are things I want to do.”

“They're just worried, like we are, but I think they feel like there's less they can do.” I shrug. Zane hums in a noncommittal response. “Nik is doing what he can at work, same as Atticus. Sam and Klaus have been reading every law that mentions Anchors to plan ahead because we all know this won't be the end of things.”

“Yeah, well, let's hope Vertus' hacker friends can find something useful.” He pushes up from his chair and stalks towards the back wall. We've all practically memorised the details on there, yet I can't fault him for looking again. When it's not my turn on the sleep cycle, I find myself in here staring at the maps, hoping something will jump out that we've missed before. It's also another distraction method. I'd be lying if I didn't admit to being jealous of my twin. Zane connected with Ember, and I'll never begrudge him for bonding or having alone time with her, but, damn, I wish I could have that too.

Despite his reassurances that she looked okay, I can't help but wonder if that was an illusion of the dream. He didn't press her for details on what she's been subjected to, and I doubt I would've reacted differently. It's not logical, but I still wish I could see her. Check there are no new scars, that the small amount of weight she'd gained since living with us hasn't been lost.

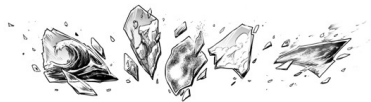
There's another part of me that's jealous because of my own insecurities. I do a good job at burying them deep, and dismissing the whispered thoughts when they rear their ugly heads. Or I did a good job of it. It was easier to push them aside when we were both going to bond with her in the caves. Now, though? That whispering voice is increasingly louder, reminding me of the physical differences. Ember's Sept is built of muscular men. She's bonded to Zane, and what reason

is there to bond with me? What can I offer her that my twin can't?

The main door opens, and Atticus pokes his head in, saving me from descending further along that path to self-loathing. "Good, you're here. Can you give me a hand? I need to unload the car and go back for another load."

"Another load of what?" I ask as Zane and I follow him outside.

"Long story short? I quit my post with the Shadow-Stalkers, as did Trey, Ristevski, Ellis, and Nox. So, we're clearing out the office and barracks. They'll move in here for the time being, but I doubt they'll stay long."



"What do you mean you all quit?" Nik stares at Atticus and the four former Shadow-Stalkers. All three of my uncles turned up soon after Atticus got home with a car full to the brim with boxes and papers.

"What Nik means is that if there was a time we needed an elite force *not* heavily influenced by the representatives, it's now," Sam clarifies, taking a seat at the cluttered conference table in the ground-floor pod of our home. I swear the papers multiplied overnight. Even more so now that Atticus is adding all the maps from his Conclave office to the table.

He curses as he unfurls one of the larger maps of the continent and pins ping off in different directions. I help him gather them while the former sergeant responds to my uncle.

"Sorry, sir." I bite my lip to hold in a smile. Trey sounds anything but sorry. "If we'd stayed, that wouldn't have been the case either. Chadwick was pushing us to add her son and Crannick's to the team. No one in basic training was flagged for consideration, and when AJ outlined why that was likely the case, Chadwick didn't like it."

“AJ?” Sam asks, his blue eyes bouncing from face-to-face behind his glasses.

“My nickname on the team. It’s my initials, Atticus James, AJ—”

“When Atticus joined the team, we had an air specialist whose first name was James. It got confusing doing the typical surname identifier, so we switched it up, and even after Whitten transferred, calling him AJ was second nature,” Vertus explains, carrying in the last of the rolled maps. “If I’d known about Royce’s nickname for you, I’d have introduced that. Abacus is much better than AJ.”

Atticus straightens and points a finger at Vertus. “No. Royce barely gets away with it because he rarely uses it. Ember using it is completely different. You, asshole, don’t get to call me Abacus.”

“What about the rest of us?” Klaus asks with a grin. “Can we call you Abacus?”

“No.” There’s a finality to his tone, and shockingly, no one presses him on the subject.

I glance down at the table, looking for a new topic of conversation. Waving a hand at the map, I glance at Atticus. “What are the coloured circles?”

“I’ve been attempting to pinpoint possible locations where the helicopter could have taken Ember.” He points to the centre of the circle’s radius. “This is the bonding cave. The outer line is the maximum distance it could have travelled with additional auxiliary tanks. Middle line is based on a standard fuel tank.” He taps the inner circle. “This is based on Ember’s approximation of time. If they were in the air for three hours, they’ll have crossed this. So, cold, mountainous areas past here are what we’re looking for.”

“And if we add the accent she mentioned?” Zane asks, stepping up next to me, his eyes never leaving the map. “How many areas does that give us?”

“Too many, but once we cross reference against EvoGen’s holdings, we’ll hopefully have it narrowed down

significantly.” Atticus flicks his finger, and sparks of light flit across the map, hovering over each pin. “I did manage to get something from Chadwick earlier, but I’m not sure if it’s useful.”

We all look over at him as he fiddles with his glasses.

“You tried to truth-see?” Vertus asks after the silence stretches on for too long.

“Hmm?” Atticus glances up, and his gaze flicks around the room, jumping from face-to-face. “Ah, yes. I think it was coordinates, but that in itself makes me suspicious of the validity of the intel. Why would Representative Chadwick be thinking of coordinates rather than a town name? I’m missing the last two digits anyway.”

“But it could help us narrow down the options much more quickly. We’ve already been without Ember for two weeks,” Helios states, as though we need a reminder. Everyone in this room, except possibly the four former Shadow-Stalkers, has a vested interest in seeing Ember home. “I have no intention of making it three or more.”

“Let me set up a chat with Source and/or Resource, if they’re available.” Vertus grabs a laptop and pushes loose papers out of his way before setting it on the table. “They can cross reference the coordinates with known EvoGen holdings and any in Carmichael’s name quicker than we can.”

Helios pulls his phone out and hits a button before putting it on speaker.

“What are you—” a male answers the call.

“Yeah, Hel? What’s up? I’m a little busy, so…” He sounds slightly out of breath, and I swear his voice trails off into a moan. Helios rolls his eyes.

“Put your dick away, Resource. I need you to do your computer shit and help find my Anchor.” His words are met with a string of curses and a distinctly female voice complaining. “Put me on speaker, Resource.”

“Ah, fucking hell. Fine. Yeah, you’re on speaker.”

“I’m not sure which of the club girls you are, nor do I care. Now, in case you don’t realise who you were cussing out, let me enlighten you. My name is Helios. My brother is Sketch, the club president. He’s the sane one of the two of us. Resource is needed to help locate my bond-mate, who happens to be the twin sister of Sketch’s bond-mate. Now, do you think your pathetic attempt at seduction is more important than that?”

“Ah, come on, man,” Resource complains as a door slams shut. “Now she’s gonna go tell the others, and I’ll never get laid again. You’ve cursed me with celibacy, Helios.”

“I’ll heal your wrist for free when you get the repetitive strain injury flare-up. Now, Atticus is going to give you some coordinates, we need them cross-checked—”

“With EvoGen, Dominic Carmichael, and Lydia Chadwick. Got it.” The clickity-clack of typing rapidly on a keyboard drifts through. “Okay, hit me with your rhythm stick.”

“Wrong twin. That’s not my kink,” Helios deadpans before looking over at Atticus and holding out his phone.

“Well, that was a surreal insight into club life.” Atticus clears his throat and rattles off a string of numbers. “Don’t look in that specific locale, though. I don’t trust the source of this intel to not be trying to plant a false lead.”

“Uh-huh, sure, sure. That’s smart. I’ll run the search and call you back with the results. Gimme a few hours and I’ll have something for you. Resource out.” The line goes dead, and the waiting begins. Again.

CHAPTER 10

ZANE

“Okay, so I got two potentials for you. Mount Elbrus or Mount Kazbek. One was a holding for EvoGen back when they first started, but I can’t find anything to say there’s been activity there in the last twenty years. The other doesn’t have links to EvoGen themselves, but Chadwick’s accounts show some purchases in the surrounding towns, and Stephanie Carmichael’s family has an ancestral home there that survived The Change.” Atticus and Vertus grab the map with the helicopter’s flight radius and pour over it as Resource breaks down his findings.

“Both are within range,” Atticus murmurs, pointing to two spots we’d pinned earlier.

“But which one do we go to? They both fit all the details Ember shared with me.” I run a hand over my head in frustration. If Ember could break the hold the suppressor cuffs have on her magic a little more, we might feel her through the bond.

“True, but if one has no record of being used in twenty years, then how likely is it they’re there?” My instructor turned bond-brother looks at me. Despite the slight glare from the sun on his glasses, I can clearly see from the slight arch of his eyebrow he thinks my question was idiotic, and tension simmers between us.

“We can’t discount it as a possibility just because of that. This isn’t some TV show with a cartoon villain. It’s EvoGen. They’re scientists and doctors. They’re not dumb, they’ll be

working with Chadwick to cover their tracks. We still can't guarantee the coordinates you got weren't fake."

"Well, we have to do something!" Atticus explodes. I understand his frustration. We all feel the same way, but going to the wrong building could cause them to move Ember to a new location, and then we'll be back to square one.

"Look, man, no one is saying we don't do anything. No one is suggesting that we don't explore these locations, but picking the wrong one is not an option. We cannot go in guns blazing and make a mistake that puts not only ourselves at risk but Ember. She's the priority here. We need to be sure we have the right location before we do anything." Atticus glares at me, but I can't find it in myself to care. There's a moment of intense silence as he processes what I've said.

Surprisingly, it's Helios who speaks up in agreement with me. "We need to do more research, but having two locations to investigate is far better than the situation we were in this morning. If they are running the experiments and tests that they were previously, there has to be power. It doesn't make sense looking at all the information we have right now that they're holding her at this old EvoGen facility. If Resource can't find any evidence of it being connected to power or even having running water, then no one is going to be there—"

Vertus throws a notepad across the table. "You say that, and we'll point out the obvious—Chadwick making purchases in the area. It's too convenient. We're supposed to accept she's conveniently forgotten that we're looking for our Anchor? You want us to believe that she thought we wouldn't be monitoring her bank records? Obviously, we're going to hire a hacker and look at her transactions, especially with her disappearing right as shit hit the fan. Representative Chadwick is a lot of things, but an idiot is not one of them. This is too obvious."

"But on the flip side," Klaus adds, crossing his arms over his chest. "Why would there be a facility with no record of power that they're using? If they are holding Ember at Mount Elbrus, then they need power. I'm not trying to burst your bubbles, but obviously, there are ways for them to have electricity without being connected to the main grid. They

could have solar panels, they could have wind turbines. They could have generators running off old oil. They could be using another member of Changed society as a glorified battery. It wouldn't be the first time we've heard of someone with an affinity for energy and lightning being used in that way."

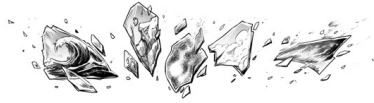
As we're talking, keys tapping drifts through the phone's speaker until Resource chimes in again. "I can't find any purchase orders for generators or wind turbines and solar panels, but what I have found is a couple of older purchase orders going to the ancestral home of Stephanie Carmichael. So, my guess would be that's where you want to start. Even if Ember isn't there, it's gonna give you some information. Plus, if you can access their mainframe, I can bypass their fucking firewalls and search the databases for her."

"Why can't you just do that anyway?" I ask.

"Well, if I could, I would have," Resource replies. "But the system is behind multiple firewalls which would take me and Source way longer to get through, man. We don't really have time for it. It's months of work. Hacking is not like you see in the old movies. It's not that fast or instantaneous. We have to find loopholes. We have to go through the code, sometimes line by line. What we do is a lot of work, okay? You don't appreciate my skill set, and that's fine, but don't you think if I could find her by doing that externally I would have already done it?" Silence greets his words when he pauses for breath. "Okay. Glad we're on the same page. Now, I can give you a device that once you're in the Abasi residence, you connect it into the system. Just plug it into any computer you find. That will give me access, bypassing their firewalls, and then I'm in. I'll have complete access to the databases, to the servers. I will find any mention of Ember they have stored anywhere within EvoGen. Even if she's not there, at that specific location, we will still be in a better situation than we currently are."

I look around the room at my twin and brothers-by-bond. Determination and resolve exude from each of us. It's clear we're all in agreement with what we should do next. I nod and look at Aaron, who nods as well, leaning forward, resting his

forearms on the table. “So what exactly do we need for this to work? What’s the address we’re going to?”



“I’m not staying behind.” Helios glares at Vertus and Atticus across Royce’s kitchen table.

“You can’t defend yourself—” Atticus tries to explain their reasoning, but Helios cuts him off.

“Magically? Perhaps not, but there are other ways.”

“Helios, seriously—” Vertus drops his hand from running through his hair in frustration and narrows his eyes at the half-Changed doctor as he interrupts again.

“Do not disregard me, Vertus. I may not be a full-blooded Changed, but my magic is capable of hindering someone just as much as it can heal.” Helios leans back in his seat. “I am also a patched member of the Hounds of Charon, or did you forget?”

“You won’t tell us anything about the Hounds, so how am I—how are we—meant to trust you won’t be a liability?” Vertus pushes to his feet, his chair toppling over behind him. “You’ve hardly proven to be calm or level-headed where Ember is involved. Or do I need to bring up the notes you sent her? The ones that had her fearing Dominic was stalking her.”

Helios leans forward across the table, angling his head to one side, and raises an eyebrow. “How exactly do you propose to stop me from coming?”

“This is getting us nowhere,” I say before Vertus or Atticus can start another round of why they think the doctor shouldn’t be part of the mission. “You both have multiple years of active duty as elites. So do your team. We”—I wave a hand between Klaus, Aaron, and myself—“have been training to join the elites for years. We haven’t partaken in real missions, but we have excelled in every training mission. That’s nine fully trained Changed, and Helios grew up in a motorcycle gang—”

“Club,” he interrupts me. “Motorcycle club.”

“Okay, club. Whatever.” I wave him off. “My point is, Helios is a full member of the Hounds. They rescued Skylar. Clearly, they’re not defenceless, and I can’t imagine Helios and Sketch being at EvoGen to rescue Skylar if they couldn’t defend themselves in a fight. If he could handle it then, he can handle it now.”

“Thank you, Zane.” Helios leans back in his seat, a somewhat smug expression on his face. “Besides, we’re already en route.”

“Royce’s kitchen is not ‘en route,’” Atticus remarks, offering the doctor a withering glare.

“Technically, Abacus, your bond-brother is correct,” Royce says from the doorway. “You’re here because I’m dumb enough to open an illegal portal for you. If you were going via an official portal, you’d be en route, so you are now.” He beckons us to follow him. “Come on. Sooner you’re gone, the less likely we’ll be caught, and I can get back to researching the prophecies around Anchors. I found a new one that might hold promise for aiding the reform you want, but I need to research it more before I can be sure.”

The door buzzer rings through the apartment bookshop, causing us all to stiffen. Tensions rise as Royce mutters a string of curses before answering the intercom. “Yeah?”

“If you think you’re going after my sister without me—” Skylar’s voice cuts off before he can finish, and I’m up and out of my chair the instant I hear him. Another voice drifts over the intercom, but I don’t register who it belongs to as I barrel down the stairs to let my cousin in.

“I can’t believe you were gonna leave me behind,” he complains as soon as he reaches the kitchen door. Sketch and Rui—Ghost, damn name change is taking longer to adjust to than I thought—shake their heads and follow Skylar. “I know I’ve been—”

“Absent? Distracted? A bit of a dick?” Klaus offers before Skylar can finish his sentence.

“Yeah. All of the above. But of everyone who could possibly be going on this rescue, I *need* to be here. I need to be a part of this because I couldn’t save her any of the times before.”

Royce clears his throat and pointedly looks at his wrist. Even without the presence of a watch, his point is clear. Tick tock.

CHAPTER II

KLAUS

The cold wind hits me like a slap across the face when I step out of Royce's portal into an empty clearing. Where the hell is Atticus?

A shiver racks through me as a new icy flurry descends.

Thank fuck for magic.

With a semiconscious thought, the air around me warms, and I trap it in place with a skin tight shield. I take a moment to look around and get my bearings since Resource and Royce couldn't find more than basic details about the area. All we know is before The Change, this place would have been along Russia's southern border.

"Isn't this as delightful as a kick in the balls?" one of the Shadow-Stalkers grumbles after walking through the portal. "Why the hell would anyone live here?"

"Well, if you don't have anywhere else to go or it's all you've ever known, why would you go anywhere else?" Helios quips. "Besides, the views are spectacular."

I keep my back to them, scanning the horizon for Atticus and promptly ignoring the red-haired doctor. There's still a niggling doubt about him joining us. Trusting him to not be a liability is proving difficult. I have to keep reminding myself that even if he causes problems during the rescue mission, the rest of us have the training to handle the situation. And depending on what Ember has been through, having him here means he can heal her. We won't have to wait.

Resting a hand on my chest, I send my consciousness through my bond with Ember, hoping that today I'll feel more of her. After she bonded with Zane, something changed. It's still quiet, and I can't get a full read on her like before Dom stole her away, but there are these moments, these flashes of pain and exhaustion. While I don't feel hope from her, I'm not sensing much in the way of despair either. The lack of such a deep negative emotion is the only reason I'm not completely disheartened by our inability to have rescued her.

I may not know her as well as I should, considering our lives are tied together for eternity, but with everything she's suffered—more than in the memories she sent to me—I know she is the strongest among us.

If I said that out loud, I'm sure people would laugh. Especially my father. If I stood there in the representatives' audience room and said that the strongest member of our Sept was our Anchor, they would all assume I was lying or only talking about her magical capabilities. They'd dismiss my words by saying I can't understand until we're all bonded and the Sept is complete. I can hear my father saying we—the men—will take on the enhancements that having an Anchor provides. How she'll be able to syphon from the world and feed power into us. They forget she can do that for herself.

Does Ember remember she can do that?

Zane talked about the suppressor cuffs she was wearing, but she managed to dream walk. The cuffs are weakening. Maybe it's not us who need to save her? We just need to offer a distraction, and then she can save herself. If I can get through the block on our bond, if I can reach her, nudge her, remind her of the raw power she holds as an Anchor...

With her fire affinity, and how her body reacted after she teleported from The Institute to the Wards' home...She jokes she changed into a phoenix, but that was without thought. She erupted. She syphoned too much, and obviously, it had to go *somewhere*, but if she could do it in that situation when there was little at stake, then surely she can do it again now?

Spotting Atticus returning, I open my mouth, ready to explain my thoughts to him and the others.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” Atticus demands, and I turn to see what’s caught his attention as he takes off his glasses and cleans them on the corner of his shirt. Returning the round frames to their place, he frowns at the good doctor, or I’m assuming it’s Helios and not Sketch. The lack of tattoos points to it being Helios. He’s kitted out in the same all-black combat fatigues as the rest of us, except his are hidden beneath an armoury. Belts of bullets wrap across his chest in a large X, and two SA80 assault rifles peek over his shoulders with two Glock 17s at his hips.

Is that a fucking grenade?

“I told you I wouldn’t stay behind,” Helios deadpans. “I told you not to underestimate me. I told you I would pull my weight.” The portal behind him flares, and he sidesteps as Ghost strides through with Sketch right behind him. Both are as equally armed to the teeth with human weaponry as Helios is.

Helios’ eyes scan the two other Hounds, and his brows draw together, forming distinct, deep lines on his forehead. “Where’s the fucking bazooka? You were supposed to bring the bazooka. Why did you leave the bazooka?”

Sketch rolls his eyes and shakes his head at his twin. “You just said the word ‘bazooka’ too many times. It doesn’t sound like a word anymore. We’re not bringing it because we don’t want to blow up the entire building,” he states. “You bring Ember out and get her home. We’ll”—he waves a hand to indicate the ex-Shadow-Stalkers and Ghost—“make the people inside pay, slowly and painfully.” He grins, and the chill running down my spine has nothing to do with the weather. “And if she’s not there, then we need the building intact so we can plug in Resource’s little doohickie device. He’ll do his keyboard thing. I don’t know how that shit works, but he’ll get the details of where they’re keeping Ember. And then we save her. We’ll be her knights in dented armour.”

“Isn’t the saying ‘knights in shining armour’?” Nox asks.

“Yeah, but who wants the guy who’s never fought for anything to rescue them? If your armour is shiny and polished, that’s like a rugby player getting off the pitch at the end of a game without any grass stains. If I’m being rescued, I want the person who dives into the fray, armour so scratched and dented, it looks like they took on an army and won.” By the time Sketch finishes speaking, I swear there are literal hearts in Skylar’s eyes as he looks at his bond-mate. It’s almost enough to make me gag, but I wonder how Ember would view my metaphorical armour right now. This is my first real mission. There’s no one watching to grade us or intervene if—*when*—shit hits the fan. Clenching my fists at my sides, I resolve to be the knight Ember deserves, and not just for this rescue, but for our entire lives. Today is merely step one. Once she’s home, then we can focus on bringing about a better future for all Changed, Chum, and humans alike.

“On that note. Let’s go dent our armour,” Atticus orders as the portal zips shut. “We have twenty-four hours before Royce will open a portal home for us in the same place. We have a couple of miles to trek. I want to get to the place before dark. If we can hit at dusk, we stand a good advantage.”

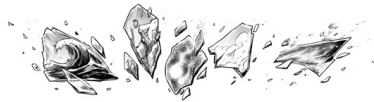
Vertus eyes the weapons carefully. Skylar steps forward, blocking Helios, Sketch, and Ghost from view. “Whatever you’re thinking of saying, don’t. We’re going to save my sister. They’re coming to help. The humans will have defences against us. EvoGen has spent decades researching, experimenting on, and learning as much as they can about the Changed. If you think for one second, we can just walk in there, use our magic, and walk back out with Ember, you’re delusional.”

“It makes perfect sense to have backup with human weaponry. It’s like fighting fire with fire and water at the same time,” Aaron adds.

It’s slow progress, even with magic to aid us. Trekking through the snow and mountains is tedious. It takes time—time that feels wasted.

Two hours after stepping through the portal, we bridge a rise, and before us is a small valley with one of the oldest

buildings that must have survived The Change. Out of the way, sheltered by the mountain peaks around it, somehow the damage of the solar flares, earthquakes, and tsunamis didn't touch this little valley. How an avalanche didn't bury it under feet of snow or even how they built the stone and wood house without magic are questions I will never have an answer to.



Vertus wraps us in his shadows, taking advantage of the growing night. There's something about being in the mountains that makes his powers more effective. Probably the lack of light pollution. Our house isn't in the centre of town, but the stars aren't as clear as they are here. The sinister nature of EvoGen's work detracts from the natural beauty of our surroundings. And now really isn't the time to be distracted.

Trey manipulates some dirt into a key, guiding it into place and unlocking the door for us.

