

# CLAIMED EMBER BOUND

Anchor for the Changed



# AISLING COUSINS

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BOOK TWO

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*Survivors*

*Even on your worst day, you have more strength than you know.*

*Healing takes many forms and timelines differ. Don't judge your journey based on another's.*

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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'.

Lost Ember Found is a why choose romance—meaning the main characters do not have to choose between love interests. It is a slow burn and medium build which means there is no spice and the full harem is not confirmed until later in the series. It does deal with some sensitive topics, which will be listed below. 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](mailto: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
- Minor references of third party pregnancy complications and stillbirth.

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 decided to create 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 is able to channel excess magical energies from her family and those she shares a bond with. She can then choose to 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.

# CHARACTERS

**Ember Ward:** an Anchor raised by human scientists at EvoGen and experimented on after testing positive for magical energies. At twenty-four, she embraced her chance of escape and was reunited with her twin brother, Skylar, and her biological father, Sam. Her elemental magic affinity is with fire.

**Skylar Ward:** Ember's twin brother, who was rescued from EvoGen when they were ten and has spent the fourteen years since training to qualify for the elite Conclave military 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 is La-La. His elemental magic affinity is with water.

**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 that she now has 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.

**Atticus James:** an Instructor at the Institute, training Ember and her classmates in combat and defence. 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 feels the call to Ember as his Anchor, and his nickname for her is Pol.

**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 and is in a cell awaiting court-martial. His nickname for Ember is Little Phoenix. His elemental affinity is with shadows.

**Klaus Becer:** a Changed classmate at the Institute, second-ranked in the year after Skylar. There is a rivalry between them which extends to Aaron and