"That's a neat trick," Aaron murmurs, his eyes glued to Trey as though he can absorb the knowledge of how to use his affinity like that by watching the other Changed.

The scent of dank, stale air tickles my nose, and I push the creeping dejection away. This entrance might not be used often, but it doesn't mean the place has been abandoned.

Atticus sends instructions to the ex-Shadow-Stalkers with his hands. Some gestures we've used in training missions but others are foreign to me, and I can't follow exactly what he's ordering.

Ristevski and Ellis branch off, heading down the first hallway. Trey and Nox take the next one. The house is a rabbit warren of passages and corridors. Atticus looks at Vertus when we reach the central staircase, deferring to the one of us with the most experience in this situation.

Vertus' pale eyes scan over us, clearing, planning out the sub-teams. With quick, deft movements, he points to Atticus,

Helios, and then me. Skylar, Aaron, and Sketch make up the second team, leaving Zane and Ghost with Vertus.

Vertus' team heads upstairs, while Skylar's team and my team descend into the basement. The backup generator lights offer a low glow to guide our steps. The whole place is eerily quiet, and with each step, my heart sinks a little more.

There's no one here.

CHAPTER 12

HELIOS

“What do we do now?” Klaus asks as the silence of the house hangs over us like a deadweight. It seemed like a sure thing. Lydia Chadwick has been in the area. Why would she have been here if this wasn’t the right place?

“We find a room with a computer and hook Resource into the systems.” Atticus points down the corridor. “And we keep searching. Just because we’ve found no signs of habitation yet doesn’t mean the place is completely abandoned.” No sooner than the last word leaves his mouth, a staccato of gunfire rings out above us.

“Guess you spoke too soon,” Skylar mutters to Klaus.

“Skylar, Sketch, Aaron, stay down here and find a computer for Resource. Helios, Klaus, let’s go join the fun.” Atticus picks up the pace as we retrace our steps. I pull one of my assault rifles from my back and grip it in front of me. Every sense goes on high alert. Now is when mistakes like friendly fire can easily happen. Anyone who steps into my field of vision has to be evaluated before I shoot, without giving them time to discharge first.

The adrenaline sends a coarse thrill through me as I follow Atticus up the stairs. Smoke fills the ground-floor hallways, making me cough. Pressure manifests around my head, and my ears pop, but once they do, I can breathe without the smoke affecting my lungs.

“You’re welcome.” Klaus claps me on the back as Atticus throws out a wall of light. The gunfire stutters to a stop as the

humans ambushing us cry out while Atticus' magic burns their eyes through the night vision goggles they're undoubtedly wearing.

My lips twist in satisfaction knowing EvoGen's men are suffering. It's the least they deserve in retribution for taking Ember from me.

A hulking giant storms out from the left hallway. I raise my gun, finger poised on the trigger, ready to shoot, until my brain registers it's Ristevski.

"We must have tripped something on our way in," he barks, running a hand over his newly grown mohawk.

"Are you saying none of you checked for traps?" I ask. "Isn't that rule one of infiltration? Always check for traps."

A short burst of gunfire goes off, and Ristevski swipes a hand toward the shooter, launching a fireball at the human soldier.

"So, do they want us, or are they protecting something here?" Klaus voices the question that's been swirling around in my mind. "Or option three, a bit of both."

"Less talking, more fighting," Atticus orders.

That cold, sinister smile that's been pushing to come to the surface finally takes over my face. Ristevski glances at me and steps back, which only causes my smile to grow wider. Nox dashes out of the right hallway and sends a heavy gust of wind through the ground floor, clearing away the smoke.

With vision restored, I move past Ristevski, taking aim and opening fire on the humans. They may be low-ranking squaddies or high-ranking officers. Either way, I don't care. They have ties to EvoGen or Chadwick, the people responsible for Ember's past and present. I will blacken my soul with a million deaths if it means her future is only filled with love and safety. I will pay any price to ensure she never knows pain and trauma like that inflicted by Dominic Carmichael past her dying breath.

Blood pools on the floor, seeping into and staining the rug-covered hardwood. Atticus raises his fist above his head, light

shining out of it and illuminating the gloomy halls. “Spread out, if any of them are alive, bring them to the foot of the stairs. Vertus can scan their memories for vital intel before we head out. I’m not hanging around while Ember is still being held somewhere else.”

“Helios!” Sketch shouts from the basement.

I drag my eyes away from the barely conscious human at my feet and look to the staircase. “What is it?”

“Fuck if I know, which is why I’m calling you. We found some sort of lab.”

Shouldering my SA80, I exchange nods with Atticus before descending into the basement. Sketch doesn’t utter a word as he leads the way deeper into the tunnels. I’m sceptical he’s found a true lab, but the note of worry in his voice has me curious enough to investigate.

It’s not that I distrust my twin. We simply have different priorities and discomforts. Once you see someone squeal and jump onto a chair to escape a money spider, it’s hard to trust when they worry. The damn things are only two millimetres long, it’s not like it was a tarantula or worse.

He leads me to the end of the corridor where Aaron and Skylar are standing on either side of a door. Both of their lips are pulled thin. Whatever it is Sketch wants me to see, it’s sure upset the boys.

Sketch pushes open the door and ushers me inside. Neither of the other two follow us.

Bubbling rumbles of multiple air filtration systems sing out, consuming my attention. The lab has a much cleaner smell to it. It’s been in use far more regularly and recently than the rest of the property. Sleek steel counters line the side walls, and a set of four make up an island in the middle. The back wall counters, however, hold the foot-high cylinders that prompted my brother to call me down here.

Viscous liquid designed to replicate amniotic fluid fills each of the four tanks.

Swallowing my rage at the sight, I send out a pulse of my magic to the clusters of cells within each tank. I check each one three times to make sure I'm reading the biometrics correctly. Footsteps echo in the corridor, but I ignore them. Sketch, Skylar, and Aaron will handle whoever it is.

Pulling my SA80 from my shoulder, I let loose a sweeping arc of bullets. Each of the four tanks shatter, spraying liquid and cellular debris across nearby surfaces, including me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Skylar shouts as I turn away from the carnage I created. My gaze slides over my Anchor's brother and locks with my twin. Sketch gives me an almost imperceptible nod before turning to address Vertus, Atticus, Klaus, and Zane as they join us.

“Trey and his team are doing a final sweep. Upstairs was empty except for some creepy-looking nurseries. What happened in here?” Vertus raises an eyebrow, peering between the shattered tanks and me.

“I was cleaning house. Did you find a computer for Resource? We clearly have the wrong place, and I'd rather it not take another month to find Ember.” I glance back at the damage I've caused. Is any of it salvageable? Perhaps we should destroy the entire building to be safe.

“There's one in the next room, but Resource gave us a different connection. We can't plug him into their system,” Aaron explains.

“Did you use an adapter?” Ghost asks, pulling a selection of wires from one of his pockets.

“Obviously not, considering you had the adapters in your pockets.” Sketch stalks over to his vice president and plucks the cables from him. “Come on, let's get this done and get the fuck out of here.”

CHAPTER 13

VERTUS

It's taking too long. I glance down at my phone again, but there's still no word from Resource or Source. When he said he was bringing the other hacker on to help with finding Ember's true location, I knew it wouldn't be as straightforward as we'd hoped.

It's been over a month since we portaled to Mount Kazbek. Accepting we wouldn't have an immediate answer and would return to Royce's bookshop was a bitter pill to swallow. Logically, I know they're working as fast as they can, but I expected them to have the answers for us within a week. And they did find answers, but not to the most important question.

We have several dossiers of evidence against the Conclave representatives. There's enough to have at least seven of the thirteen step down. I found myself agreeing with Helios' suggestion of blackmailing Ember's location from them, but that was vetoed by the others.

"I expect unhinged suggestions from Helios, but not you, Vertus," Atticus' words replay in my head.

Grabbing the back of my office chair, I swivel it and drop down before facing the computer. My fingers drum out a random beat as I fight the urge to message the two hackers. If they have intel, they'll reach out. I'd only be pulling them from their search if I contact them.

My foot twitches, and I turn the chair with full intention of getting up. The best intentions often go awry, though.

With two swift clicks of the mouse and a trickle of magic to verify my signature, I open the chat centre with Source.

/Any update?

It feels like an eternity, sitting watching the blinking cursor before the machine beeps and the three dots appear. They wave at me, taunting my impatience for any thread of an update.

Source: You understand the concept of “we’ll get back to you when we know something,” right?

/Yes

/But it’s been weeks, and you signed a contract two days ago. I’m your boss.

Source: You are.

Source: That doesn’t magic answers into existence. I—we—still have to do the work.

/And?

/Anything?

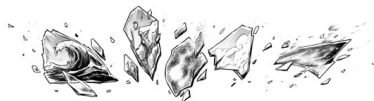
Source: Yes, actually.

“Guys!” I holler, amplifying my voice with a trace of my magic to ensure they all hear me.

/What have you found?

/Source?

**Source has left the chat



“What the fuck?” I stare at the message blinking on the screen.

“You hear back?” Zane asks, coming up behind me and scanning the screen. “Why’d they leave?”

“I don’t know. Something feels off.” Turning in my chair, I look over to Helios. “Since you’re the only one with

Resource's number, can you call him? Source said they had something, and then nothing before logging off." The screen flashes as I'm booted from the server, and when I try to log back in, I'm met with an error message. "And now it's saying the server doesn't exist. What the fuck is going on?"

He frowns but pulls his phone from his pocket. "I'll see what Resource can tell us."

I bring up Trey's contact details in my phone and leave Zane to fill Aaron, Atticus, and Klaus in on what's happened. My gut is telling me there's more to Source logging off than meets the eye. They're a hacker, and we've been digging up a lot of evidence against the Conclave recently.

"Boss," Trey greets and then waits.

Knowing there's no need to waste time with pleasantries, I dive straight into the reason for my call. "What do we know about Source?"

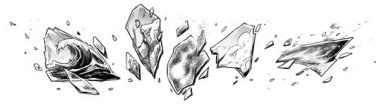
"Your hacker who you just convinced to sign on to be our eyes in the sky for all missions? That Source?"

"Yeah. That one." I quickly fill him in on today's events. "My gut is saying they've been compromised, but I can't prioritise Source over Ember, and if we get the information they had..." I leave the rest unsaid. He knows I'll be through the first portal to Ember's location the second I know it.

"Tell Resource to send us what he can regarding Source. We'll find them and help them if that's what they need. You get your Anchor back, Boss. We'll handle the rest."

"Thanks, man. I'm really glad you came and joined my little venture," I say and hang up on his chuckles. With a wave of my hand, I draw Helios' attention. "Tell Resource to send anything to Trey and the team he can find on Source's disappearance. They'll look for Source while we get Ember home. Assuming we have a location?"

Helios relays my message down the phone and nods before hanging up. "We've got a location."



Stepping through the portal, the cold air whips the loose strands of my hair from the low ponytail I've tied my silver mane in. This time, we're all decked out in Helios' armoury. I keep the assault rifle ready as we make our approach.

Acrid smoke tickles my nose, and as we clamber up the final peak, Atticus, Klaus, and Zane gain a new burst of energy.

"Ember's magic is in the air." Atticus sends in a mental message to me. That's the best sign we've had that we're in the right place.

"No!" Klaus shouts as he reaches the top first.

Zane falls to his knees, and Atticus stumbles to a stop before releasing an anguished bellow. A bright plume of light explodes from my second-in-command and bond-brother.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

I wrap his magic and him in a shroud of shadows. The last thing we want is to offer EvoGen a beacon directly to us.

"How does that happen?" Aaron mumbles, and I turn from Atticus to see what they're all looking at.

The valley Resource sent satellite footage of an hour ago is nothing but a charred crater. Fires burn sporadically throughout the debris that was once the EvoGen facility.

Helios pauses briefly to take in the disaster zone below us. "You think fire would harm Ember? You call her 'Little Phoenix' for a reason, don't you?" He activates the skis on his boots and hits the slope.

"He's right. Pull it together. Use your bond with her. If Ember was dead, you'd know it. So let's get down there and find our girl."

CHAPTER 14

EMBER

“When will you be proceeding with the implantation? Wasn’t that the whole purpose of freeing you and bringing her here? We had a deal, Dr Carmichael. It’s been almost two months, and there’s been no progress.”

The words pierce through the haze surrounding me as fear lances through my heart. Chadwick’s here again, which never bodes well for me. I mentally prepare myself for another round of uncomfortable tests when her words register.

Did she say implantation?

“This afternoon.” I almost miss Dom’s response, lost in the reeling thoughts and implications of what that one word means for me. “I’m confident the hormones we’ve been administering will enable a successful transfer of the embryos.”

“And when exactly were you going to request Mason’s sample? Don’t you need that *before* now?” Chadwick’s snippish tone relays her displeasure, but I can’t say I feel the same. Mason Chadwick is a bully, the only one worse than him is Felix Crannick.

Dom’s condescending chuckle drifts across the room from his office. The sound sends a cold chill racing through my blood. “Ember’s eggs have already been fertilised. They have a better chance of remaining viable if they’re fertilised prior to being frozen. Your son’s contribution is unnecessary.”

“If that’s the case, who will be the biological father for the Anchor’s offspring?” The representative’s words sound as

though she's forcing them out through clenched teeth. There's a beat of silence, and my anxiety increases with every millisecond until Dom answers her.

"Me, of course."

Bile rises in my throat, and a cold sweat breaks out across my skin.

If I wanted children, it would never be under these circumstances. There is nothing in the world I would hate more than to see this plan of his come to pass. I can't let it. The time for sitting back and hoping for rescue is gone. I can't rely on my Sept to find and save me.

"What do you mean 'me, of course'?" Representative Chadwick shrieks.

I force my eyes open, staring up at the metallic beams and pipes overhead. It's gone eerily silent since her outburst.

A throat clears, in the way people do when regaining composure. "We had an agreement. My son would gain the advantages of bonding an Anchor, while you get to conduct your experiments. My son was meant to father her children. Not you!"

"I can't unfertilise the eggs, Lydia." I can't see them from where I'm strapped to the exam table, but if I could, I'm sure Dom would be rolling his eyes at the Changed representative. "Don't be pathetic. If your doctor had fixed her like you claimed he would when we made the agreement, this would be a moot point. Your doctor failed. Thus, no grandchild for you to carry and birth. The other surrogates have already been processed. They'll return next week to the other site for embryo transfer. We'll implant the final four embryos into Ember today and monitor the pregnancies. I'm intrigued to see if those she carries will be more powerful..."

The racing, pounding beat of my heart drowns out the rest of his words. I cannot allow Dom to use me like an incubator. This cycle of being the victim ends now.

Closing my eyes, I reach down into the depths of my being and call on my magic. I'm an Anchor. There is a well of power

within me that everyone is clamouring to use or gain control of. Why can't I use it to my advantage? Embrace the chaos of the fire within and ignite.

My core temperature rises, and my eyes fly open as a gasp leaves my lips. Every injury Dom and EvoGen have inflicted upon me flashes through my mind. Close on their heels come the trials, tests, and interviews from the Conclave. Helios, Vertus, and Atticus telling me I can be more. Do more.

A soft glow engulfs me as my fire magic rises to the surface. My pale skin glistens with sweat as it flushes from pink to red from the increasing heat. Freeing myself is one thing, but then Dom will still live. He'll still have access to my eggs, and the surrogates...No, they're fine. He said there's another site and they're not pregnant yet.

"I do not consent to being a mother. Biologically or otherwise." I pull at my restraints, sitting up and locking eyes with Dom through the small window in the wall separating us.

The door bangs open as Dom marches towards me. "Who said anything about *your* consent? Stupid girl, do you think you have any say in what happens here? Your Sept may have damaged one facility, but they will never find this one. You will remain here and provide me with all the future subjects I desire." A wicked grin pulls at his lips as he continues his approach. "We're starting with your eggs, but I have a theory that any Changed eggs will do. The foetus will feed from you and harness your power, regardless of biology." The overhead sprinklers explode in a shower of water and foam, filling the room with steam.

Still, my fire rises.

It consumes me. My clothes disintegrate, drifting to the table and floor, but there's no feeling of exposure despite being naked. A flickering glow in my peripheral catches my attention. Flames lick my skin and dance around me, obscuring all intimate areas from view.

"I thought you said she was cuffed?" Chadwick screeches. Her eyes widen with fear as I slip off the table. I take a single

step towards them, and Dom scrambles to retreat to the assumed safety of his office.

“Ember? Rein the fire in, pet. You’re in the main lab. There’s an oxygen pipe to your left and directly above you. If you’re not careful, you’ll blow us up. No one wants or needs to die today.” Dom’s tone is soft and soothing, as though he’s trying to calm a wild animal.

In a way, I suppose he is. But you don’t abuse an animal for years and expect them to calm because you decide to try and feign compassion. His self-preservation is the only thing driving him. Maybe if I was younger or had never known freedom. If I had never known Sam, Nik, or Tavon. If I’d never met my Sept, or Myra, Willow, and Sawyer. Maybe then I would have fallen for Dom’s ploy. But I knew freedom. I did meet my fathers, Sept, and friends.

So, this time, he’s shit out of luck.

I turn my head slowly toward the pipes. There’s no need to ask which one is the oxygen. A bright red label runs along one section, calling me to it. In a trancelike movement, I glide toward the pipe.

“I don’t need them...” I say, looking back at Dom and Lydia. Their shoulders sag before I continue. “...to destroy you and this place.”

Their eyes go wide, but before a word can fall from their lips, my fire explodes out of me.

CHAPTER 15

ZANE

Smoke curls up from the wreckage. I wish I had an ounce of Helios' confidence in Ember right now. It's not that I think the fire will have harmed her, but that the structural damage the fire caused will. If the ceiling collapsed, how would she avoid getting hurt? There's only so much magic she can wield at the same time. Controlling a fire fierce enough to level a building wouldn't allow room for multicasting.

Then again, Ember excelled in training. She has proven time and time again she can think outside of the box. In my mind, I flick through the various displays of her magic that astounded not just me but the rest of our class at the Institute too.

She held her own against Vertus and Klaus. Not to mention the syphoning of energy and teleporting miles from the training ground to home. I've never witnessed someone achieve that at our age.

A shiver runs down my spine and I pull my heated shield closer, though I'm not convinced my reaction is solely due to the chill in the air. The bite of frost is intense as I follow Helios and Vertus down the slope towards the EvoGen facility's ruins.

Vertus cups his hands around his mouth when he reaches the base. "Little Phoenix?" he calls without using his magic to enhance his voice. "Ember?"

Helios doesn't shout out or try to vocally pinpoint where Ember is. He exudes an enviable calmness as he removes the

skis from his boots and heads to the nearest section of debris on his left. I bypass Vertus in the middle of the two of us and move deeper into the crumbled destruction. Little fires still burn in random places. Part of me wishes they were beacons, guiding my steps closer to Ember, like a will-o-wisp from the old tales.

“What if we try Klaus’ idea again?” I pitch my voice so no matter where my bond-brothers are in the valley, they’ll hear me.

“Which idea? I’ve suggested a few different ones, especially over the last month.” Klaus doesn’t look at me as he speaks, too busy scanning the rubble at our feet for any signs of life.

“Using our bond with Em to find her.”

“I don’t know,” he hedges. “Last time was...not great.”

I suppress my frustration, instead focusing on the possibility that we’ll sense Ember now that we’re close to where she is.

“Yeah. I get that, and this is probably going to be just as unsuccessful, especially if she’s still got those fucking cuffs on ___”

“Nah, no way.” Aaron shakes his head. “Not a chance Ember did this much damage without having gotten free of those cuffs.” He sweeps a hand to encompass the entire valley. “Look at this place. The raw power and strength needed for this is insane. If Ember still had those bastard cuffs on when the fire started, there’s no way they stayed on for long.”

“I agree.” Atticus pushes his glasses up his nose as he approaches Aaron and me with Klaus. “It’s logical to try again. We’re in considerably closer proximity now, and there should be nothing but our instinctual feelings to interfere on our end. Whether Ember is conscious may impact the results, but the odds should be more in our favour than not.”

Atticus holds his hand out, palm up, and Klaus rests his fingers across Atticus’. Light and water manifest the instant their skin connects, forming a glowing, rippling orb. As soon

as I rest my hand with theirs and my fingers connect with them both, the light breeze in the valley with us dies down.

My air affinity joins their magic, increasing the ripples on the orb's surface. Allowing my eyelids to droop until almost closed, I summon every memory of Ember. How her smile lights up any room and makes her shine from the inside out. How the morning sunlight dances on her septum piercing and highlights her freckles. Memories of her igniting on the lake pier at my uncles' house flood my mind. The way the flames grew from her red curls, it was almost impossible to tell where her hair ended and the flames began. Clinging to the memories, I push down the frantic energy that's been bubbling its way up my throat. We *will* be reunited with our Anchor today. I can't consider the alternative. I have to believe by the end of the day I'll hold her in my arms. It's already been too long.

Wind swirls through the water and light orb, pulling a tendril out that drifts to the heart of what was once the facility.

"Stay focused on Ember," Vertus orders, excitement lancing through his words. "Aaron, Helios, with me. Follow the trail but watch your step. Last thing we need are broken bones because of an avoidable accident."

"Why would we worry about that?" Helios sounds genuinely confused. "If you can't heal yourselves, I'll heal you."

"Because I would rather you conserve your energy to heal Ember, should she need it." Vertus sighs. "I thought that would have been obvious."

The tendril of our combined magic swirls into a miniature cyclone before bursting into flames. I inhale sharply, trying to contain the inferno of hope coursing through me.

Come on. Please. Show us where she is.

"There!" Aaron points at the smoke left behind.

Helios charges through the broken slabs of concrete and exposed pipes and girders. Klaus pulls his hand free first and races after the others towards the smoke, indicating where we

should look. As Atticus and I follow, I push a breeze to form behind us, aiding in propelling our steps to reach Ember faster than if we were moving under our own steam alone.

“Fuck!” Helios pulls his hand back from the shattered pipe, leaning over several chunks of concrete where our magic congregated. “It’s still scalding hot.”

“On it,” Klaus responds, pulling the water left behind from where the fire melted the snow. My water magic isn’t as strong as his, but it’s a straightforward task. I add my magic to Klaus’, then Atticus, Vertus, and Aaron join us. The metal hisses as the five streams of water hit it. Steam rises, and I switch to creating a gentle wind to direct it away from us.

Helios heals his palm from the burns and rams his shoulder under the pipe as soon as the water no longer creates new streams of steam. “One of you get the other side,” he grunts under the weight.

Aaron drops his water and cracks his knuckles, looking over at me. “You good to help with the pipe and I’ll work on the concrete?”

Instead of answering him, I step around Klaus and burrow my broad shoulder under the pipe, bending my knees to give me the best leverage possible. The remains of a yellow and black warning label catch my eye as I push upwards, planting one foot on the block of rubble to aid in shifting the heavy metal out of the way.

Atticus moves next to Aaron, and after a brief conversation, they both thrust their hands forward, curl their fingers, and lift. Aaron’s nostrils flare, and a bead of sweat dampens Atticus’ brow as they work to lift the concrete.

Klaus drops to his knees when a gap appears. “Ember? Hey, Freckles, you down there? Can you hear me?”

Blood roars in my ears as my heart races in an adrenaline fuelled staccato threatening to drown out all sound, but I force myself to focus, seeking any hint Ember is here and conscious.

“Klaus?” Her response is so quiet I almost believe it to be a figment of my hopeful imagination—except I’m not the only

one who heard it.

“Yeah, Em. We’re all here. We’ll get you out—”

“Oh, no. That’s okay,” she replies, cutting him off.

Klaus rolls to his side and looks up at me with confusion etched across his face. *What the fuck?* he mouths, but I don’t have an answer for him.

The remaining slabs of concrete and shattered pieces of metal piping between us and Ember begin to shake. I have enough wherewithal to grab Klaus by the collar of his shirt and yank him back before the debris blocking us from getting to Ember launches into the air.

“Do you have spare clothes with you by any chance?” Ember asks, and I snap my gaze to her. Soot and dirt streak and smudge her pale skin. The yellow hue of healing bruises mingles with the purple of fresh ones amidst the grime.

I drop my guns and yank off the bullets crossing my chest before reaching back and pulling my long-sleeved black combat shirt off in one fluid move. Helios beats me to her side, running his faintly glowing hands over every inch of her in a weird cross between medical professionalism and reverence.

“I’m okay. Just tired. I think I could sleep for a week.” Ember forces a smile, and I crouch next to her, hand out, offering my shirt. “Thank you.” She reaches up, caressing my cheek. Her skin is so warm against my chilled cheek I have to fight a hissing gasp from slipping free.

“Anything urgent that needs immediate healing, or are we good to get home?” Atticus asks Helios. The doctor’s jaw is clenched as he grinds his teeth. His golden-amber eyes dart around the valley, and with each passing second, he looks angrier and angrier.

“Helios?” Vertus prompts, but the doctor merely purses his lips before pushing to his feet.

“You’re safe to move. I’d like to do a full workup in the morning after you’ve showered and eaten.” He directs his

comments to Ember, but they answer Atticus' and Vertus' questions too.

“Shower and food sound *really* good. But can we switch it for a bath?” Ember asks, getting to her feet. Helios and I give her a helping hand whenever she needs it as we navigate our way back home.

Royce's portal flares to life as soon as we step foot in the clearing, but instead of spitting us out at his shop like it always has, I step through onto the terrace outside our kitchen and living-room pod with Ember wrapped around me like a koala.

“I'll get that bath running for you, Sprite.” Aaron drops a kiss on Ember's head before jogging up to the pod with the master suite.

“What do you fancy to eat? I'm not Aaron, but I can make a mean cheese toastie?” I offer.

“Sounds perfect.” Ember smiles and turns on the spot, taking in the room like it's the first time she's seen it. Her shoulders droop as a stuttering breath leaves her lips. “I killed them. All those people...”

My eyes widen because I have no idea how to have this conversation. Killing people on a mission is different somehow. At least I've rationalised it in my head to be different. I grab the bread, butter, and cheese to make the sandwiches and throw a pleading look at Vertus, Atticus, Helios, and Klaus.

“You gave Dom a far more peaceful death than he deserved, love.” Helios steps up behind her, resting his palms on her shoulders and massaging the muscles.

“It wasn't just him, though. What if the surrogates were there, and I misunderstood? What if one of the staff's families were visiting? What—” Helios spins her around to face him, and my hand hovers above the bread I'm buttering as I wait to hear what he'll say.

“You can't think in 'what-ifs.' You'll drive yourself into a depression or worse.” He ducks down until he's eye level with

her. “I’m not saying to compartmentalise it. I know that’s something you’re good at, but it’s not the healthiest route.”

“Let’s put this another way, Pol.” Atticus adjusts his glasses as he rounds the island to stand beside Helios. “Would you blame us for the deaths on your hands?”

“No. It was my magic and my decision—”

“Decisions you only had to make because we failed you. We’re to blame for what happened to you. We didn’t protect you. Despite *knowing* the representatives were up to something, we failed to take proper precautions. If we had, you wouldn’t have been in that facility. Everything that happened in the last two months wouldn’t have come to pass.”

“And,” Vertus adds, “don’t forget anyone in that building would have needed a specific clearance level. When you were growing up, how many staff families came to visit?”

Ember chews her lip as her eyes dart from side to side while she searches her memories. “I-I’m not sure.”

“Well, I can tell you that I never saw a civilian inside the facilities I was stationed at.”

I finish building the sandwiches and butter the outside of the bread before adding them to the grill. The scent of melting butter and cheese fills the kitchen as I wait for the perfect time to flip them.

“Is it wrong that I’m sad Dominic Carmichael is dead? Burning doesn’t feel like enough of a punishment.” Helios purses his lips, tilting his head to the side, and strands of his red hair fall into his eyes.

“Um, I’m not sure he burnt, exactly,” Ember says as I place one golden, gooey toastie masterpiece in front of her. She glances down at it and smiles.

“What do you mean, he didn’t burn?” Klaus asks, grabbing a glass and filling it with water and a lemon slice for Ember.

“Thank you.” She takes a small sip before answering. “Um, we were in one of the examination rooms. There were two oxygen pipes, and he was pretty close. I think when my

fire took over, he was too close to the pipe.” She shrugs and takes a bite of the toastie. A happy moan slips out of her, and she wiggles where she’s standing next to the island. “So good.”

“Yup, see, it’s not just my twin who’s good in the kitchen.” I wink at her, trying to defuse the sullen mood that’s descended the room from the conversation. “Finish that and then head up to your room. Aaron will have the bath ready, and you can relax some before we let Skylar and your dads know you’re home.”

CHAPTER 16

EMBER

Home.

I'm home.

The layout of the house, with its different levels and disconnected rooms, keeps me from hearing the guys. It's so quiet. Too quiet after the events of the last two months. Which seems odd, since I now have the full scope of my bonds with Atticus, Klaus, and Zane. Externally, the world is too quiet. Internally, it's loud and somewhat overwhelming. The adjustment to sensing their combined residual annoyance, frustration, and anger will take time. More time than the few hours that have passed since they found me.

A small part of me wishes they'd arrived sooner. That we could have destroyed Dom and the facility together. But I can't shake the pride flowing over me when I think back on what happened.

I started as a damsel in distress. The woman in the stories who needs to be saved by the heroes. Except I became my own hero. This time. That's something I can be proud of, even if I'm conflicted over the deaths my actions caused.

Chewing my lip, I walk over to the window, taking a moment to absorb the view, and let the winter breeze brush away the faces of EvoGen's staff. Releasing a heavy sigh, I close my eyes briefly, accepting that I need to ask Helios about starting therapy. Not with him, though, which I'm sure he'll hate, but I know myself enough that I won't be comfortable discussing everything with him.

“Hey, you.” I turn at Aaron’s voice, and despite my exhaustion, a soft smile takes over my lips.

“Hi. Is everything okay?”

“With us?” he asks and nods. “Perfect. You’re home and you’re safe. The world is falling to shit, and my uncles and Skylar will probably have an aneurysm that we haven’t let them in to see you...” He shrugs one broad shoulder before stepping into the room. “Everything else in life can wait for another day. I have plans.” He stretches out a hand towards me.

My smile wavers as thoughts of the botched bonding ceremony surface along with Trex watching me shower every day. Aaron’s sharp gaze flicks to my lips, then to my eyes. His expression softens as he takes another step closer. “I’m not sure where you just went, but I would never pressure you into doing anything you don’t want to. Trust me?” The vulnerability behind the question doesn’t escape my notice.

“Always,” I murmur, sliding my hand into his much larger one. The contrast of our skin tones is like night eclipsing day in a protective shroud as he wraps his fingers around mine and leads me from the bedroom.

A light scent tickles my nose, and I inhale deeply, trying to identify the fragrance. Aaron guides me into the bathroom, and my free hand flies to my mouth as a gasp slips out.

“I don’t know all the details of these last two months—and I don’t want to know unless you want to share. I’m happy being a silent support, but I thought some pampering would be nice.” I can’t find words to answer him, so I simply nod, taking in the candlelit room and giant bubble bath. “I went with coconut and tonka bean,” he explains. “Not traditionally relaxing fragrances, but they’re subtle together. While you get settled, I’ll go grab the ice cream—”

“Ice cream? In the bath?” That’s not something I would have ever considered doing, but now that he’s suggested it, it sounds like heaven.

A wide grin spreads across his face. “Yeah. Ice cream in the bath. I found some audiobook files too, so you can relax, eat, and listen. Unwind. De-stress. Tonight is about you. Though, I will say, it’s unlikely you’ll get the bed all to yourself.”

“That sounds good, honestly. If I wake up and I’m not alone, it’ll be easier to remember where I am.”

His smile drops for a millisecond before he has it firmly back in place. “I’ll let the others know you’re good with a puppy pile. Probably best to pinpoint the snorers sooner than later anyway.” He grins. “Did you want mocha chip or vanilla or a mix of both?”

“Mix, please.”

“You got it, Sprite.” Aaron drops a kiss on the crown of my head. “I’m really glad you’re home, and I’m sorry we couldn’t find you sooner.”

“It’s fine. And I’m not just saying that. I think I needed to save myself, purely to prove I can.”

He bobs his head, nodding along to my statement. “I can see that. I’ll go grab that ice cream for you and the book.” He slips out of the room, and I centre myself.

Tilting my head to the side, I groan in relief as my neck muscles crack, relieving some of the tension that’s been hanging there. With quick, deft movements, I strip out of my clothes and dip a toe into the warm water hidden beneath the mountain of sweet-smelling bubbles. The heat sinks into my skin, and a contented sigh leaves my lips. Tipping my head back, I close my eyes and bask in the moment.

I’m home.

Not at Sam’s house, but *my* home. One I share with my bonded and future bonded. This is the place where we’ll grow old together, where we could raise hypothetical children, if that’s something we all agree we want. It has to be unanimous. A decision I need to give some serious thought to. For now, I will simply bask in the knowledge that I’m here because of my own strength.

I knew they'd come for me. There was never a doubt in my mind, but freeing myself without their help? That's something I needed to do for myself. To prove I could—and can—be my own saviour.

The first time I escaped from Dom and EvoGen, there was the ambush on the facility. Vertus' plan did save me, just not in the way he expected. Without his attack, I wouldn't have attempted to flee under my own steam.

The events of these last few weeks are proof of how much I've grown and changed. I told myself I wasn't the girl I used to be, but I don't think I believed myself until my magic broke free of the suppressor cuffs.

In my mind's eye, I watch with a twisted satisfaction as the memory of Dom's last moments on Earth play on repeat. EvoGen isn't destroyed, but the damage I caused with my fire will hinder them, and if the hacker helping the guys can get a virus into the system... That would go a long way to causing irreparable disruptions to their work.

What they were planning to do was inexcusable. I haven't stopped them completely, but that shouldn't be my responsibility. The Conclave should take groups like EvoGen more seriously. They should work with the human government to prevent the tests I grew up undertaking from happening.

And if they won't do that? If they won't put the needs of the Changed first, then there needs to be a reform. What would the world look like if, instead of having two governments and ruling bodies, there was a coalition? Where Changed and humans work side by side. Where all three races have a voice. *That's* a world I'd like to see and experience.

“Here we go.” Aaron's hand appears in front of my face, holding a heaping bowl of ice cream and a spoon. “So, I have two options. One, I set up the audiobook and you can listen in peace until someone gets twitchy and breaks down the door to check on you. Two...” A light blush takes over his cheeks. It's hard to notice on his darker skin tone, but it's there, nonetheless. “I can read to you?”

“Does that mean you’re going to join me?” I ask, looking up at him with what might be considered puppy-dog eyes. I should probably tell him about Trex and the showers at EvoGen, but that will ruin the moment. It will sour it, and I don’t want that.

If we’re both in the bath, then it’s even more different to every bathroom visit I’ve had these past two months.

“Ember...” He pauses, clearing his throat, and glances away, avoiding eye contact. “I’m not built like the other guys. Not that I’m upset about that,” he rushes to add. “I like my body, and I like my food. I’m as strong as Zane, but there’s a cuddly soft layer over the hard beefy muscles.”

“Aaron.” I shift onto my knees. The water sloshes against the lip of the tub, almost escaping. Stretching, I reach up to cup his cheek, turning him to face me. “Every body is different. I’m covered in scars and Klaus’ art. Physical attraction is great—and we have it.” I bite my lip, suddenly self-conscious. “Well, I’m attracted to you—”

His lips collide with mine. Aaron wraps one arm around my waist, pressing my damp naked chest against his T-shirt. He nips my top lip, and we open to one another. Our tongues dance in a sensual caress as Aaron’s other hand holds the back of my head, his fingers threading through my hair.

He breaks the kiss, and our breaths mingle as he rests his forehead against mine. “Okay, I’ll join you. I think you’ll like this book. It’s, uh, a little different to the ones you read with Atticus but not drastically.”

CHAPTER 17

EMBER

Aaron's deep timbre rumbles through my back as I lean against him, alternating between feeding myself ice cream and then him.

A hum of pure contentment leaves my lips, and the water sloshes against the side of the tub as I curl closer to him. I lose track of the book he's reading after the first chapter. It's a good story, and Aaron has a talent for accents, bringing each character to life in a unique way. But I get distracted by the fact we're naked.

His comments and insecurity about his body play on my mind, and the desire to show him he's not less than the others cements in my soul. Finishing the last bite of ice cream, I shift my weight until I can reach across to place it on the counter beside the sink. Aaron pauses in reading and glances up at me. Without his glasses, the resemblance with Zane is stronger but still different.

"Want me to get you some more?" he asks, already placing a hand on the side of the tub to push himself up.

"No. I'm good. Unless you want more?"

"This is your treat, Ember. It's about you relaxing and feeling pampered and sated."

"Sated, huh?" A coy smile curls my lips and confidence courses through me as I readjust my position. My small breasts graze his thighs as I slide closer towards him. "What if I want to make sure you're sated too? Not everything is about me. I want to do something for you too."

His amber eyes darken with lust, and the water ripples when his cock twitches. Aaron clears his throat and picks the book back up, obscuring his face. “Having you home is what I wanted. Sharing a bath with you is more than I anticipated from tonight. You don’t owe me anything.”

Pushing aside the minor sting of rejection, I raise a hand from the water, calling on my magic to dry it before gently pushing the book to one side so I can see him. “And if I said it wasn’t about ‘owing’ you something but offering because I *want* to?”

“I-I—” Aaron pulls his arm across his face, coughing into his elbow. “You’ve been through a lot—”

“And we lost our bonding night. Do you—Did you—not want to bond with me?”

“What? No. I mean, yes. Fuck.” He rubs a hand through his close-cropped hair. “I’m saying this wrong. Let me start over?” I nod, chewing on my lip. Aaron sets the book on the edge of the bath before reaching for me. His fingers cradle my chin as his thumb pulls my lip free from my teeth. “Yes, I wanted to complete our bond in the caves, and I still want to complete our bond when you’re ready. There’s no rush though. I’m not going anywhere.”

He tucks a loose curl behind my ear, a soft reverent smile on his face as he looks at me.

“So, you want to bond in the future, but not now?”

“You just got home after two months of—I can’t even begin to imagine—there’s no rush. No pressure from me. But when you’re ready? I can’t wait to take my time exploring every curve of your body. To bury my face between your thighs until I’m drowning in your cum. Only once I’m sure you’re thoroughly satisfied will I sink into your sweet pussy and wring at least one more orgasm from you before spilling inside you.”

“Okay.” He quirks an eyebrow at me while blindly reaching for the book.

“Okay what?” he asks.

“Okay, I’m ready. And I’ll prove it.”

His brows crease at my words, but I don’t explain. Ducking my head beneath the surface of the water, I summon my magic, parting the water and creating an air pocket around my nose and mouth... and Aaron’s hard cock.

Licking my lips, I lean forward and run my tongue up his entire length, following the curve as it veers to the right ever so slightly. At the tip, I lave and lick around his head before taking him into my mouth and swallowing. His hips buck, creating rippling waves in the tub and sending some water splashing over the edge.

It’s difficult to hear detail, but the thump of the book landing on the floor as his fingers curl into my hair pulls a smile to my lips. Aaron doesn’t take control of my movements. His hand on my head feels more like he’s reassuring himself this is actually happening.

His grip tightens before he relaxes and his fingers flutter against my head. His other hand sinks through the water into my pocket of air to tap my shoulder. With a final languid lick, I pull off of his cock and allow him to haul me to the surface.

Without a word, he drags me onto his lap so I’m straddling him. Aaron’s full lips collide with mine, a fierce kiss I’d never have expected from him. There’s a ferocity and hunger that fills me with self-confidence and boosts my self-esteem. Water tendrils curl around us as he reaches between us and guides his thick, hard length into me.

I gasp, arching my back and breaking our kiss as three water tendrils circle my nipples and clit. “I thought your affinity was earth?” Through hooded eyes, I glimpse the corners of his mouth tilting with a smile.

“It is. That doesn’t mean I’m not good with water too. It’s my second strongest affinity, and it’s not like earth magic is a big assist right now.” He thrusts up, burying himself to the hilt.

The internal stretch balances on the line of pain and pleasure until my body adjusts. His large hands wrap around either side of my waist, lifting me almost off him, then

dropping me down. Stuttering gasps and moans pour from my lips as his magic and cock work over every erogenous zone of my body.

With each movement of his hips, water splashes over the edge of the bath onto the floor, causing a giggle to slip out at the thought of us flooding the bathroom. He grins at me and leans in, taking my ear between his teeth and nipping at it before whispering, “At least we have magic to make clean up easier.”

Kisses trail down the side of my jaw and onto my neck as he moves his hand from my waist to tangle his fingers through my damp curls. Pulling my head back and to the side to give him more access, he sucks on the juncture of my neck and shoulder, and I know there will be a bruise by morning. This should make me worry about Sam’s or Skylar’s reactions. I’m sure they will be here first thing to check on me and make sure I’m okay, but in this moment, I can’t bring myself to care.

Tendrils shift from circling to becoming entwined with the aid of air magic. More water cascades over the edge as he lifts me off of him and spins us, leaving the bathmat drenched. “Put your hands on the side of the tub,” he orders as he moves behind me, switching our position and realigning himself. His hands come forward to cup my breasts as he thrusts back into me, finding new angles and deeper spots. The orgasm that had been creeping up on me with the previous position crashes over me as he tweaks my nipples between his thumb and finger, pounding into me from behind. “Fuck, you feel so good, Ember,” he groans. One hand moves up from my breasts to cradle my throat as he hauls me up, my back against his chest. I reach back, resting my hand just above his hip, desperate for him not to stop.

Heat surges through my skin to his, and he slows his movements but doesn’t stop. With a grunt, he finishes inside me, and his water magic forces me over the edge into a gasping climax. I keep my hand on his head as best I can as our bond seals into place, and his magical signature entwines with mine. He presses a kiss to the top of my head and then both cheeks before carefully pulling out. He lightly taps my

hand on his hip, and after it's cooled, I pull away. Turning in the little water that remains in the tub, I look at my mark on his flesh. He traces it with a finger, then cups my cheek in his hand and kisses me with a soft passion, tugging my bottom lip between his.

“We should probably clean up this mess and then head to bed before the others come up,” I murmur.

He climbs out of the bath first, wraps a towel around his waist, and holds out a hand to help me so I don't slip. With the aid of our air magic, it takes seconds to dry the room.

Aaron scoops me up and carries me into the bedroom, laying me gently in the centre of the bed.

“I believe I said something about drowning between your thighs? And I am a man of my word.” He grins down at me, tugging the loose knot holding my robe closed free. He hooks my knees over his shoulders and kisses a hot trail up each thigh before sucking my clit into his mouth. My eyes roll back as intense pleasure consumes me over and over again as Aaron makes good on his promise.

CHAPTER 18

AARON

The smug, satisfied smile will likely be a permanent feature on me for a while. The image of Ember gasping and panting after I pulled a fifth orgasm from her will be one of my favourite memories. At least until I can relive it.

Careful not to wake her, I use a trickle of magic to tame the frizz our activities have left. I need to remember to dry her hair beforehand next time.

Next time. My grin widens, and I trace the mark branding me as hers. A low gurgle draws my attention back to Ember, and I bite down on my lip as her stomach grumbles again.

It's probably a good idea to get dressed before the others come up anyway. I like my body. Ember seems to, too, and her opinion is the only one that holds any weight. But that doesn't mean I'm ready for the rest of the Sept to see me naked.

Shifting to my knees, I use my magic to levitate Ember and pull the covers down before resettling her in the middle of the bed. After tucking her in, I press a featherlight kiss to her forehead before getting dressed in a clean T-shirt and sweatpants, stealing a pair of Zane's trainers on my way out.

Closing the door softly, I leave Ember and descend the many stairs to the living room and kitchen pod. I don't know if living here without the ability to teleport, like Ember can, is my favourite thing, but at least the stairs add to the daily exercises we do.

Burning all these extra calories means I can spend less time in the gym training with Atticus, Vertus, and my brother.

Klaus is in there a fair amount too, but thankfully, I can dodge that perceived requirement. Especially now I'm not looking into joining the Conclave military with Skylar and Zane. Besides, I'm not the only one who doesn't spend hours in the gym for fun; Doctor Helios' idea of fun seems to be more experiments in his lab, which I don't want to ask about or learn more about.

I'm sure his work is interesting, but something about the doctor leaves me grateful he's on our side and is as devoted to Ember as he is. But perhaps, the devotion is more akin to obsession. It's hard not to be concerned by his past behaviour. A part of me wonders how he would have reacted if Ember hadn't been called to him. Shaking my head, I open the pod door and step into the space where the rest of the Sept has gathered. Casting aside the what-ifs and worries, there's no point in borrowing trouble from things that haven't happened and likely never will.

"We need to cement the bonds. If we were a complete Sept, there's no way Ember would have been subjected to—" Helios turns abruptly before punching the wall behind him.

My eyebrows shoot up, and I glance around at the rest of the guys, trying to work out what I've walked into.

"You want to let us in on what you sensed that has you so worked up you're attempting to renovate the pod?" Vertus asks, flicking his fingers and repairing the minor damage from Helios' fist.

"I can guess to their plans..." Helios shakes his hand out and slumps down onto the sofa. Scrubbing his hands through his hair, he leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "When we found Ember, she had a large quantity of fertility hormones in her system. That along with the tanks I destroyed at Mount Kazbek..." I glance up when his words peter off. Pure hatred and rage burn in the depths of his eyes. If I didn't know his affinity was healing, I'd believe it was fire. "They were going to use her as a surrogate. An incubator. Force her to carry and birth. Dominic Carmichael should have suffered an eternity of pain and misery for all he subjected her to. His

death was far too merciful, and I want nothing more than to piece his atoms back together purely to eviscerate him.”

“What was in the tanks, Helios?” Vertus asks, his voice low and serious. It’s a tone I associate with someone who commanded the top elite force of the Conclave’s military.

Helios doesn’t answer for a moment, and the longer the silence stretches, the wilder the thoughts my brain supplements become. Yet none come close to the truth.

“Zygotes with Dominic’s DNA... and Ember’s. The viability was already failing. I simply sped the process up.”

“Skylar can’t know,” I say, drawing their attention as the gate buzzer rings through the room. Zane glances at his phone and winces, letting me know exactly who’s at our door. He taps the screen as I continue. “It’s probably best if my uncles don’t know that detail either. It will just upset them. We can’t change the past, and they might act rashly. We have evidence of the Conclave’s involvement in the abduction from the caves. Sam can use that to go after the representatives via the legal route.”

“Agreed. Resource is splitting his efforts between tracing what happened to Source and digging up dirt on the remaining representatives. I think we should bring forward the completion of the Sept bond and research into why the Conclave has a hard-on for destroying Ember if they can’t control her.” Atticus finishes speaking just as the door opens and Skylar walks in with Sketch and my uncles close behind.

“Where is she? Also, seriously dickish move to not call us to help you bring her home. What if something had gone wrong? Or there had been more security? You went up against an entire facility, just the six of you. Do you realise how insane that is?” Skylar points between Zane and me. I should feel bad, but I don’t. While I understand their desire to be part of bringing Ember home, had it been another false lead, the ramifications on Skylar’s mental health would have been detrimental.

Uncle T tilts his head to one side, looking at me with a shrewd expression. Only when he raises an eyebrow does it

click that he can sense Ember's magical signature intertwined with mine.

"To answer your question." Atticus adjusts his glasses, glancing at me with a small smile before focusing back on Skylar. "Ember is upstairs, resting. In regards to us bringing her home, yes, the six of us going up against a full facility had the potential to run awry. However, Ember saw to her freedom herself. We didn't do anything other than locate her and bring her home through a portal."

"What do you mean, she sought her own freedom?"

Vertus clears his throat. "Resource located the coordinates from EvoGen's servers, and we were able to obtain a portal to those coordinates, or as close to them as possible. There was a facility in the valley, but when we arrived, it had already been destroyed. Ember's magical signature was present, and Zane, Atticus, and Klaus were able to use their bond with her to trace her exact location amongst the rubble. Once we made ourselves known, and she knew it was definitely us, she moved the debris from over her and climbed out. We came back through the portal and brought her home. She had something to eat and went to get some rest. As I'm sure you can appreciate, she's been through a lot."

"Don't try to tell me what my sister has been through. Of everyone in this room, I know what she's been through. Evil dead held me too—"

Helios slams his hands down on the arm of the sofa and launches to his feet. "You know nothing about what she's been through! You can make assumptions the same as the rest of us, but don't stand there and act as though you know what she went through. You got out when you were ten! You have no idea of the damage inflicted upon her: the broken bones, the surgeries, the drugs they pumped into her system, the conditions they subjected her to so that they could control her like a puppet."

"That's enough, Helios," Sketch says in a deadly quiet voice. The two redheaded twins glare at each other, a battle occurring silently between them.

Turning to my cousin and uncles, I move farther into the room, standing next to Zane and the rest of our Sept. “When Ember climbed out of the facility’s remains, she was covered in soot and dirt. Yes, we were going to let you know she’s safe, that she needed a moment to relax and—”

“And you thought you’d bond her?” Sketch snaps, giving me a look of distrust.

Skylar’s head snaps around to look at me, betrayal burning brightly in his eyes. “What the hell, Aaron? How the hell could you do that after what she’s been through?”

Surprisingly, it’s Klaus who steps forward and defends me, not that my actions need defending. I can admit that the optics don’t look great. “Are you seriously insinuating that he forced Ember into bonding with him? This is your cousin, your best friend. You grew up together, trained together. And you’re gonna stand there and accuse him of something that heinous? What the hell is wrong with you? If they bonded, it’s because Ember wanted it. There is not a single person in this room who would do anything to her against her will. She means more to us than that. I would have expected you, of all people, to have known that.”

Skylar looks at his feet, and I do my best not to take his words to heart. I’ve done nothing wrong. I’ll never regret completing my bond with Ember. Our magic calls to each other. Even before we came of age, I was drawn to her. She’s beautiful, yes, but her soul is incandescent. Her warmth and kindness shines through and her smile lights up any room she enters. She embraces her imperfections and that, in turn, has me accepting mine. For the first time, I don’t have a little voice whispering in my ear I’m a consolation prize. Ember bonded me because she *wanted* to. She wanted *me*. I won’t let Skylar tar this with his insinuations.

“I have never given anyone a reason to even consider for a second that I would behave in the way you just accused me of.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I stare at my cousin—my best friend—pushing the hurt away. “I thought you were supposed to be working on not being a dick to us?”

“All right, I think that’s enough on that topic. We’re not your fathers, Aaron, and we didn’t raise Ember like we had wanted due to circumstances. But there’s a difference between knowing a bonding happened and will happen and discussing it,” Sam says, not quite meeting my eyes.

Tavon runs a hand over his bald head and then sighs. “Let’s just leave the conversation there and move on. Let’s take the rest of the evening to have dinner, and if Ember wakes up, we can discuss things with her. If not, we can come back in the morning and talk to her after she’s had a *good* night’s rest.” He glares me and my Sept-brothers with his last words, conveying no more bondings would occur tonight.

“How did you all get here so quickly, anyway?” Zane asks. “When I messaged you after Ember went upstairs for her bath, I assumed you would come over in the morning.”

Nikolai nudges Sam and tilts his head in our direction. Sam takes off his glasses, cleaning them on the edge of his shirt. “I’ve been doing some digging into the various laws surrounding Anchors and their positions within our society, specifically any that relate to only a female Anchor rather than a male. There hasn’t been a female Anchor in so long, and I’m not convinced the Conclave enforced all the relevant laws during her lifetime. Which begs the question of why the representatives are so focused on Ember now if they weren’t previously. Part of it will be that these are different representatives; they’re not the same ones who were in the seats of power fifty years ago, but they were likely to have been involved and mentored, at the very least, by the previous representatives.”

“Okay, so what did you find, then? You obviously found something, so that doesn’t explain why you’re here,” Helios says, addressing the last question to his brother.

Sketch rolls his eyes and places a hand on Skylar’s shoulder. “We weren’t aware that Nick and Tavon were on their way separately. Skylar and I were out for a ride when we got your message; we weren’t that far away, and since I was driving, it made sense for me to come up too. After all, Ember is my sister-in-law twice over.”

Helios grunts, not seeming satisfied with that answer, but not pushing for further details. A slight pink tinge blooms on Skylar's cheeks as he stares at the floor, not meeting anyone's eyes. It piques my curiosity. What could they have been doing? But it's none of my business, and I don't press. I don't want him pushing me for details about my relationship with Ember, so I won't push him.

Sam outlines the notes he's been able to find, all of which we know about already. Standard things, nothing new jumping out to why the representatives are so invested in Ember to the extent that they spent resources to send her out to Dominic Carmichael and EvoGen. Sam rubs at the back of his neck, exhaustion clear in the line of his shoulders.

He hands the book to Klaus and addresses Atticus, "Ember mentioned your scholarly friend and the extensive collection he holds. He had the journal. How likely is it that he has a copy of the original laws?"

Klaus flips through the notebook, reading different sections. Atticus glances over his shoulder, or as close to it as he can, considering Klaus is taller. Atticus nods before pulling out his phone. "I'll send Royce a message now and ask. If he doesn't know if he has the records, it will only take him a few days to check, and if he does have something, it will take me another couple of days to get him to agree to let us read it." He shares a look with Vertus before typing out a message. "Something that isn't mismatched sections of old prophecies, anyway."

"Let's have dinner," Vertus suggests, glancing around the room. His eyes linger on me for a beat longer. It takes a moment for me to realise he's checking I'm okay with them all staying. Skylar's words hurt, but they're my family. Who else can cut you as deep with an ill-thought sentence than family? I nod, and Vertus returns it before speaking up again. "We'll fill you in on what we've pieced together from Ember and what Resource has found. Trey and the team are on assignment, so the guest suite on the first floor is free. Fresh sheets and all that jazz. You're all welcome to stay tonight, and then you'll

be here in the morning when Ember wakes up if she doesn't join us before that."

CHAPTER 19

ATTICUS

After a morning session in the training room with the guys, where Skylar, Sketch, and Nikolai joined in, we trek up the flights of stairs to the main kitchen and living-room pod. Nikolai veers off on the first floor to wake Tavon and Sam, saying he'll meet us up there. Klaus bounds ahead, still holding on to an obscene amount of energy. Admittedly, we went easy this morning and had a later start than we normally would.

It was difficult to tear myself from Ember's bed. It's the first night we've stayed in the master room all together. She looked so small in the middle of the giant bed, and I think we were all so relieved for her to be home that no one argued about who should sleep where.

I didn't have the heart to deny any of my Sept-brothers space in her bed. As much as I would have loved to spend the entire night holding her in my arms, reassuring myself that she's home, I know they needed it too.

"Hey, what's that face all about?" Klaus asks as he wanders into the pod and over to Ember. She's standing by the kitchen island, looking at a thick piece of paper. A moment of silence hangs in the air before she holds the letter out to him. "Freckles, I'm covered in sweat. We've been training all morning. Just read it out."

Ember clears her throat and tucks some of her curls behind her ear. "It's...it's a summons from the Conclave."

I close the distance between us and take the proffered letter. Klaus wipes his hands on his shorts, pulling Ember under one arm as he reads over my shoulder. The sounds of the others joining us prompt me to read aloud.

“Ms Ward,

The Representatives of the Conclave to the Changed require your attendance on Tuesday, 26th of January, at 08:00 a.m. in the auditorium to give evidence in relation to the case against Lydia Chadwick, Dominic Carmichael, and the business entity EvoGen.

Failure to comply will be viewed as disobedience of a witness summons. You will be charged with contempt of court, and you may be fined or imprisoned for contempt. You may also be liable to pay any wasted costs that arise because of your noncompliance.”

“What the hell are they playing at?” Klaus mutters. I’m assuming it’s a rhetorical question because there’s no way for us to know. If anyone would, it would be Klaus himself, since his father is the central figurehead of the representatives. I pass the letter to Sam when he enters with his bond-mates.

“How did they know Ember was home?” Zane asks the question on my mind. Ember’s eyes go wide and flick between all of us, finally landing on Klaus.

“You didn’t tell your dad?” she asks, confusion lacing every word.

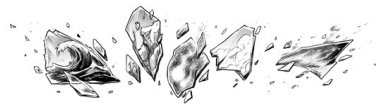
Klaus stares at her for a moment before shaking his head. “No, I haven’t spoken to him in weeks, over a month, if not more. He hasn’t been home when I’ve visited Mum. I’ve not gone out of my way to see him though, not after he refused to help when you went missing despite us knowing Chadwick was involved. He refused to acknowledge it. What’s that old saying from before The Change? ‘Couldn’t see the trees through the forest.’ Sounds like a good expression to describe my father.”

“A hearing against Lydia Chadwick will cause a stir. They’ll likely televise such a high-profile case.” Sam purses

his lips, handing the letter to Nik.

“If it’s going to be broadcast, it would be a great time to reveal all the corruption,” Sketch states. “Think about it, a trial over allegations of kidnapping and endangering an Anchor is them admitting that the representatives aren’t as infallible as the public presumes. People, Changed and human alike, will be sceptical of the other representatives purely from association. If Resource uses the feed to drop everything we’ve learnt, with evidence”—he shrugs—“maybe they’ll accept. If you want full reform, you need the public’s backing, and with the hearing being a couple weeks away, there’s time to put a plan in place.”

“And on that note,” Nick says, passing the letter back. “We should probably be leaving. The downside of being a lieutenant general is that hearing this conversation or where this conversation will lead would constitute treason, and I would be obligated to report it, so I’ll pretend I didn’t hear a word my son-in-law just said. And we’ll also pretend I’m not wishing you good luck.” He winks before leaving the room.



“I found something you might find interesting.” Royce drops a heavy tome on the conference table. “Well, multiple things, but we’ll start here first.” I don’t think I’ve seen him outside of his shop in years. The fact he’s here at all has me intrigued, and the title of the old book only increases my curiosity.

“Founding Laws for the Improvement of Changed Society,” I read.

“Bit of light bedtime reading, then, ay, Royce?” Klaus pulls out the chair next to me and reaches for the book. His hand hovers above it, and he glances to Royce. “Do I need gloves or anything?”

“No, it’s delicate, but it has multiple levels of preservation magic on it. You can read it, just don’t manhandle it.”

“Right.” Klaus opens the cover, and I lean in to read over his shoulder.

“Save us some time, Royce, what are we looking at?” I ask, scanning the contents page for anything obvious.

“Give it here.” He doesn’t wait for either Klaus or me to pass the book back to him. He spins it around and carefully but quickly turns to a page toward the last quarter of the book. “Here.”

I take the book back and read over the heading. Sitting back, I pull my glasses off, cleaning them on the corner of my shirt before re-situating them on my face and reading the page again.

“Holy fucking shit on a stick flying mothballs,” Klaus utters in disbelief.

“Pretty similar to my reaction.” Royce taps the page. “Makes sense why they’ve wanted to control or break your Anchor now, doesn’t it.”

“This is still in effect? Laws get rewritten or at least amended all the time.” I need to make sure we’re not working with something archaic and void.

“I didn’t go into the Conclave and ask if they’ve overturned the law that a female Anchor gets the central seat with the representatives. I figure you can ask your father-in-law. Samuelson Ward is your father-in-law, right? Hot-shot lawyer. He’ll be able to find out if this is still in practice.”

Leaning back in my chair, I nod slowly as Klaus continues to read through the legal jargon. I can understand enough to know it will enable a potential coup. This could very well be the smoking gun for us to bring about the reform Ember has been dreaming of.

“Atticus, phone Sam. If I’m reading this right, Ember should be in my dad’s position with overview of the election candidates. She wouldn’t necessarily have authority over them...more like one of the old monarchies.” Klaus sits back and looks up at the ceiling as he formulates how he wants to word his next sentence. “The Parliament would make the laws

and present them for a vote. If the vote passed, it would go to the monarch to sign and approve. If the monarch disagreed, they could veto the law.”

“So, Ember gets the deciding vote?” I ask, wanting to check I’m following.

“Yeah.” He nods. “We could have seats as her Sept, but it’s not mandatory.”

“What’s not mandatory?” Ember questions, walking into the pod. “Hi, Royce.” She smiles and tilts her head after spotting the book on the table. “Anything interesting?”

I barely suppress the smile at how her eyes light up and fingers twitch to examine the old leather-bound hardback.

“It might prove to be.” I beckon her closer with a crooked finger. “This would affect you more than us.” She frowns at me, but instead of offering a verbal explanation, I push the book towards her and point to the heading. Her eyes widen as she reads the first few lines.

“I think we should call Sam,” she whispers, pushing her fingers against her bottom lip as her eyes continue scanning the page.

“While one of you does that, I have more.” He grabs several old books from his bag, opening them to the relevant pages as he places them on the conference table. “Remember when I said I wanted to research a prophecy more before I sent you to Mount Kazbek? Well, it looks like that’s the central prophecy the others I found were referencing. And I’m almost convinced they’re about you, Ember.” He leans forward, pointing at the books. “See here, these four mention the Mother. And here”—he points to the central book of his collection—“we have the Mother Anchor.”

“And you think this Mother and Mother Anchor are the same person?” I query, pulling Ember into my lap as we skim over the texts.

“Precisely, and more so, I think they’re Ember. Here, listen.” He picks up the centre book and clears his throat before reciting, “*In times of great strife, the Mother Anchor*

will rise. She will be born with fire in her heart and an abundance of compassion and empathy, her kindness overflowing. When those in charge veer from the crystal path, the Mother Anchor will appear with a Sept of all. They will right the wrongs inflicted upon our people. So, the crystals foretold, so shall it be.”

“Fire in your heart is one way to describe your affinity, Little Phoenix,” Vertus remarks as he joins us. I’ve no idea how long he was listening before making his presence known.

Royce nods again, and points to another passage. “This one alludes to bringing life to the crystals for justice and truth. They get a bit poetic and obscure, so I haven’t figured out exactly what that means yet. But I will.”

“And even without the prophecy stuff, because a ‘Sept of all’?”

“Yes, but that fits you all too.” Royce’s eyes dance with fevered energy. His excitement over this discovery is more palpable than with the law. And that’s essentially our smoking gun to push for reform. We can go public with it, then there will be little they can do to deny Ember her seat. “As a Sept, all seven of you encompass the seven core elements of Changed magic. Fire, earth, water, air, light, shadow, and healing. You are the Sept of all. With this and the law, the Conclave will have a hell of a time stopping you from taking your rightful place. If we leak this and they fight you? We could see a full revolution.”

“Whoa, Royce. Don’t jump ahead. Let’s find out from Sam if the law is still active, and then we can go from there.”

CHAPTER 20

KLAUS

“I think it would be prudent to ensure that the Sept is complete prior to the hearing next week. How do you feel about that, Ember?” My eyes go wide at Sam’s question. I know he doesn’t have the typical father-daughter relationship with Ember, but it’s still weird to hear my father-in-law ask about her—our—bondings. I suppose at least it’s not his nephews he’s asking about. That’s a weird family dynamic. The world is typically an open-minded place now, but small groups still cling to pre-Change prejudices. It could get messy if those individuals found out Aaron and Zane are Ember’s cousins despite there being no blood relation between them.

The crystal wouldn’t call blood relations. Too many possible complications for any children the Sept had. Even before The Change, it was outlawed. Had Tavon fathered Ember instead of Sam, the twins would be in a different bond-group...and our Sept would have two different members. It’s a bizarre thought, and I shake my head to stop myself from falling down that rabbit hole.

Maybe at some point, I’ll dig into the records and research the history behind those called by the crystals. It will be interesting to see if there is a pattern between who’s called to who. Specific affinities? Maybe? It’s not lost on me that our Sept is made of the main seven. Water, earth, air, fire, light, shadow, and healing. There’s no overlap in where our strengths lie, and I wonder if there’s a reason for that we’re still meant to discover.

Ember coughs around a sip of tea at Sam's question. Her cheeks heat with a soft blush as she sets her teacup back down and glances around the open-plan living room and kitchen pod. Her eyes skip over Vertus and Helios before landing back on Sam.

"I guess it would make sense. I just...I don't want it to be an obligation or a chore."

I snort but try to cover it with a cough and fail miserably. Vertus leans forward, resting his arms on the table. "I think what Klaus is attempting to convey is that completing the bond would never be a chore for any of us at any time." He glances over at Sam and tilts his head, his silver hair spilling over his shoulder as he regards his future father-in-law whose cheeks now have a blush spreading the same as Ember's. "I imagine it's not a comfortable question to ask your daughter. We'll address it amongst ourselves later so you both can be more comfortable."

"It's not that I think the bonding itself is a chore for anyone," Ember cuts in. "I don't want it to be scheduled. I don't want it to be me picking someone over the other." She looks down at her fingers, twisting her cup back and forth. "All the other bonds have been natural. They've just happened. They weren't planned. And—" She takes a deep breath before meeting Vertus' and Helios' gazes. "I don't like the idea of planning it. It feels clinical. There's no spontaneity or romance." Her lips twist as she shakes her head. "No, that's not it. You can plan something to be romantic, but there's something different about planning a date and planning a bonding. There's—" She sighs and shrugs. "A pressure. I'm not explaining this well."

"Why don't you and Sam continue going over what to expect with the hearing." Ember and the other guys frown at my suggestion, but I push on before anyone can interrupt. "We aren't going to be able to say anything since we haven't been called as witnesses. We'll just be sitting behind you in support, which we can do without being here for all the gritty details. While you talk, we'll go and do the planning side of things to shower you with spontaneity and romance. How does that

sound, Freckles?” I grin at her as a smile grows across her lips. “Maybe we can hire a string quartet or one of those acapella bands.” I snap my fingers. “They can serenade us while we bake cookies and have a picnic. That’s gotta be pretty romantic, right?”

“Mmhmm.” She nods. “Yeah, that sounds like fun.”

Pushing my chair back, I give her a quick hug from behind. “Leave it with us, Freckles. You won’t ever have to choose or put one of us over the others.” Tilting her head, I drop a light, chaste kiss to her lips before making my way out of the pod, heading down to the ground floor. Sounds of the other five guys getting up and saying their own versions of “See you later” drift behind me, so I know they’re following.

Bypassing the conference room once I get to the ground-floor pod, I head into the training room, grabbing the sparring pads and pulling out some additional mats. When the doors open and the others file in, Vertus and Helios look from the mats to me with furrowed brows.

Resting my hands on my hips, I grin at them. “We have a couple of options, gentleman. We could flip a coin to see who goes first. You could spar and the winner gets to choose. Although, you could also put aside your differences and make life easier on our Anchor and share your bonding night.” Silence greets my words. Maybe the sharing suggestion was too soon, but none of us can expect to only ever have alone time with Ember.

Helios recovers first. “Don’t you think that should be something Ember decides? Not you.”

I nod because that’s very valid, and it is something I’ve thought about. This suggestion might seem out of the blue to them, but sharing Ember has been a possibility I’ve considered since my discernment ceremony. “Ember doesn’t want to pick one of you and make the other feel like they’re not the favourite or that it’s not about favourites. She doesn’t have it in her to even have favourites. Despite everything she’s been through, she has the biggest heart, and she’s full of kindness and empathy. If her affinity wasn’t fire, it would be empathy.

She's practically an empath as it is. Especially when it comes to us. I don't exactly have the best track record, especially with Skylar, Zane, and Aaron. By rights, she should have rejected me, not only because of my father and what he said, but my friends, and the reputation I have at the Institute. But she's never even made me feel like she considered that as an option. She didn't listen to the rumours. She didn't listen to my father. She made her decision herself. I think Ember has been subjected to so much and had so much autonomy taken from her that if she didn't want to do something now, she would say so." Taking a deep breath after getting all that off my chest, I straighten my spine and level Vertus and Helios with an unwavering stare. "So, again, we can flip a coin. You can spar for who goes first, but she's not rejecting either of you. No matter the order that the bondings happen in, there isn't a hierarchy. We're like that old legend with the round table and the king with the sword."

Atticus pushes his glasses up and sighs heavily. "King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table."

"Yes. Thank you." I point at him before turning back to the two of our Sept without the bond. "No one had a seat at the head of the table because it didn't have one. Everyone was equal. That's what we are, except instead of a king, we have Ember. Though, I think there was a dragon, and we don't have one of those. It'd be cool if dragons were still a thing. Do you think they actually were a thing? Or just another myth?"

"How the hell have we gone from talking about coin tosses, sparring, and sharing to dragons?" Zane asks Aaron.

"Because it's Klaus?" He shrugs, and I roll my eyes. Inside, I'm borderline ecstatic we've reached a point of easy banter. When Ember first joined the Institute, had anyone said I would be in her Sept with Aaron and Zane Greene, I would have laughed, thinking they were joking with me. The idea that Skylar Ward would ever let me within touching distance of his sister when he would glare and clench his fists at the sight of me? Completely absurd, and yet, here we are.

My life has improved a hundredfold all because of the curly redhead with the septum piercing sitting two floors

above.

“I can’t spar with Helios,” Vertus says, pulling me from my thoughts. The half-Changed doctor turns to look at Vertus and raises an eyebrow.

“And why is that? Because you’re scared?”

“No, asshole, because you’re a doctor. And you don’t have the same magic as I do.”

“Did you miss the part where I came with you on the mission to Mount Kazbek? Do we need to run some tests on your memory? I am not only a doctor but also a patched member of the Hounds of Charon. I am well versed in hand-to-hand combat. If you are so concerned about the possibility of me showing you up, we can skip this whole thing, and I’ll bond with Ember first.” He crosses his arms over his chest, regarding Vertus with a cool, disinterested stare. “I do believe I mentioned you would be the last, did I not?”

“And again, you don’t get to make that decision.” Vertus glares at Helios.

“Okay, so sparring it is, then.” I clap my hands, breaking their stare off. “Clearly, you two have some shit to work out.” Grabbing two sets of sparring pads, I toss them each a set.

Moving back across the room, I stand next to Atticus, Zane, and Aaron. “So, who wants to referee this one?” I ask, looking at Atticus, because, frankly, he’s the one with the experience in this, having been our instructor at the Institute. He rolls his eyes as Zane and Aaron glare at him as well.

“Fine.” He huffs, but the smile curling the corners of his lips is proof he’s not as put out as he would like us to believe.

CHAPTER 21

EMBER

Sam spends the next hour going over more details for the hearing and what I should expect. The change in location has increased the nerves growing since I first read the summons. I can't shake the foreboding that's taken root.

Why would we need to use the judgement caves when there's no one to judge? The crystals can't offer a verdict on Lydia Chadwick, so are they planning to bring charges against me?

The click of Sam's briefcase closing pulls me from my thoughts, and I get up from the table. I may as well walk down with him to his car, and then I can join the guys in the training room. I want to check in with Vertus about their search for Source too.

Despite knowing little about the hacker, there's an empathy resounding within me for their situation. Either they were in danger and had to leave abruptly, or they were taken against their will. The latter is something I'm familiar with, unfortunately, and it's not something I'd wish on anyone. Maybe once all this hearing business with the Conclave is over, I can help Vertus and his team find Source.

Chewing my lip, I hold in a scoff. Me help the trained, elite soldiers? What a ridiculous notion.

Sam rests a hand on my shoulder once we reach his car, and ducks down so my eyes meet his. "Sweetheart, I know some of what we discussed isn't comfortable, and I'm sorry for that." He pauses, tilting his head and looking as though

he's warring with himself. "Speaking in hypotheticals, because anything else would likely be treasonous, I think sealing your Sept will be a good thing. It not only protects you all and boosts your powers, but this case will be high-profile. It will be broadcast across the continent. Humans and Changed will be watching. If they see your Sept complete without having used the caves, it would strip away the illusion of absolute power and authority the Conclave holds. It will give hope to those the representatives have denied. Especially with Helios in your Sept. I have zero doubt in my mind that there aren't others called to..." He frowns. "I don't want to say Chum, but we really don't have another word for human and Changed mixes."

My eyebrows shoot up, and his eyes widen.

"Mixes sounds even worse. Forget I said that. My point is you're an Anchor called to a half-Changed, half-human individual. Skylar and Sketch are proof that there are other Changed called to those of mixed heritage, and I highly doubt it's just you two. The representatives weren't thrilled with approving your bonding ceremony."

"So, you think they've refused to allow other Changed to use the caves to complete their bonds?" Sam nods, and I can't contain the sigh that escapes me. "I don't want to receive special treatment or be held up as an example of the representatives' biases. I just want to live my life. I want to have normal experiences that everyone else has."

"I know, sweetheart. Unfortunately, I don't think that's likely to happen. You're a female Anchor, and the more old texts Royce pulls from his archives for me to read, the more I'm realising we've barely scratched the tip of the iceberg. My gut is telling me something big is coming, and you'll be at the centre of it. Perhaps there is some truth to you being this Mother Anchor. Time will tell, I suppose."

With those ominous words, Sam gives me a hug, dropping a kiss on top of my head before climbing into his car. I stand outside long after he has vanished from sight, mulling over the conversation.

“At some point, things have to settle down, right?” The wind whisks my question away on a breeze. Shaking my head, I turn to make my way to the ground-floor pod in search of my Sept. It’s time we have a conversation about our relationship and the expectations we all have.

Bypassing the conference room and offices, I head toward the training room, stumbling to a stop after pushing the door open. My mouth drops open at the sight of Vertus and Helios bent over both holding the other in a headlock.

“What are you doing?” Their heads jerk up at my voice, but neither can meet my eyes due to the arms around their necks restricting movement. Turning, I look to the other four with wide eyes. “That doesn’t look like training sparring. What’s going on?”

“Ah, well.” Klaus ruffles the back of his hair, looking over at me while shuffling his feet. “That would be my idea. They have some differences to work out, and this killed two birds with one stone.”

“What’s the other bird?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Erm...” He glances at Atticus, who doesn’t acknowledge Klaus, then at Aaron and Zane, who hold up their hands, shaking their heads. Klaus blows out a breath, his shoulders sagging. “Well, um, bonding order?”

I blink at him, waiting for my brain to process his words in a different way. But it can’t because there’s no other way to process them. “They’re fighting to decide which of them will bond with me next?”

“Well, you didn’t want to choose—” Helios grunts, and I whirl around to face him and Vertus.

“Are you kidding? You think this is better?” I wave a hand at them before pulling on my magic and using it to separate them.

“He doesn’t deserve you!” Helios’ eyes flash with more than just the anger he’s projecting. “He did nothing to help you

escape EvoGen, but he managed to find a way to get you naked.”

“Helios! Just stop. Is this what it’s going to be like? I have to pick and choose who I spend time with constantly? Why do you need to work out your differences physically? And why now? Is the idea of sharing your time with me that awful? Is it that heinous that you have to come to physical blows? You were literally choking each other. I don’t understand”—I drop my hands, releasing the magic, letting Vertus and Helios drop down to the mats—“what were you planning to do at the caves? How was that going to work? Because that was months ago, and there wasn’t this level of tension. I never would have thought I’d walk in and find you fighting over who spends time with me. This is an equal relationship. It’s new and still developing, and maybe we are going about in a weird way.” Pulling my lip between my teeth, I frown and shake my head. An overwhelming wave of defeat crashes through me. “If this is how you’re reacting, then maybe the representatives were right and we’re rushing into completing the bonds.”

“Well, now, hold on,” Vertus states, brushing down his clothes. “We’re not rushing anything because we already have a basis. We have a history.” He waves a finger between us, then points to Helios. “And you have a history with Helios. Even if it’s not crystal clear in your memories, though, that also points to him being the complete stalker, his notes made us believe he was.”

I stare at Vertus, blinking, unable to form a reply. Did he just call Helios a stalker? Klaus doesn’t have the same issue.

“Really, dude, really? That’s what you’re going with?”

“Okay, I can admit the notes were perhaps not the smartest decision,” Helios admits while glaring at Vertus. “I wouldn’t say they’re the main cause of our tensions. Your history with Ember is a bigger factor.” He purses his lips, glancing at me before nodding, clearly coming to a decision. “You had ample opportunity to help her escape EvoGen. But what did you tell me that you did? You got her a *cupcake* and then worked your way into her bed. Instead of getting her out of that place, you sort your own gratification!”

“The cupcake was really good,” I mutter before taking a deep breath and speaking louder so they can all hear me. I doubt Helios is the only one upset about my original relationship with V. “To you, it’s a small cake that has limited nutritional value, where I was malnourished. In no way did it make up for the calorie deficits I was subjected to on a daily basis. But for me? I felt cared for, for the first time since Skylar was rescued. Life wasn’t amazing before we found out we were Changed. But there were snippets of time when Steph treated us like she cared. There’s a reason we called her mum, and she wasn’t even an egg donor. Not that we knew that. That came out after, but there were these moments where she treated me like I was a person and not an experiment. They disappeared at least a year before Vertus arrived.” Pushing my shoulders back, I look around the room, meeting each of their gazes before focusing on Helios again.

“Do you know what it’s like to go years without feeling any affection? Because that was my life, Helios, until Vertus. And you can say that he should have gotten me out instead, but I wasn’t in a place where I would have agreed. I needed that relationship with him, the mental escape he provided. He was the light that cast away the shadows of my existence, and it all started with a cupcake. It was less that he worked his way into my bed and more I dragged him into my bed needing to feel something other than...I don’t know how to explain it.”

With a heavy sigh, I look up at the ceiling. “I needed to feel like I had control over something, and my virginity was the thing I took that control for.” Closing my eyes, I voice the thoughts that had played on my mind back then. “There’s no way Dom and EvoGen would have left it alone for much longer. I guess the fact that I didn’t generate new eggs after the original extraction saved me to an extent. But there’s a darkness in the world, in humans and Changed alike. At some point, my virginity would have been taken, and I wanted control of that decision.” All six men are silent, and I can’t bring myself to look at Atticus, Klaus, Aaron, or Zane. With only a brief glance at Vertus, I once again give Helios my full attention. His jaw and fists are clenched tight as his nostrils flare. Taking a single step towards him, I soften my voice.

“You’re entitled to feel however you feel. You can be upset with Vertus, but I’m not. We both made the decision. We both made the choices that we did, and he did help get me out.” I look at Vertus, his azure eyes sparkling with memories, regret, and something a little like love, maybe. “Losing him was a wake-up call. I am not upset about my history with Vertus. I wish he had been honest, but I can see why he wasn’t. Honestly, I think our biggest hurdle is—was—the truth-seeing the first time I met the representatives.”

Vertus reaches a hand out to me, and the moment I place my palm in his, he pulls me into a tight embrace. “I will spend the rest of my life regretting following orders instead of putting you first. It won’t happen again. You will be my priority until the final breath leaves my body.”

What does a person say to a declaration like that? Thank you seems inadequate. Instead of trying to find words, I reach up and kiss him. His hold on me tightens as he deepens the kiss, only breaking it when someone clears their throat.

Right, don’t get distracted, Ember.

Turning in V’s arms, I look at Helios again. “Can you explain to me why all of this is an issue now? What were you going to do in the bonding caves? How was that going to work? Each take a turn while the others stared at the wall? Or were you comfortable with sharing and something changed? When did it become a competition? Is that what this is?”

Klaus snorts somewhere behind us. “Orgasm competition. Like in that book Myra lent you, Freckles. Maybe that’s what you guys needed, instead of sparring. Totally should have set up a competition where Ember wins no matter what. Hell, I don’t think anyone loses in that scenario, actually.”

I twist out of Vertus’ hold, putting my hands on my hips and glaring at Klaus as he rubs his stubbled jaw in thought. “We’re not doing a competition,” I chastise him. Then I turn to look back at Vertus and Helios, expecting them to agree with me. Instead, they glance at each other, a silent communication transpiring that I didn’t think possible. When they turn back to

face me, their gazes burn with mischievous challenge and desire.

CHAPTER 22

HELIOS

Ember's eyes widen as Vertus and I step forward, stalking towards her. No doubt the idea of a light competition between us spurring him on in a similar way to me. I always thought there would be at least a residual reluctance on my part to sharing Ember. I've spent my entire life so far working towards being united with her. I have enough self-awareness to know I'm somewhat of a selfish man. But it's not been as much of an adjustment to view myself as one part of her whole.

"Is that a hard no? We can open the competition up and involve everyone." I run my fingers through her curls, dipping my head to speak against her ear. "As you so rightly pointed out, we all would have been present in the bonding caves. Each witnessing the others embrace you... love you... devour you."

Her breath hitches, and I nip her earlobe before leaning back, taking in her lust-heavy eyes and parted lips. Circling around her, I look over to the other four. They've each had a moment with our Anchor. Each already bonded to her. And while I want my own alone time eventually, this moment feels like it should be for all of us. We're completing the Sept. Embracing the destiny the crystals and fate have laid out for us. It's only right that all six of us are a part of that tonight.

"What do you say, Pol?" Atticus asks. Ember looks over her shoulder, biting that delectable bottom lip as she scans over the four men waiting on the sidelines.

"I... I think... If you're all comfortable—"

“This isn’t about us as much as it’s about you,” Vertus says as he closes the remaining distance between them and runs a finger along the side of her jaw and down her neck. “You are in control here, Ember. You have all the power. One word, and we stop... but until then?”

I take over, murmuring into her ear again and eliciting a shiver from her. “Until then, let the six of us worship you. Let us bring you untold pleasures. The kinds that leave you hoarse from crying out our names and screaming your release.”

A silence seems to stretch into eternity before Ember closes her eyes and straightens her spine. “Okay.”

“Okay what, Pol?” Atticus prompts, crossing the space between us in three strides and removing his glasses. The frames disappear with a pop into a magic pocket as he raises a single brow in question.

“Okay, show me these untold pleasures that will make me scream your names until I beg you to stop because my limbs are too weak to support me. Share me. Claim me.” She turns from him to look at Vertus and me. “Bond with me and complete our Sept.”

Atticus grips her chin, tilting her head, and kisses her with raw passion. I open my senses, tracking Ember’s vitals. The others can read her through their bond, or in Vertus’ case, from their history. My magic evens out the playing field and lets me ensure we don’t push her too far into overstimulation.

Tendrils of shadow weave out from Vertus, wrapping around Ember’s wrists and forearms. A soft gasp leaves her lips, breaking the kiss with Atticus. Shadow veins entwine around her limbs, crisscrossing over her torso in an intricate pattern akin to those used in the art of shibari.

Magic swirls in the air as Vertus’ shadows finish their design and rise from her body to connect with the ceiling, twisting and suspending Ember off the floor. The increase in her heart rate and blood pressure matches the heaviness of her breaths as her nipples strain against the fabric of her top pulled tight across her breasts by the shadow ropes.

Moving around to face her, I drop to my knees and cup her cheek to steady her. “How do you feel, pet? Is it too much?”

“No. It... it feels good. Freeing in a weird way. There’s no pressure on me... no expectations.” I nod, pleased that her mental reaction matches the physical. Though, I doubt Vertus would have dived right into this play if he didn’t know she enjoys it. Ember licks her lips, a slight hesitancy glimmering in her eyes behind the arousal.

“What is it?”

“I’m still fully dressed...”

“Shadows don’t burn, Little Phoenix,” Vertus whispers, though it sounds loud in the quiet that’s descended over the training room. “But clothes do.”

“Think of it as another way to confirm you’re happy to proceed,” I murmur against her lips before kissing her, my bottom lip brushing her top one.

The smell of singed fabric rises as smoke drifts up from the seams of her clothing. I don’t break the kiss until the scent fades, and I know my pet, my Anchor is suspended naked before us all.

“My shadows frame your tattoo so beautifully,” Vertus tells her as he runs a finger across her abdomen, tracing the lines of the roses and blackberry brambles. He dips his head, peppering kisses across her skin, and her eyes flutter closed.

“That’s it, pet. Give in to the sensations. Embrace the moment and know that this is only the beginning.” Pushing back to my feet, I circle Ember, taking in every curve and scar. I thought I’d experience a stronger sense of urgency, that my competitive side would drive me to bring her to climax as soon as possible. Instead, I’m almost overwhelmed with the need to prolong her enjoyment. To build the anticipation until she’s a panting mess, desperately in need of completing our bonds.

Sharing a glance with Vertus, something passes between us. An understanding, or maybe a realisation, that our differences are negligible and Ember’s well-being, health, satisfaction, and happiness are all that matter. If she holds no

animosity towards him, then it's not my place to hold it on her behalf. Until he acts like a prick again and we butt heads. It's an inevitability, but at this point, if she can forgive him, then I will let it go too.

Vertus looks away from me as he takes Ember's breast into his mouth. Her muscles contract and a soft sigh of contentment leaves her lips, drawing a smirk to his expression. That's a sound I want to hear multiple times tonight.

Letting out an exhale, I lean closer, so my breath caresses the skin of her calf, and move up to her thigh.

"Shall we adjust the angle for you both?" Zane suggests before twisting his wrist and using his air affinity to tilt Ember until her legs are spread wide in front of my face. I give in to temptation without a second thought, pushing forward and running my tongue along her folds until I can pull her clit between my teeth.

We work together, licking, sucking, nipping, each action edging Ember closer and closer to her first orgasm of the night. Her arousal soaks my lips and chin as I push one finger into the tight rosebud of her ass. Using my magic to help relax the ring of muscle, stretching it slowly so it will accommodate me later.

Reaching up, I place my wrist within Ember's palm, my forearm brushing against Vertus' as he offers her other hand his wrist.

Ember's fingers close around me, holding me in a tight grip as she falls over the edge. Intense heat flares where her hand connects with my wrist as she brands me as hers, sealing our bond and claiming my soul completely.

"Ho-holy shit. T-that was..." Aaron stutters.

"Hot. That was really fucking hot," Klaus states, finishing Aaron's sentence.

"You guys want to help out while our bond marks cool?" Vertus asks, and I pull away from Ember's pussy after one final lick, stepping round to her back to make room for whichever of our Sept wants to taste her next.

Zane steps forward and crouches in front of Ember's face. "Hey, Peanut, how you doing? Still okay with everything?"

I can't see her expression, but there's nothing in her body's physical reaction to cause me any concerns. Still, it's reassuring to hear her voice the desire to continue.

"So good," Ember mumbles in a blissed-out voice. "More. Wanna taste."

Zane brushes a thumb along her cheek. "What do you want to taste?"

"You."

Zane's eyebrows shoot up, and he glances around at the rest of us. Klaus shrugs. "I wasn't planning on sitting out, and it's not like we don't all have the same equipment."

A warm heat spreads through my arms and legs and down my sides. The scent of burning fabric fills the air again as all our clothes burn from the seams out until we're standing naked.

"Apparently, our Anchor had her own ideas on what we're comfortable with." Atticus quirks a brow, and Ember's pulse spikes.

"Sorry. I-I didn't... didn't mean to." Her stuttering words have his expression smoothing, and he drops to his knees next to Zane, cupping her jaw.

"Ember, it's fine. We all knew what was happening here. If any of us were uncomfortable, we could have left before now."

"He's right. And we're all here, so I say it's time we celebrate the completion of our Sept and give you all the orgasms you can handle." Klaus grins, his gaze trailing along Ember's body. "Then maybe six more after that."

"Please." With that one whispered word, Ember has us all ensnared. Dedicated to her pleasure with a single focus for the rest of the night. Atticus shuffles around, taking over from Vertus, playing with her nipples. Klaus takes up position between her thighs, wrapping her legs around his waist as he presses into her opening.

Zane adjusts his stance, dropping to his knees and running the tip of his dick against her lips. My view is obscured, but with the bond and my magic, reading Ember is as simple as reading a book. The magic in the room swells, and despite the movements of the three men worshipping our Anchor, her grip on Vertus' and my wrists never wavers. Three orgasms later and after Klaus and Zane switch out with Atticus and Aaron, Ember's hands are cool enough to release Vertus and me.

The pale skin of my wrist is now adorned with the shiny red burn of Ember's hand, declaring our bond for any who see it. But there's still something I want from tonight.

When Aaron's thrusts drag Ember into her fourth orgasm of the night, it takes him over the edge with her. After he pulls out, I gather the natural lubrication from her pussy and return to that perfect rosebud. Lube, magic, and patience pay off as Ember relaxes more and more.

Vertus' shadow ropes rotate ever so slightly, allowing her right leg to rest against my shoulder while her left wraps around Vertus' hips. I ignore him and the others as I push forward, sinking my cock into Ember's arse one inch at a time. Rocking my hips back and forth while manipulating the muscles to stay as relaxed as possible. Once I'm sheathed, I pause, waiting to see if Vertus will join us or back out.

The corner of his mouth twitches just before his lips twist into a smirk. "Technically, we're not touching, and I'm not missing out on this because I might feel you against me." A gasping moan leaves Ember as Vertus pushes into her pussy.

"How you doing, Em?" Atticus brushes the hair back from Ember's face as he checks in with her. It takes a couple of prompts before she responds.

"So good. So full."

"Do you need a minute? Or do you want them to move?"

I almost hold my breath to ensure I don't miss her reply. Her voice is so soft, it's more like she breathes "move" than actually says it. But it's all the encouragement I need. Vertus holds still as I pull my hips back, waiting until I drive back

into Ember to draw back. We match each other's rhythm as we thrust in tandem.

A breeze stirs around us, drawing another gasp from Ember. Glancing up, I notice Zane's focus on her, taking note of her every reaction. Opening my senses further, the echo of phantom touches around her nipples and clit course through me. Ember's toes curl with the pleasure of Zane's air magic stroking her as Vertus and I fuck her. It doesn't take long for her orgasm to overwhelm her, ripping an involuntary scream from her lips as wave after wave of pleasure courses through her and down our bonds.

Six voices grunt and groan as we're overcome with the intensity of Ember's climax, and we're all dragged over with her.

CHAPTER 23

EMBER

Waking from a deep sleep that only copious orgasms can send you into, I blink until the ceiling beams above come into focus and my mind catches up to being awake. It doesn't take long until the distraction of the two warm bodies on either side of me fades and the realisation hits that today is the day.

The hearing.

And if that wasn't anxiety-inducing enough, it's at the judgement caves.

The representatives will ask me question after question about Representative Chadwick's involvement with EvoGen. Not to mention the part she played in freeing Dom from Helios' lab in the Conclave headquarters. She won't be there to defend herself, though, so this might all just be a formality? A perfectly choreographed song and dance for the public?

At least that's what I'm hoping, but if I've learnt anything over the years, it's my hopes rarely come true.

I know the guys have something planned, but I've deliberately kept myself away from any conversations with Resource or the Hounds of Charon except for Skylar. Partly so a truth-seer can't pluck it from my mind at the hearing. But I would be lying to myself if I didn't admit I'm burying my head in the sand. I'm firmly holding onto the fact my brother's not a patched member yet, and as a prospect, Skylar won't know the sordid details of what's to come.

Probably naïve of me, considering his bond-mate is the president of the club, but I can't distance myself from my

twin. I need him as much as I need my Sept. I know today will be difficult. There isn't a doubt in my mind that Representatives Becer and Dixon will go hard with their line of questioning. They won't want Lydia Chadwick to be cast in an ill light, so they'll try to twist the surrounding circumstances of everything that happened. They'll want her to come across as much the victim as I will, maybe more. I guess my job today is to stop that from happening.

Slipping from between Helios and Vertus, I make my way to the bathroom to shower and mentally prepare myself for the day ahead. My phone rings on the counter after I turn the water on, and I grab it, not wanting the sound to wake the guys. I doubt they had much more sleep than me.

Seeing Myra's name flash across the screen, a small frown tugs at my brow. It's unusual for her to even be awake this early, much less phoning people.

Before I can utter a hello after answering, a stream of words flows from her end of the line.

"Hey, so I know you're really busy and life has been a bit of a shitshow, and I'm really sorry for all of that. We definitely need to have a girls' day where we can catch up on everything now that you're home. And, oh my gosh, girl. I am *so* glad you're home." I open my mouth to respond, but before I can utter more than a syllable, Myra ploughs on. "We also need to look into rebooking your bonding ceremony. Which is one hundred per cent non-negotiable. I mean, without it, your Sept isn't legal, so we're getting on that toot sweet."

Toot sweet? That phrasing alone has concern rising as I wait to get a word in.

"We probably need to go dress shopping again too, right? Of course, we do. You need a new lehenga choli! The old one's going to have negative thoughts attached to it. What even happened to your original outfit? Do I want to know?" Myra huffs out a breath. "No. I probably don't. None of that's why I'm calling, anyway."

"Hi, Myra," I greet her after she pauses long enough for the words to leave my lips. A wry chuckle sounds down the

phone.

“Sorry. Sorry. Hi.” She exhales before pausing. A heavy weight of anticipation settles over me and this obvious behavioural shift. “Okay, everything I just said we’ll put a pin in because there is a reason for my call. I know that you have *a lot* going on, but I’m worried. And I know your heart is like the biggest ever and you would be worried too, and you know people that could actually help which I don’t, so, yeah...”

“Myra, what’s going on?” I ask when my usually straightforward and brusque friend keeps rambling and circling around the reason for her call.

“So, Willow kind of said not to contact you about this because, well, everything that’s been going on in your life and that’s coming up and the trial and... Oh God, that’s today, isn’t it? I am the worst friend—”

“Myra, tell me what’s going on. You’re worrying me now.”

“Right, so I’m hoping you can help. Well, not you, but Commander Irfan. I mean, Vertus, I guess, since he’s not a commander anymore, and he’s not our instructor either, but anyway, is he maybe free and able to look into Sawyer?”

My frown deepens at the mention of Willow’s half-sister. “Myra, I really need you to tell me what’s going on. Obviously, I can ask Vertus and his team. They have other cases, but this is Sawyer. I’m sure they can help with whatever’s going on.”

“She’s missing. And I’m hoping that Vertus and his team can look into where she could be. It’s honestly ridiculous, but the Conclave authorities won’t do it because, well, as they put it, ‘she’s Chum.’” The disgust and disdain as she lowers her voice to mimic the officer she spoke to, is clear as day. “I guess if you’re not full-blooded Changed, then you don’t matter to them. But then the human authorities won’t look into it because she’s half-Changed and so therefore ‘not their jurisdiction,’ or so they claim. It’s all bullshit but neither will budge. They actually threatened to arrest me for harassment! Can you believe that?” Given what I know about my friend, I can easily imagine her hounding the officers to try and get

them to investigate. I don't voice my opinion, though, because words are still flowing from Myra like a river breaching a dam. "I never realised how much tougher life was for those who have mixed blood. They're just letting people fall through the gaps because their DNA doesn't fit a specific profile. It shouldn't matter if someone is full Changed or full human or half and half or any other combination! If someone's missing, the authorities should look into it. It shouldn't matter how much money someone has or where they live or who their parents are." The passion and indignation leak from her voice, replaced with a despondent resignation. "But apparently it does. No one will investigate what's happened, and Willow's a complete mess over it all. I mean, we both are, but it's her *sister*. It's better now that you're back as well because obviously, we were both worried about you too, but you're home and you're safe and, well, do you think Vertus can look into it?"

Leaving the shower running, I head back into the bedroom. "Okay, I'm going to wake him now and talk to him about it. I'm not gonna be able to help him this morning. He might not be able to do too much either, because we've got to go to the judgement caves for this hearing. *But* he can definitely flag it with his team." I gently shake Vertus awake, and Helios stirs beside him. "Send me everything you know, and I'll pass it on. They can start digging—and I mean *every* detail you can find. Dates. Times." I tick each item off on my fingers, ignoring the quizzical looks from Helios and Vertus. "Where she was last seen. Where she was meant to be. Anything and everything like that. I'm sure V and the guys can find her." At my words, Vertus sits up and holds out his hand for the phone.

"Yeah, okay." The relief in her voice is palpable. "I'll pull everything together. I can get all of that over to you, and then once the hearing's over, maybe we can do ice cream with Willow? It can be ice cream to celebrate or commiserate depending on what happens, but I'm crossing everything for celebratory. There's no way they can't come to a guilty verdict after everything that cow did."

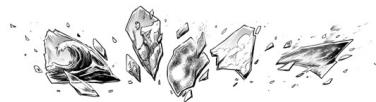
"I will never say no to ice cream." I laugh despite the nerves twisting my stomach into knots. Vertus raises an

eyebrow and motions with his fingers to hand the phone over. “Look, Myra, Vertus wants to talk to you. I’m going to pass you over so that you can fill him in on Sawyer, and then he can let his team know so they can start looking into it alongside the other cases.”

I place the phone in his hand, and he drops a kiss on my forehead as he gets up. “Hey, Lhuthal, let me grab a pen and paper, and then hit me with everything you know.”

He strolls out of the bedroom as Helios wraps an arm around my waist.

“Come on, pet, let’s get you showered and ready for the day. Maybe another orgasm or two will help settle those nerves I can sense.” Vertus throws a half-hearted glare over his shoulder at missing out on shower time, but the expression smooths to genuine concern as he listens to Myra.



My muscles shake as we walk down the roughed stone pathway towards the judgement caves. Memories of the first time I stood in front of the Conclave Representatives flood my mind. Back then, I was so full of optimism I thought life would be so different, and, in reality, the Conclave wasn’t much better than EvoGen. They didn’t put me in a cage or limit my experiences and revoke my freedom in the same way, but ultimately, they want to use me for their own gains like EvoGen. Like Dom.

There will never be formal justice for all he put me through, but today, I can take a small measure of justice from Lydia Chadwick. That’s my goal for today, no matter the ultimate outcome. I know the fact we’re having a hearing at all is a huge step. I should probably have questioned how it even came about because of her involvement in my abduction by EvoGen and complicit agreement with the experiments they were running this time—all of which should have been brushed under a rug by the remaining representatives over the

past week. Sam and Royce have both voiced surprise that not only is there a hearing but it's at the judgement caves. Clearly, this isn't something they thought would happen, and the fact there is such scrutiny on Representative Chadwick's conduct will open the doors for the others to be looked into.

Because if she could abuse her position of power, what's to say the others aren't doing something similar?

In a non-humorous way, I've gotten the last laugh. I'm not laughing about her death. There's definitely no humour in the fact that I killed them and anyone else who was in that facility when my magic erupted. But I can't bring myself to feel sad over someone as evil as Dominic Carmichael and Lydia Chadwick ceasing to exist. I'm sure not everyone working at EvoGen's facility knew the extent of their experiments. I was there for long enough, but I can say no one there was innocent. Even if they weren't partaking in the experimentations or monitoring the data, they would have overheard conversations or seen the conditions I was kept in. There is a kernel of sadness over their deaths, but given the plans Dom and Chadwick had for me, I cannot regret my actions. Not when they were talking about impregnating me with Dom's child.

A shudder of revulsion runs through me as we reach the entrance to the judgement caves. Sam, Nik, and Tavon are waiting for us, and each gives me a reassuring smile as we approach, no doubt having seen my reaction and assuming it was nerves.

Sam steps forward and wraps me in a gentle hug, giving a light squeeze before stepping back and leaving his hands resting on my shoulders.

"Sweetheart, it's okay. I know that you're worried, but you have done nothing wrong, and there is no way they can twist anything that has happened to be your fault. That's not to say they won't try. We'd be foolish to dismiss that notion. I have scoured every law pertaining to Anchors and specifically, female Anchors with Royce. That man has a knack for finding relevant texts that prove to be very interesting reads. We are covered, and no one will lay the blame at your feet for the intrigue that surrounds this case. We couldn't protect you for

all those years, but this time I can do my part as your father and as your lawyer. You can protect yourself, and I know your Sept can protect you too, especially now you've completed the bond and all of your powers are enhanced. Your control is astounding, and it proves that the way our society has been conducting itself in regard to training female Changed is immeasurably wrong. Once we are able to push through this hurdle, we can begin planning on how to bring about changes for all women in our society. And I, for one, am excited to see those changes come to pass. It's time for the Changed to step forward with equality. I know people argue that it's different for humans because they don't have the disparity in birth, but we do, and we could definitely learn a thing or two from them in this instance."

Atticus clears his throat and tilts his head towards the cave opening as the sound of footsteps reaches us. "Perhaps best to finish that discussion later at home."

"I think that's an excellent idea, Atticus," Nik says, wrapping an arm around Sam's shoulders. Sam lets go of me and allows his bond-mate to steer him into the opening.

Atticus mimics Nik's hold of Sam by wrapping his arm around me, and together we follow my fathers down into the central judgement chamber.

CHAPTER 24

VERTUS

My phone beeps as Atticus heads inside with Ember. I wave Aaron, Zane, Klaus, and Helios off, holding the phone up so they can see it's Trey. "Go on ahead. I need to take this, but I'll follow in a sec."

The Greene twins and Klaus shrug and follow the path Ember took into the judgement cave. Helios crosses his arms over his chest and raises an eyebrow at me. "Go on, then. I'll wait."

Holding in a groan, I turn so I'm not fully facing the red-haired doctor. We've resolved some of our differences. And it's a fair bet we will become friends. We have similarities. It's just a few minor hurdles and our own egos we need to overcome first, but last night was definitely a step in that direction.

"Hey, Trey, thanks for getting back to me. We're about to head in, though, so can you make it quick?"

"Yeah, sure. I really just wanted to double-check the time and dates you sent over for Sawyer. Did you look at them?"

I frown at his words. "Obviously I looked at them. I didn't simply forward you a message. I wrote down everything Lhuthal could tell me on the phone and sent it over. What's going on?"

"Did you notice it's the same dates as when Source went missing?"

His question catches me off-guard, and I stare into space as my brain starts connecting the dots. "I knew they rang a bell,

but I hadn't made the connection they were the same as Source. You think she's Source? Is that what you're saying?"

Trey huffs out a breath. I can picture him running a hand over his head as he contemplates his answer. "No, I'm not saying that. I mean, this could just be a coincidence. And we've learnt recently about the other Chum going missing, especially those with more niche magical skill sets. But I reached out to Sawyer's family, and they said her magic specialises with technology. That would fit with Source too. If you find tech easy, and you can manipulate it with your magic, becoming a hacker seems almost an obvious career path."

When he puts it like that, I can't disagree with his conclusion. "Okay, thanks for letting me know. Keep digging, and hopefully, after things come out today, we'll be able to get some more concrete answers from some of the individuals perceived to be involved in the disappearances."

Helios coughs loudly, and I glance over at him. He nods his head to the side, and when I turn in that direction, I see a small crowd approaching. A few look like reporters, and this conversation is definitely not one to be overheard. Offering him a nod of understanding, I quickly end the conversation with Trey after hashing out a few minor details but ultimately leaving him in charge of the investigation while my focus is on today's hearing and Ember in general. Returning my phone to my pocket, I spin on my heel and nod to Helios. My bond-brother shoves his hands into his pockets, and we make our way through the dark tunnel in silence.

Once the light from the surface fades, the path is illuminated by the crystals embedded in the stone. They're a permanent fixture in all Changed procedures. There's something about the way our magic came to be and how the first Changed discovered their abilities and the bondings. Everything links back to the crystals, but over the years, we've used this cave less and less. I can't recall a recent case being judged down here. It must have been at least five years since the representatives used these caves; they tend to keep it for serious crimes. And thankfully, those have been few and far between, or so I thought. The information Source and then

Resource have dug up on the individuals in power has me questioning how many cases were dismissed or tried outside of the caves to avoid the crystal's judgements. Which has me questioning whether the fact that we are here now should be a cause for concern.

The cavern chamber is full of reporters and spectators when we finally enter. The twelve remaining representatives wait in their seats on an alcove balcony overlooking the rest of us. Ember and Sam sit on another raised crystal dais in the centre of the judgement lake. Crystals jut out from the water, glowing a soft white with pale-green and yellow hues. Some of the tension building inside me releases upon seeing them in their neutral colourway. If a guilty verdict comes back, they will flash red and black, depending on the severity of the crime. But with no defendant present, I can't tell how the crystals will react. Will they demand penance from someone else? Ember? Could she be at risk? With that thought, tension rises anew within me as Klaus' father, Representative Becer, stands and the trial begins.

I try to pay attention to representatives as they ask Ember questions. Each one is more inane and ridiculous than the last. Instead, I busy myself watching the reporters and public gathered in the space before us. There are some with that glazed-over look of disinterest and boredom already. No doubt they came expecting juicy details, which is not what's happening, but we prepared for this. And then Sam, with the help of Royce and his endless fountain of knowledge, spent the last week preparing rebuttals for any plausible question. Any way that the representatives could try to twist Lydia Chadwick's actions. We have a rebuttal.

Proving that Helios didn't release Dom is possibly the most trying part of the whole situation. Conveniently, the security data for that day has been "misplaced" and our requests for access to their systems were denied numerous times. We have a contingency plan though, and as Sam finishes pointing out how Helios hadn't been at Conclave headquarters the week prior to being informed of Dom's escape, Representative Becer looks agitated. Dixon stands, taking over by inquiring as to the treatment Ember received in

her time away, as if she was vacationing at a resort somewhere.

A squealing feedback resounds through the room as reporters pull earpieces out and wince. Representative Becer cuts off mid-sentence, glancing around, shouting for order as magic swells in the air. It does nothing to settle the crowd, and then Resource's deep, distorted voice fills the cavern. An echo of his words rings out eerily through every speaker, every TV, and radio. Anything that can receive a signal broadcasts the hacker's words.

“In times of great strife, the Mother Anchor will rise. She will be born with fire in her heart and an abundance of compassion and empathy, her kindness overflowing. When those in charge veer from the crystal path, the Mother Anchor will appear with a Sept of all. They will right the wrongs inflicted upon our people. So the crystals foretold, so shall it be.” There's a pause after he finishes reciting the main prophecy Royce found, letting the words sink in for all those hearing it for the first time. “Representatives of the Changed Conclave, you are guilty. None of you have been true to your oaths. Amongst you are petty thieves, fraudulently claiming expenses you are not owed. Then there are those of you poisoning your bonded, believing you know better than the crystals. That is simply your greed and thirst for power speaking. The worst amongst you sell those of your blood to hideous fates. You tried to control and abuse the Mother Anchor for fear of what she would bring about. You sought to judge her when it is she who should judge you. The crystals' will shall be upheld.”

The ground shakes, and the silent crowd, who had been listening to Resource's distorted voice, almost enraptured by his words, now screams in panic.

There's a stampede for the doors as the crystals break free from the cave's walls and coalesce together, forming three giant golems. The white glow is painful on the eyes, and I raise an arm to shield myself, rushing with Atticus and the rest of our Sept to surround Ember as the voice speaks again.

“Penance must be paid. Judgement will begin. Right the wrongs of your souls before it is too late. The world is divided for no reason but your own greed. The hatred in your hearts will ensure the destruction of all that is left of this world. The Change occurred to reset the balance. Another will come to pass if the laws are not upheld.”

I turn to Helios as one golem reaches for Representative Cragg. “I know we said Resource should hack the broadcasts and out them, but this isn’t how I pictured that going!”

Ember screams as the golem flashes black and drops Representative Cragg into its open mouth.

CHAPTER 25

SKYLAR

I walk into the office space in the basement where Resource has set up camp. Royce sits next to our resident hacker, the two pinning note cards on the wall for easy reference.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” I don’t hide the apprehension and nerves in my voice. I know the representatives need to be outed. The public deserves to know the things they’ve been doing, but this prophecy they found last night worries me.

I don’t like my sister being blindsided by it, and we don’t know what will happen when announcing it to the world. The only reason I’m going along with it is because Dad’s aware of what they found, and he thinks declaring it publicly is the only way to have it become common knowledge.

“Hey, prospect.” Resource’s eyes scan over me, and he offers me a reassuring smile. It does nothing to alleviate the tension coursing through me, though. “Look, man, I get why you’re worried, but we know this is something the Conclave are aware of, and they’ve not publicised it for a reason. If we want any hope of putting a stop to their illegal activities, then we need to make everyone else aware they’re not the ones who are supposed to be in power right now.”

“I get that. I do. I’m just worried Ember is gonna be in a vulnerable position when this is announced.”

“She’s going to be surrounded by her Sept and your dads. Plus, there’s going to be a crowd of people with reporters, not just the general public. But if the representatives attempt to do

anything to cause her harm, it will be captured on the broadcast feed. There's a two-second delay, so even when we take over the feed, we'll still have the footage of the judgement caves backed up on an external server," Resource explains. Royce nods along with his words, both doing their best to reassure me they've thought through the contingencies. "Look, man, I know you're worried about your sister, but this isn't something I'm taking lightly. I'm not gonna go against my president, and not only is Ember his sister-in-law through you but also through Helios. Now, in case you hadn't noticed, Helios has kind of an obsession with your sister, and there is no way any of us in this club would do anything to put her at risk. After you were freed, Phantom ordered Helios not to return to EvoGen... Well, that went down like a lead balloon. Then there was an accident, and the vice president at the time, Crutch, broke his leg. He couldn't ride, but no one was particularly worried because Helios was already showing an aptitude for healing. Except he refused to heal the vice president until Phantom lifted his restrictions of movement." He holds my gaze, letting the story sink in. "I have no desire to be on the receiving end of that man's anger, so I will do everything within my power to make sure Ember is safe. There's way too much corruption buried behind the facade the representatives are presenting to the world, though, and this is the quickest way of bringing about a reform."

"And it's completely legal, so that's another bonus," Royce adds, not glancing up from the notes he's organising.

An alarm beeps on the screen, and Resource sends out a pulse of his magic. The lights flicker above us, and the monitors blink on, showing the judgement cave. Ember stands on a raised crystal platform surrounded by water. I can make out Dad just behind her, but the cameras are purely focused on her.

Resource leans back in his chair, threading his fingers and cracking the knuckles. "Okay, it's almost showtime. If you want to stay down here, you're welcome to, but I know Sketch, Ghost, and a couple of the club's other council members are going to watch upstairs. If you stay down here,

you have to promise not to make a sound. I won't be able to distort your voice and mine."

"I'll head upstairs. I'm impulsive enough that I might blurt something out, and I don't know all the crimes the representatives are guilty of, so I'll sit with Sketch and the council if they let me in, since I'm only a prospect."

Resource's nod switches to him shaking his head by the end of my statement. "You know that's just a formality. Every one of us had to go through being a prospect before we could patch in. It's not like Sketch is one of those old-school, misogynistic presidents, even some of the patched members are women. Phantom would have had an aneurysm over that." He grins at the thought, and once again, I'm happy to not have met my father-in-law. "Besides, man, you just have to do one more run once this is all sorted, and you're in. You're the president's bond-mate. No one is gonna expect you to sit back and take on an ol' lady role. Unless you wanted to, of course."

"Nah, I know that." I wave him off. "Sketch gave me the option of staying neutral and not knowing the details, especially given Dad's and Pop's jobs. I don't want that wall between us, so I'll patch in. It's not like I'm going to join the Shadow-Stalkers now, anyway." I shrug, ignoring the hint of sympathy in their eyes as they look over at me. "I only ever wanted to work for the Conclave because I thought it would help me rescue my sister. There's nothing to tie me to that now because she's here."

The two men nod, and I glance around the room, taking in the computer screens and Post-it notes. Everything is colour-coded and organised within an inch of its life. There is nothing to make me believe that Resource and Royce haven't considered every variable. Taking a steadying breath, I remind myself not for the first, or last, time that if I'm joining the Hounds, I have to put my trust in all the members, not just the club's council. Royce isn't one, but without him, I doubt we'd have found a fraction of the laws pertaining to female Anchors. We definitely wouldn't know about the prophecy.

Without another word, I turn and head back upstairs, offering a two-finger wave over my shoulder as I go before

making a beeline for Sketch's office, where I know he's gathered with his council to watch the hearing.

There's an empty seat next to Sketch when I step into the office. They've pushed the desk against the back wall so we can all easily gather around the TV. He offers me a soft smile and pulls me into the chair next to him.

"Just in time. I was about to send Styx to find you."

"I was checking in with Resource and Royce in the basement. Everything is good to go."

Sketch raises an eyebrow at me, not missing the trepidation niggling in the corners of my mind through our bond. "Good to go, huh? Then why do you seem nervous?"

"I don't know." I sigh, leaning my head back to the ceiling before straightening and clearing my throat. No need to be quite so dramatic. "It's probably just this prophecy business. It feels like something out of one of the old movies that Pa, Aaron, and Zane like watching so much, and something always went wrong."

"This isn't a movie, Skylar. Stop borrowing trouble."

"Hush, you two. It's starting." Styx waves a hand in our direction without taking his eyes from the screen as Representative Becer issues an opening statement outlining the charges against Lydia Chadwick.

As the hearing progresses, anger courses through me as the representatives attempt time and time again to excuse Chadwick's behaviour and lay the blame at my sister's or Helios' feet.

"When is Resource going to do his thing?" Ghost mutters, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. The tension in my friend's shoulders practically screams his annoyance over the proceedings so far. It's nice to know I'm not overreacting because it's my sister.

It's almost as though the club's hacker heard his vice president's grumbles. Static fills the screen, taking away the images of the judgement cave and replacing it with a masked man. A small box rests at his throat, distorting his voice as he

speaks to the representatives and the watching public. He recites the prophecy before laying forth the accusations of the different crimes. Embezzlement, fraud, abusing their power for their own gain, none of those come as a surprise to me, but when he mentions the poisoning of bond-mates and the selling of Changed bloodlines, the tension in the room skyrockets. None of the council have found their bond-mates, and I know I have Sketch, but I can't help but wonder if the second pulse the discernment crystal gave me could link back to one of the people who have been sold because of their gifts. Sketch curses loudly, pushing to his feet and slamming a hand down on his desk.

“I knew they found some shit, but I didn't realise it was this. I thought it was going to be bribes and tax dodging, maybe inappropriate affairs or something, not selling Changed to gangs and cartels and who knows where else.”

I shake my head, not wanting to give voice to where my thoughts have led, though if I want our relationship to work, especially after we find our missing bond-mate, then we need to have open and clear communication from the start. “He said Changed bloodlines not that they were selling Changed. Do you really think the representatives who prize purity of blood would sell full-blooded Changed?” I glance around the room, waiting to see if any of them come to the same conclusion I have.

Styx runs a hand through his blue hair and curses loudly. “They sold Chum. That's what you're getting at, isn't it? You think they sold Chum, like us.”

I don't answer before Resource disappears from the screen and the judgement cave comes back into focus. Three crystal golems appear exacting judgement and their own version of justice on the representatives. Jumping to my feet, I rush out of Sketch's office, heading for the basement doors. There was no mention of motherfucking golems when I spoke to Resource and Royce. I only make it halfway down the stairs before Royce turns the corner, sprinting towards me, taking two steps at a time.

“I know what you’re gonna say. And no, we didn’t know about the golems. If we had, we would have told you, and we definitely would have warned the others. I can’t get through to Atticus. We need to get over there and see if we can help. There’s going to be riots in the street with people terrified of what’s happening.”

“No shit, Sherlock, one of those golems just ate a representative on live TV! Of course people are going to riot. They’re going to be terrified that they’re next.” I grab my phone from my pocket, dialling Dad, then Pops, followed by Pa and Aaron, but it doesn’t connect. Finally, with my anxiety rapidly rising as I call Zane’s number, it rings, and a breath of relief escapes. I rush back up the stairs with Royce close on my heels.

As soon as we make it into the main clubhouse, I hear Sketch and Ghost ordering the club to grab their shit and get on their bikes.

Sketch tosses a helmet at me, which I catch with one hand and quickly sync my phone to the Bluetooth inside it. Zane’s gruff voice comes through the speakers as I shove it on, knocking my glasses askew in my haste.

“We’re on our way. And when I say ‘we,’ I mean like the entire fucking club are coming. We’re not too far out, but are you safe? What do you need from us? Are the golems paying you any attention?”

CHAPTER 26

ZANE

I wrap my arms around Ember as her scream dies off. Tucking her face into my chest, I shield her from the sight before us as best as I can and rub soothing circles along her lower back. With my other hand, I fish my phone out of my pocket. Seeing Skylar's name, I answer quickly. He'll have been watching and will need whatever reassurance I can offer that we're safe.

I have to say his name twice before he finally speaks, skipping any greeting and diving right into the nitty gritty. "We're on our way. And when I say 'we,' I mean like the entire fucking club are coming. We're not too far out, but are you safe? What do you need from us? Are the golems paying you any attention?"

"They don't seem to be paying us any attention. That could quite easily change once they finish working through the representatives."

Sam pushes his way over to us, and I pass him my phone after letting Skylar know what I'm doing. As much as I want to talk with my cousin and help figure out a plan of action, I need to put Ember first. My Peanut is shaking with a mixture of the adrenaline and fear flooding our bond. Both are completely understandable, given the bomb Resource just dropped on us. Behind me, Vertus and Klaus are discussing the revelations with Atticus and Helios. I glance around for my brother, not seeing him straight away.

A shout draws my attention, and Ember shifts in my arms, fighting free of my embrace. When, like me, she spots the golem reaching for Klaus' dad as the other two flash black,

eliminating the representatives they were holding, Ember's head shakes from side to side.

Her words get lost amongst the cacophony of the public as they scream and shout, stampeding over one another to get into the exit tunnel. I can't say I blame them for wanting to put as much distance between themselves and the golems as possible. The lack of magic, however, surprises me. I would have expected at least one person to attempt an attack—counter-attack?—against the crystal constructs. Self-preservation is winning out, though, because the representatives are the only ones attempting any magic against the golems, but their spells are weak. Little more than the tasks we accomplished in our first classes at the Institute.

Ember's voice grows louder, and as the golem's fist closes around Representative Becer, a guttural scream rips from her throat.

“No! Stop! Just stop!” Desperation and anguish rip through the bond, along with fear and trepidation. The golem flashes a deep red but doesn't lift Becer any higher off the ground. The other two columns freeze in place, one dangling Representative Doyle over its gaping maw. He'll be the fourth? Fifth? Representative the golems eat. How many of our government have committed heinous enough acts to warrant death?

“Dad!” Klaus shouts, jumping off the crystal dais and using his magic to form a water bridge over to where the golems block the remaining representatives from escaping.

Instead of following him right away, I pull Ember back against my chest as Atticus steps up on my left and Aaron on my right. Both stare at the frozen golems before shifting their gazes to Ember.

“Did you just control them?” I scoff at my brother's redundant question, because why else would they have stopped if not in response to Ember's shout?

“I-I think so, but why?”

“If I were to hazard a guess, I would say it’s something to do with the Mother Anchor prophecy that was mentioned before they appeared.” Atticus adjusts his glasses and looks back at the golems and the representatives, now attempting to slip amongst the remaining crowd. He hums under his breath, mumbling, “That won’t do.” Flicking a hand in a lazy gesture towards the exit tunnel, a gold shimmer appears over the opening.

The people at the front stumble in an attempt to stop themselves from crossing the threshold, but the momentum of those behind them pushes them forwards, regardless. Only when one representative tries to escape does Atticus’ magic reveal itself and block them.

Ember turns to Aaron, and they exchange a look that holds an entire conversation. I thought seeing my twin have a nonverbal conversation with someone other than me would spark jealousy. Instead, seeing them form a relationship so quickly is heart-warming, and the prospect of our future together fills me with excited anticipation.

Before we can move forward with our lives, though, there needs to be a resolution to the mess happening here. Aaron lifts his hands, and through the bond, I feel Ember’s magic dwindle as she syphons it into my brother. The remaining crystals around us in the lake, part, creating a clear path, and Aaron calls a solid earthen bridge from the bank to the crystal dais we’re standing on. No one hesitates to cross, and we race to catch up with Klaus as he approaches the golem holding his father.

“What did you do? Why did it flash such a dark red? What crime had you committed from the list the voice provided?” The exasperation and hurt are clear in Klaus’ question as he demands answers from Representative Becer, but the older man refuses to answer. Instead, he demands to be released, while loudly dismissing the claims of a Mother Anchor and yet making no mention of the crimes Resource outlined when he took over proceedings.

“We won’t help you down until you admit to what you did.” Klaus crosses his arms over his chest, and the two

representatives dangling over the mouths of the other golems find their voices.

“You have no right to demand answers from us. We are the law, and we do not answer to the likes of you.”

“That’s a bold claim from someone about to be eaten by a magical construct,” I point out as Sam, Nik, and Uncle T cross Aaron’s bridge and join us.

“You have no evidence of our wrongdoing. This is simply an Anchor and her Sept throwing about power and attempting to steal the mantle of government from us.”

“Actually,” Sam cuts in, waving my phone in the air. “There is ample evidence to back up all accusations, should it be required. In fact, I believe that all evidence against each individual representative will be made public knowledge by the end of the day. If the golems do not complete their judgement, they will remain until a balance is restored or all judgements have been carried out.”

“What evidence can you possibly have for claims as outrageous as the ones presented? There is no conceivable way anyone would believe such absurd allegations as us selling Changed people.” Ember closes her eyes briefly at Jermaine Becer’s words. Through our bond, I feel that last kernel of hope fizzle out and die. Despite everything he’s said and done, I know Ember didn’t want him to be involved in this. I glance over at Klaus, his face is a blank mask but his knuckles are a stark white from how tight he’s clenching his fist.

“See, Representative, that’s the thing. The allegation is that people with Changed blood were sold by the Conclave. Which would include individuals like me who are half-Changed and half-human. Are you suggesting that no one on the Conclave has been involved in handing over Changed or Chum to the cartels or gangs? Because I find it interesting that you specifically said the allegation was absurd for selling Changed people, not those with Changed blood. That’s a key distinction.” As Helios points all of this out to the remaining representatives, I move up behind Ember once more, ducking down until my lips are beside her ear. “Why don’t you try

asking the golems what crimes they are judging Becer, Crannick, and Loughlan for?”

“Do you think they can talk?” she asks in a hushed, soft voice, and I shrug.

“I’m not sure, but it’s worth a try.”

CHAPTER 27

EMBER

Taking a deep breath, I step forwards to put some distance between my Sept, Sam, Tavon, Nik, and myself. Tilting my head back, it dawns on me that if the golems do speak and this becomes a conversation, I'll end up with a crick in my neck before long. Drawing on my magic, I raise the earth under my feet up until I'm level with the golem holding Representative Becer.

“Can you answer my questions as to the crimes you're judging?” I twist my fingers together behind my back, not wanting the creatures to see how nervous I am to address them. There's a long pause before the one in front of me speaks with an echoing, deep voice.

“This man is not the worst amongst the accused. He is guilty more of inaction and neglect. His bond-mate suffers because of the actions of another who has already paid the price at your hands, Mother.”

I can't focus on it calling me mother. There'll be time to delve into that later when no one's life is in danger. “Explain what he's being judged for. Please.”

“Becer was called to his bond-group yet entertained the advances of another. No physical betrayal occurred, but his refusal to end the flirtations led the other party to poison his bond-mate and her own with the notion that once they severed the bond, they could form a relationship.”

“What the fuck!” Klaus explodes, throwing his hands in the air, and the water in the lake erupts into a hot geyser.

“You’re the reason Mum’s been sick this whole time? How could you hurt her like that? Does she know?”

Jermaine shakes his head, pushing his hands against the golem’s fist closed around his waist. “That’s not true. None of that is true. No one would ever think I could betray Bonnie. I would never betray her.”

The golem’s head turns back to face the man in his grip. Its eyes glow and cycle through every colour of the rainbow as it observes Representative Becer. “Judgement detects no falsehood within your words. Red judgement is revoked if the Mother Anchor agrees.”

Everyone turns to face me, waiting for a verdict, but I have no idea what that should be.

“Will you step down from your position as a representative in order to care for your bond-mate and make amends for the damage caused by the person or persons responsible for illness?”

Before Jermaine can answer, there’s a low rumbling from the tunnels where all the reporters and general public have escaped. The representatives who have not already faced the golem’s judgement huddle against the far wall on either side of the opening. A screech sounds from them as the rumbling grows louder until motorcycles burst through.

Twenty or thirty motorbikes spread out around the cave. Skylar skids to a stop closest to us, jumping off his bike as soon as the kickstand is in place. He rips his helmet off and stares up at the golems. “Holy shit, they’re even bigger than I thought.”

Before any of us can respond to my brother’s outburst, Klaus steps forward, manipulating his magic to propel him up onto the platform I’ve created. He wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me into him as he looks at his father. “Well, Dad, what’s your answer? Will you step down and focus on Mum or does your position within the Conclave mean more to you than your bond-mate?”

Jermaine turns his gaze to Klaus, his lips beneath that ridiculous moustache twisting with a sneer. “Your mother is a shell of her former self. No one has been able to heal her, and there is nothing to suggest that that will change now. I have worked too hard and for too long to sacrifice everything I have built.”

Klaus’ grip on me tightens, but it’s the only outward reaction to his father’s words. Through the bond, I sense the internal storm of disbelief, hurt, confusion, and shock. “You would really choose your job over the person the crystals called for you?”

Jermaine scoffs, casting a pitying look at Klaus. “The crystals are not infallible, son. The fact they provided your Anchor with such strong bloodlines is proof of that.” His lips twist into a sneer as he regards me. “It is nothing but a waste to have five families die out. Bonnie would have been a remarkable woman, and you can allege that someone poisoned her, but she has been this way since my bond-brothers died tragically in a car accident.”

The golem holding Jermaine flares black as he speaks, its head turns, eyes flashing as it regards my father-in-law. “The original crime brought to us is negligible compared to the one your soul just confessed.”

The colour in Jermaine’s face pales, and he renews his struggles to break free. Klaus’ grip tightens, and I know it will leave a bruise. I can’t find it within myself to care though, not in light of the growing concern over what the golem is accusing Jermaine of.

Klaus opens his mouth, but no words come out. The devastation on his face is nothing compared to what I suspect it will be. I don’t want to question his father, but Klaus deserves to know the answer. Swallowing my trepidation, I ask, “What crime made you flash black?”

Jermaine’s wide eyes flick between the golem and us before narrowing. There’s no denying the shrewd calculations forming behind his gaze. “You’re committing treason by holding us hostage like this. I think it would be best if you had

your constructs release us. Perhaps we can come to an agreement to avoid the death penalty—”

“It was an accident that caused the car crash, wasn’t it?” I glare at Klaus after he cuts his father off. He swallows but doesn’t take his eyes off of Jermaine.

I wrap my arms around Klaus, hugging him tight as his father speaks. “Bonnie showed such promise. Her line is born from one of the original representatives. Her entire family can be traced back through their seats on the Conclave. I couldn’t allow it to be sullied by lesser men, but she refused to acknowledge the crystals had made an error. I was the only one of a suitable match. If the others had fathered her children, they would have diluted the gene pool, and eventually, our people would have died out. Action had to be taken to ensure only the strongest reproduced.”

“Did you kill them?” Klaus forces out the question, and the golem flares black once more.

“Their reckless driving is no fault but their own. They went off the cliff and were unable to save themselves, which simply proves I was right and they were weak.”

Klaus closes his eyes and nods subtly. He turns away and presses a kiss to my lips before whispering against them, “Let the golems take their judgement.”

I reach along our bond, scanning the maelstrom of emotions swelling inside him, but his conviction is clear. I nod and do as he asks.

The golem raises Jermaine over its head and drops the enraged representative into its open mouth. I lower the earth platform we’re standing on, and as soon as we’re back on level ground with everyone else, Helios steps forward, clasping a hand on Klaus’ shoulder. “How about we pay your mum a visit and see if I can heal the damage years of poisoning have caused?”

“What about the other representatives?” Zane asks, nodding toward the once-haughty individuals who now cower against the stone wall.

“We will stay and bear witness to the golem’s judgement. Once the representatives have been tried, we’ll let you know. It would probably be best for Ember to return, as they seem to listen to her,” Sam offers with a nod in my direction.

None of this is how I expected the day to go. It’s overwhelming, almost suffocating to think I somehow have sway over these giant sentient constructs. The prophecy and the golems are more than I can comprehend, so instead, I focus on the blossoming hope unfurling within Klaus at Helios’ offer.

“Yeah, but... let’s not tell her that my dad orchestrated the accident?” Klaus glances around at us all, his eyes pleading as he rushes on. “I’ll tell her, eventually. Once she’s better... I just—” He expels a heavy sigh and shakes his head. “This will break her. And she’s already struggling—”

“It’s your decision if you tell her. We’re just the backup support team,” Aaron answers Klaus’ concern.

Helios snatches a set of keys from Sketch’s fingers. “Ember, ride with me?”

CHAPTER 28

HELIOS

Once we leave the mountain pass behind us, I open the throttle and unleash the true power and potential of the bike. Ember's grip tightens around my waist, and a flash of fear hits me through our bond. Of course the winding path would induce fear for her. It's not that dissimilar to the road Dominic crashed on when Ember first escaped EvoGen's clutches.

Before I can tap the brakes, her fear gives way to exhilaration and a burst of adrenaline. She lets out a carefree laugh as we practically fly back towards town.

"This is amazing!" I can hear the smile in her words, and pride fills me that despite everything that's happened so far today, I'm able to offer her this small reprieve.

Ember is a natural at following my lead. Each time I shift my weight to manoeuvre the bike, she mimics the movement flawlessly.

"Do we need to wait for the others?" she asks, no doubt manipulating the wind with her magic so I can hear her.

"Probably best," I ramble. My focus caught on the sight of smoke curling above the trees at the bottom of the valley close to town. "What's going on?"

My question must draw Ember's attention to the smoke because a gasp leaves her. "Is that a fire? Go! We can help."

Trying to argue is fruitless, but I keep our approach under the speed limit. A blanket of foreboding washes over me, and I learnt long ago to trust my instincts. And with the rest of the Sept being a few minutes behind us, I don't want to risk

getting Ember into a situation I can't protect her from. Or one where she's distracted because she's trying to protect me.

"Oh my God." The soft whisper from Ember pulls me from the what-ifs to survey the reality.

The smoke that caught our attention wasn't from one fire but multiple ones. Glass litters the pavement in front of the different shops, where the windows have been smashed. Looters clamber over one another as they scurry away with their stolen goods. Individuals with their faces obscured by bandana scarves carrying an array of weapons seem to focus their destruction on Changed-owned businesses.

The rumble of vehicles pulling up behind us has me looking over my shoulder, tensing with the anticipation of a fight. My muscles relax at the sight of my Sept-brothers and the Hounds. Sketch pulls up next to me, his eyes scanning over the chaos unfolding before us.

"Guess word got out about the trial..." I turn from inspecting the scene to give Sketch a withering look. His ability to state the obvious is second to none.

"Well, duh," Skylar intones from his seat behind my twin. "It was broadcast across the entire continent."

"We need to stop them. How do we stop them?" Ember's grip on me shifts, and I reach back, clamping a hand on her leg.

"You're not getting off this bike to walk into a riot."

"We have to do something! They're destroying people's livelihoods. We can at least help put out the fires and repair the broken glass—"

"We'll run interference with the mob. You go heal your mother-by-bonding like you planned." Sketch lifts a hand, twisting his wrist and fingers, signalling what he's planning to the Hounds.

A shout rises from the crowd of looters; two or three break off from the main group and head towards us.

“Em, whatcha doing?” The hesitancy in Skylar’s question has me twisting in my seat to look back at her.

“Not leaving these people defenceless.” Ember’s curls rise around her as magic swells. Her power grows through the bond as she syphons from the world. Small doses of energy from each blade of grass, flower, bush, and tree, but never enough to cause harm to the plant she’s taking from.

“And how, exactly, are you—” Sketch stops mid-sentence as a gust of wind flows over us, whipping all our hair forward and obscuring our view of town. “That’s not possible,” he murmurs, looking from the streets in front of us to Ember behind me. “Fire feeds on oxygen; you just blasted the town with wind, and the fires are all gone. They should be an inferno.”

“Except I removed the oxygen and made a wind of carbon dioxide.” Sketch stares at Ember, his mouth opening and closing. It’s amusing but also an understandable reaction, one I would undoubtedly have, too, if it weren’t for our bond, allowing me to follow the path of her magic. “How—”

“Magic, Sketch. She used magic.” I clap a hand on my brother’s shoulder. “Think you can round up the main offenders or disperse them while we go and heal Klaus’ mum?”

“Yup. Sure. I think we can handle that,” he says, nodding slowly as he tracks the movements of those wielding weapons or hiding behind bandanas.

“We should check if anyone here is injured before we leave—” Ember starts.

“There are other healers who can help everyone here, pet. But I’m the only one who can help your mother-by-bonding, and that’s not my ego talking. It’s just the truth.”

There’s a long pause before she sighs. “Yeah, that makes sense... I just feel responsible—”

“Fuck that shit, Pipes.” Skylar cuts her off. “You didn’t order anyone to riot or summon the golems. You didn’t make the Conclave so corrupt and delusional that they thought they

were above reproach. None of this”—he waves a hand at the destruction, causing Sketch to duck—“is because of you. People choosing to leave their homes, places of work, whatever and come out here and do this is not and never will be your fault or responsibility.”

“Unless you’re using some kind of mind control on them,” Sketch adds with a shrug. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh heavily at my brother’s words.

“Really?” Skylar glares at the back of Sketch’s head as Ember laughs and a car door shuts behind us.

“Hey, what’s the plan? Want me to go with Helios to see Mum, and you can stay here with the others to help put the town back together?” Klaus asks Ember, his gaze moving between her and the carnage.

“If you don’t think all seven of us turning up will overwhelm her, I’d like us to stick together.”

“Okay, good. That’s what I think we’d all prefer too. Don’t buzz when you get to the front gate before us. I’ll open it once we catch up.”

“I’ll stick to the speed limits now. We won’t get that far ahead,” I reassure him. Klaus quirks a brow, and I can tell he doesn’t believe me, which is fair.

I’m true to my word, though, but despite sticking to limits, the bike can navigate around the obstacles in the road far more easily than the car. Still, we don’t have to wait long at the Becer residence before Klaus and the others join us.

The ornate front gates creep open, and as soon as there’s space for the bike to fit, I accelerate through and up the arched driveway, pulling to a stop before the house’s main entrance.

Klaus is the last to get out of the car. None of us rush him, and I’m pleasantly surprised when not an ounce of jealousy or possessiveness sparks within me when Ember leaves my side to join him. Part of me always wondered whether I would adapt to sharing her, but since the night in the training room when we completed our bond, I haven’t felt even a twinge of those compulsive emotions.

Klaus and Ember share a whispered conversation. I'm sure I could listen in. They're not that far away, but I respect the privacy and need to have this couple's moment.

Sometimes, each of the Sept needs one-on-one time with Ember, and realising her split focus isn't a slight against the rest of us is a maturity I wasn't sure I would reach where she's concerned. After all, I've spent the majority of my life obsessing over her. Everything about my relationship with Ember up to this point would categorise me as a walking red flag. A label I will gladly wear since those actions brought me to this point.

Klaus tugs at his shirtsleeves as he climbs the three steps to the front porch. His hand hovers over the door handle for a moment before he rolls his shoulders back and leads the way into the mansion.

The entrance foyer is expansive with a large winder staircase to the left. Klaus motions us past it, heading instead to the back of the foyer, where the space opens on either side into two corridors.

"The kitchen is at the end of that hall." Klaus points to the right. "If you want to raid for snacks or something. We haven't eaten in a while, and I don't think we'll all fit in Mum's room."

Aaron nods and cracks his knuckles. "I can definitely head down there and make something for us all. I'm sure once Helios heals your mum, she'll be hungry. What are some of her favourite foods? I'll check what ingredients are here and whip something up."

"We can always nip to a shop. The rioters only seemed to be in the centre. I'm sure we can find somewhere that's open if needs be," Atticus adds.

Klaus rattles off a short list of dishes. All are relatively bland, but that makes sense if Bonnie has spent the last two decades suffering the effects of whatever poison Lydia Chadwick inflicted upon her.

The fact Chadwick got away with poisoning Bonnie Becer for so many years is sickening. I don't blame Klaus for not noticing the signs. By the time he was old enough, it had been going on too long for him to view it as anything but the norm.

Jermaine Becer, however, should have done more. In my mind, the blame for Bonnie's suffering lies as much at his feet as it does Lydia's.

I follow absently behind Ember as Klaus leads us down the lefthand hall. Turning a corner, the scent of antiseptic and disinfectant hits me. The smell transports me back to working in hospitals and my lab after an in-depth session with Dominic Carmichael. I never managed to fully repay him for all of Ember's scars. A shame. He inflicted so much pain, and despite his fiery ending, I can't help but feel he got off lightly.

The scent intensifies until we reach a door which I assume leads into Bonnie's bedroom. Klaus taps before pushing it open, revealing a space filled mainly by the hospital bed. A high wing-backed armchair sits to one side as does a table that can fit over the bed. Footage from the judgement caves flash across the TV mounted on the wall, but I ignore it, far too intrigued by the sheer number of books on politics, history, and sociology.

"Klaus?" The raspy frail voice draws my attention to my patient. Dark hair that matches Klaus' frames a gaunt face. Even with the effects of long-term poisoning ravaging her features, it's clear Bonnie Becer was a stunning woman. Her dark-blue eyes flit over her son, rake over me, and freeze on Ember. Before she can voice the questions I see swirling behind her gaze, Klaus steps to her side, taking her hand in his.

"Hey, Mum. This is Ember, my Anchor, and Helios, my bond-brother. He thinks he can help you feel better."

CHAPTER 29

AARON

“These are the final candidates for the remaining seat. The golems vetted them, and I think any would be a welcome member of the new coalition government,” Bonnie explains as Klaus hands out the files on the remaining candidates to the Changed and human members of the new universal government.

After Helios removed the lingering trace of poison from her body and healed the extensive damage to her organs, it didn't take long for Bonnie to thrive. Her knowledge of the previous Conclave is remarkable. Jermaine must have spent an inordinate amount of time discussing things with her, or at least within earshot. It's knowledge proven to be invaluable to creating a reform multiple times already. It's given her something to focus on other than the betrayal of Jermaine.

Thankfully, we haven't had to start from complete scratch. The human structures were already in place and there's a benefit to having giant crystal golems who will eat anyone corrupt. We shouldn't have needed them, not with truth-seers and the other magic available to us. Unfortunately, the Conclave proved an outside source to maintain accountability is necessary. We need more equality between races. The new coalition has seats earmarked for a mix of bloodlines. Changed, half-Changed, and human. I thought finding candidates would take longer than it has. The threat of being a golem's dinner is probably to thank for only the truly good prospects throwing their hats in the ring.

“I know since the Changed Conclave was overthrown, there’s been a lot of turmoil.” One of the human women scoffs at Bonnie’s words. My mother-by-bonding inclines her head. “A gross understatement; I’m sure you’ll agree. But we’ve worked hard these last few months to bring about a real change, and I’m genuinely hopeful that this new coalition between humans, Changed, and those of mixed blood, will enable a brighter future for us all.” Bonnie flashes the humans a warm smile. Her passion and enthusiasm to see the world unite and work together to be a better place for all individuals, regardless of magical potential, is infectious. “I know that it’s unlikely we’ll ever get to a point where we don’t view each other as separate races. But I would love to see us reach one where we don’t have that intense level of segregation of the past. My hope—” She pauses and waves a hand to indicate Ember and our Sept. “Our hope is that we will integrate the education systems so that everyone is informed and aware of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. The last thing I think any of us want is for history to repeat itself.”

I sit quietly at the table while Bonnie addresses the human branch of the new government. Had anyone said before we entered the judgement caves three months ago that I would not only be thrust into the world of global politics but also be working alongside my mother-by-bonding to bring about a coalition where there are representatives for each race, I never would have believed them.

Not in part because Bonnie was bedbound, and although her mind was still functioning—and sharp—her body had succumbed to the effects of the poison. Lydia Chadwick had been feeding her a mixture of concoctions for years. With each passing day, as we uncover more and more of the corruption of our previous government, I can’t help but feel Chadwick and several other representatives were let off easy.

Bonnie clasps her hands in front of her on the conference table. Her smile firmly in place as she regards the five humans opposite. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I slip it out as Roberts, the human spokesperson, leans forward and pulls the files closer to him.

“The golems have proven themselves more than just when it comes to vetting politicians. I know that there’s always a chance of corruption with a position at this power level. But I am happy to proceed with the election process as soon as we have a complete overview of our government representatives. We have the final trial for the remaining Changed Conclave Representatives this week. Once that concludes, I would like to discuss how we can help locate those trafficked, or if there are any ways we can help prevent more of your young people from going missing. I know you have lost someone to the trafficking scheme, Mother Anchor.”

I jerk my head up at his words and glance over at Ember. While she’s embraced the title, it’s not one many have taken to calling her in person.

“Please, Ember is fine,” she replies with a pleasant smile. I see the strain around her eyes though, and our bond hums with her worry and fear for Sawyer. I want to reach out to her and offer some comfort. Zane shifts in his seat, and I know he wants the same thing. “And yes, one of my friends has been missing for five months now. But I have every confidence in Vertus and his team. They have reunited several families with their loved ones already. I’m sure they will reunite Sawyer with her own soon.”

“Of course.” Roberts ducks his head before clearing his throat. “My apologies if my comment insinuated otherwise. We’ve all been incredibly impressed with their work so far.”

“Yes, and I personally believe the public will find comfort that the events of the previous Conclave won’t be repeated with a force like this in place,” the blonde woman on his right says. She fires a sideways glare at her colleague, and Roberts’ cheeks warm.

“Quite right, Tara. Especially with Mr Irfan’s truth-seer abilities. Between that power—now there are less restrictions on his using it—and the golems, I think the public can be assured they’re in safe hands.”

“Which was the thought process behind the unit. This job we’re all taking on comes with a great amount of power, and

as the saying goes, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Vertus and the seers will ensure no one believes they are above reproach.” Bonnie steps in, steering the conversation back on track.

I roll my shoulders, releasing the tension and focusing instead on sending warmth, comfort, and reassurance to Ember through our bond. Her lips twitch with a smile as she steadily avoids my gaze.

A knock on the conference room door halts the conversation as Myra pokes her head in. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop from smiling, knowing the reason for her arrival.

“Sorry to interrupt. Miss Ward, you have another appointment across town. The car is downstairs waiting.”

The human delegates check their watches before packing away the files. Atticus and Vertus push to their feet first and help Ember stand. Helios moves behind her, placing his palm on her lower back, and her posture shifts, physically changing as he takes away some of her exhaustion and stress.

The last three weeks have been a huge amount of pressure on her, and now the pieces are finally falling into place where she can take a step back. I want to ensure she has fun, that we all do. It’s far too easy to get swept up in the maelstrom of political reform.

Vertus checks his phone as Ember says goodbye to the human politicians, and Bonnie walks them out. An expression crosses his face too quickly for me to identify, and as he leans in to whisper in Ember’s ear, there’s nothing to hint whether it’s good or bad news.

A huge smile takes over Ember’s face, and she turns, throwing her arms around him. The kiss they share has me remembering the bondings in the training room. I have to shift to adjust the comfort of my trousers. We’ve all been too busy since then for anything remotely similar. That should change soon, though.

Myra calls out to Ember again. She disentangles from Vertus, a soft blush coating her cheeks as she hurriedly says bye to the rest of us. Myra winks at me before closing the door behind them.

Everything is on schedule, and I don't think Ember has any suspicions. Our Sept are the only ones remaining in the conference room, which gives us the perfect moment to discuss the final preparations for our bonding ceremony. But first, I have a question for Vertus.

“What did you say to Em to evoke that reaction?”

The silver-haired man shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. A smug smile in place as he answers, “We found Sawyer. We're bringing her home.”

CHAPTER 30

EMBER

Myra pulls the blindfold from my eyes with a gleeful chuckle. Blinking against the bright sunlight after the hour journey without sight, I take a moment to orientate myself with my surroundings. A smile spreads across my face as I twist to look at her.

“What are we doing here?”

My best friend grins, dragging me towards the door. “Well, it’s finally time that you actually have your ceremony and make your bonding, you know, *legal*.”

“My bonding? It’s not—What do you mean it’s not legal?” I ask, following Myra up the stairs to the studio space I know waits above.

“I *mean* exactly what I said.” She looks back at me and sighs, rolling her eyes. “You know, for someone who is basically in charge of the government of the entire planet. You should really know this.”

“Uh-huh, except I’m not. I’m not in charge.”

Myra stops on the stairs and looks down at me, raising an eyebrow and scoffs. “Right. You’re just the female Anchor from the prophecy. That the golems call Mother Anchor while listening to your every word. Oh, and you overthrew the representatives and then somehow managed to form a coalition with the humans. Plus, you got them to agree to full democracy where we—the gen pop—get to elect people who don’t suck and won’t traffic us because they think they’re

untouchable.” She pops her hip out, resting a fist on it as she continues. “Any of this ringing a bell?”

“That wasn’t all me.” With her eyes narrowing, I hurry to explain before she can cut me off. “Bonnie did a lot of the work towards the coalition. She may have been bed bound for years, but she studied and listened to what was discussed when Jermaine had guests.”

Myra hums, pursing her lips. “And again, let’s refer back to the prophecy. A female Anchor—that’s you—and her Sept of the affinities; that’s your guys. This shouldn’t be news to you. You literally set up the election process and we have this like calm, almost tranquil existence now because of you. So yeah, you’re kinda queen of the universe.”

A laugh breaks free at her last statement, and I shake my head. “I think alien life forms would disagree that I’m queen of them.” Myra looks at me like I’ve grown an extra head. “Aliens are real, Myra. There was a whole court case before The Change. They might not be humanoid, or even bipedal, but they exist. Royce has this whole section full of articles on it, and how NASA had to declare that aliens might not be fuckable. He also had a bunch of pictures that were people saying ‘not with that attitude.’” I pause, thinking back over the media Atticus’ friend has in his shop and home. “He has some weird stuff. He has a lot of interesting stuff, but he has some weird stuff too.”

“Yeah... I still need to meet him. We should do that. I want to see the book hoard that is his place. Maybe find something to read that’s old.”

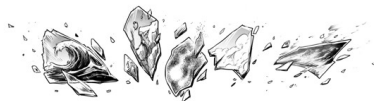
“Well, Royce’s place would be the way to go. He definitely has old books. Aren’t you burnt out on reading, though? Isn’t that something you said last week?”

“Yeah. Kinda. I’m more burnt out on academic reading and the pre-Change classics. But it’s almost over. Once I get these final qualifications, I’ll be able to declare myself as a qualified teacher. Then, it’s the not-so-simple case of finding a school that will hire me.” She grabs my arm again, pulling me with her as she finishes ascending the stairs. “I mean, I say it’s

a tranquil world that we're living in now, but there's still some hesitancy with people wanting Changed to teach. There are quite a few human schools that don't even allow Changed students. As soon as they show signs of power. They're asked to leave."

"Does that happen for mixed blood as well?" I ask as we walk into Nadya's studio.

"It probably depends on the power. If it's something that is inherently offensive, or invasive, like mind reading or something? Then yeah, they're asked to leave, but like the telepathy and stuff is easier to keep under wraps." She waves me off before I can ask anything else. "Enough about me. We're here to get you a new outfit for your bonding ceremony. Gotta make sure the Mother Anchor and her Sept are all legal."



The cave entrance shimmers before me and, unlike the last time I stood here, I step forward with no trepidation or fear. Warmth tingles across my skin as I pass through the barrier and inhale the icy freshness of the cave air.

The soft, tranquil sound of trickling water meets my ears as the bottom of my long skirt trails behind me. Soft moss cushions my feet as I descend into the heart of the cave, and the crystals glow a stunning azure blue as I pass.

The light of the moon cascades through the open ceiling, refracting off the crystals and reminding me of the last time I was here almost six months ago.

Looking up, I follow the path of one of the waterfalls, the dull roar bringing a healing comfort to a deep part of my soul. The last time I entered the mossy clearing, I came face-to-face with a nightmare. Now, that memory is being overwritten. Instead of a single man waiting for me, there are six. Their sherwanis are identical except for the colour of the embroidery decorating the cream jacket depicting their strongest affinity.

Purple for Vertus' shadows. Blue for Klaus' water. Yellow for Zane's air. Brown for Aaron's earth. Green for Helios' healing. And a mixture of silver and gold for Atticus' light.

I take a moment before approaching them, absorbing the sight before me. We've come so far since I first met each of them. We've achieved something together I would have thought to be impossible. Love and happiness overwhelm me, and as I take the first steps into the clearing, they each drop down to one knee.

Vertus raises his palm, a plume of black shadow outlined in purple manifesting in his hand. "Ember, I pledge to you my love, and my shadows. We will be with you even in the darkest of moments. Forever by your side, reminding you of your fire and strength." The shadow leaves his hand, circling me in a spiral.

Klaus clears his throat and holds up a perfect sphere of water. "I pledge to you, my love, and my water. We will wash away the roadblocks and cleanse the memories of the past. Keeping the lessons learnt but smoothing the edges until they gleam with your light." The sphere stretches into a tendril and joins Vertus' shadow in circling me.

Zane opens his palm, summoning a tiny cyclone. "I pledge to you, my love, and my air. We will be the wind in your sails, and the breeze to clear your mind. A support to help you reach your dreams and goals." As the representation of his magic joins Vertus' and Klaus', I swallow and blink. Each vow striking home their feelings for me.

Aaron smiles up at me. His eyes are misty like my own as his magic lifts three small clumps of earth from the ground. "I pledge to you, my love, and my earth. We will be your constant, a solid foundation to steady you. We will hold firm and shelter you from any storm."

Atticus adjusts his glasses and summons a ball of light like the one he had me create in our first training session at Sam's house. "I pledge to you, my love, and my light. We will endeavour to brighten your every day. Guide you through any trial and illuminate every book you wish to read." The light

joins the other magic representations of my Sept, swirling around me and lifting my curls.

Helios' hands glow, his lips tilting up at the sides. His magic is the only one that can't swirl around me. From the corner of my eye, I catch Atticus wink. I don't have time to question it before Helios speaks. "I pledge to you, my love, and my healing. We will care for you and those you love without fail and without question. Anything that is within my power to give, you will receive." As his vows end, Atticus' light swirling around me splits in two. The second tendril shifts from the yellow-white colour to a green to represent Helios' magic.

The tears that have been building slip free as their vows and ability to come together settle over me. We've all come so far, but Atticus ensuring Helios is represented in this part of the ceremony fills me with more love, happiness, and contentment than I will ever be able to express in words. This ceremony is private. No one would know if they didn't include him in the visuals, yet they have. Because they want to. Because they accept him.

Taking a deep breath, I steady myself and answer their vows with my own. "I accept your pledges and love. In return, I offer you my heart, my power, and my fire. We will burn for you until the end of time. Feeding our bond with each touch, each whispered word, and gifted token."

When the last word leaves my lips, the crystals sing, emitting a rainbow of light that coalesces above us and shoots up into the night sky and explodes into an artistic display.

Klaus reaches me first and cups my face in his palms. He uses his thumbs to wipe away the tears of happiness that escaped before capturing my lips in a kiss.

"We're officially, legally bonded," I whisper as he pulls back.

"That we are, Little Phoenix," Vertus says from behind me. "That we are."

EPILOGUE

AARON

SIX MONTHS LATER

“It’s time!”

Ember’s disembodied voice rings in my ears, interrupting the quiet we’ve fallen into while watching a movie. As the meaning behind her words sinks in, I scramble to my feet, looking at my bond-brothers, Skylar, and Sketch. We’ve been planning what to do for weeks, but now that it’s time, I’m frozen in place.

“Shit. Shit. Are they early? This is too soon, right? Didn’t the book say it would take longer?” Skylar runs his hands over his head as he paces back and forth behind the sofa. “I should call Dad, right? Shit. It’s too early. What if something goes wrong?”

Klaus raises an eyebrow as his eyes track Skylar’s movements. “It’s a little weird how invested you’ve gotten with this, you know?”

“Fuck off, Klaus.” Skylar points up at the ceiling. “One of those is mine.”

“Only if Helios doesn’t rescind the offer, love. My brother is going to go goo-goo eyed over those crystal kits,” Sketch reminds his bond-mate. He rubs Skylar’s back, attempting to soothe my cousin.

“And that’s step one of the plan.” I snap my fingers before heading to the door leading out of the living-room pod. “Not leaving Helios and Ember alone with Trinket and her kits, otherwise, we’ll have a house overrun with tiny crystal foxes.”

“I still can’t believe Trinket exists, let alone that she’s having kits,” Sketch mumbles as we file up the stairs towards the main-bedroom pod.

“Yeah, well, be thankful it wasn’t your bonding cave night that was interrupted by her appearance. Or your naked arse she bit.” Vertus scowls, rubbing his left cheek where the tiny golem had sunk her teeth.

“You were blocking her way to Ember. At least it was only your butt and not your balls.” Klaus laughs, dodging the swipe Vertus aims at his head.

I don't hide my grin since they're behind me. The orange and white crystal fox had given us all a shock, but Vertus was the only one to leave that first encounter with a scar. Helios could have healed it, but Vertus brushed aside the suggestion. I think he's secretly fond of the reminder. Trinket wormed her way into all our hearts almost instantly and followed us home.

She's Ember's companion since the rest of us are keeping odd hours. Vertus has his enforcement and rescue team. Atticus and Zane work with him in locating the half-Changed the old Conclave sold. Some missions they're gone for less than a day, others are longer. V sends the ex-Shadow-Stalkers on the more intense missions, like the cartel who had Sawyer. Trey and the guys were gone for a month before V requested the Hounds help with extraction.

Klaus and I probably keep the most stable hours. Him with tattooing and me with studying full time. I only disappear when exams are coming up or when I have essay deadlines. So many freaking essays.

Getting my degree puts me one step closer to helping at Helios' clinic as a therapist. I want to help people, and the best way for me to do that isn't out in the field like my twin.

“Hurry up, Aaron. Helios will claim and name all the kits before we get in there.” I roll my eyes at Skylar's impatience. So much has changed and yet some things remain the same.

“Technically, you picked this place for us. You only have yourself to blame for all the stairs,” I chide as we reach the top floor and I push open the door.

Ember looks up at me as I step into our room and allow the others to enter behind me. Her blue eyes sparkle and she vibrates with excited energy as she points to the small bundle in Helios' hand.

“They're so tiny, and the cuteness.” She squeaks, unable to express how adorable she finds Trinket's kits any other way.

With careful steps, we approach the labouring fox. I settle on to the floor next to Ember as Helios passes the smoky-grey and orange kit into her palm.

“Not a colour I was expecting,” Atticus murmurs, and I nod my agreement.

“I’ve never seen a grey and orange fox before.” I glance up. “Then again, before Trinket, I hadn’t seen any crystal foxes.”

“And now we get a family of them,” Ember coos, stroking a finger along the kit’s spine. It stretches, letting out a big yawn, its little tongue rolling out briefly before snuggling into Ember’s hand and falling asleep.

Over the next forty minutes, Trinket delivers another four kits. None with the same colouring as the first.

“You still okay with us having one of them?” Skylar whispers.

Helios scowls as Ember’s foot darts out to poke him in the thigh. She smiles at her brother and nods. “Of course. Got one in mind?”

“Well, I think Fi would love the grey and orange one—” He cuts off with a grunt as Sketch elbows him. It’s too late though.

“Who’s Fi?” Ember asks, sitting up straight and pinning the two Hounds with an expectant look. Through our bond, I feel her anticipation and excitement building.

“Um, well, the thing is...” Skylar hesitates and glances at Sketch beside him. “We found a female half-Changed, who we’re called to.”

“That’s great,” I say with enthusiasm until I take in the apprehensive look on his face. “Isn’t it?”

“It is.” He hurries to add, but again there’s a pause before he continues. “It’s just that, um, she may or may not be a fan of the MC life.”

“Probably not a fan of the kidnapping aspect either,” Sketch mumbles, scratching his jaw.

“Kidnapping?” Ember stares at her brother and Sketch with wide eyes. “Skylar, did you *kidnap* your bond-mate?”

“And you assholes called me unhinged and a stalker,” Helios scoffs.

“Our brothers kidnapping their bond-mate doesn’t negate or excuse your own past behaviour, Helios.”

“Technically, we didn’t kidnap her. We rescued her from that cartel.” His gaze bounces to Vertus before returning to Ember. “The same one that had Sawyer. They weren’t keeping her for themselves, though. Fi was gonna be trafficked, and we’re still not sure who wanted her. She’s staying with us for her own protection now.” I can’t begin to wrap my head around everything in that statement. Skylar has the grace to at least look somewhat sheepish. “It’s just a bumpy start, and we’ll grovel later once she’s safe.”

“Uh-huh.” Ember purses her lips. “Okay.”

Skylar and Sketch release heavy breaths, but our Sept doesn’t. We can all feel Ember’s emotions. I can practically hear the wheels turning in her mind.

“Well, I want to meet her.”

Sketch opens his mouth, no doubt to refuse Ember. Skylar elbows his bond-mate though and swallows thickly. “Sure. We can do that... When?”

“Sunday dinner seems as good a time as any, don’t you think? Then Fi can meet the new addition to your bond-group.”

Skylar shares another look with Sketch as Helios laughs and throws an arm around Ember’s neck, pulling her into him for a kiss.

“You are the best woman on the planet. Fuck, I love you, Ember.” He kisses her again. And I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. I agree with every word he said.

No matter what our future brings now, I’m confident we can weather every hurdle. Together.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been a labour of love. Not once when I started this author journey did I think I would struggle as much as I have with this book.

I've learnt a lot over the last eighteen months, and if I were to write *Shifting Their Ideals* or *Lost Ember Found* now, they would probably look quite different.

Ignite Ember Astound has tested me at every turn. There have been many times during the writing process where I contemplated giving up or at the very least delaying until 2024.

After the cliffhanger at the end of *Claimed Ember Bound*, though, I didn't feel I could delay. It didn't feel fair to readers, and I honestly love this world build. Ember's story is at a close, but it's not goodbye. I have more stories from the *Changed* to put down on paper, there will be a hiatus though.

I have so many other worlds and characters I want to introduce to you all, and I hope you'll stick with me on this journey.

Thank you for reading, for being patient with me, and for loving these characters and worlds as much as I do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aisling is a book addict living in London with her Scottish husband, their tiny tornado of a daughter and their fur baby affectionately known as Tw@Cat.

Aisling has always had a brain full of fantasy worlds and fictional scenes, and now they're being put down on paper to be shared with the world.

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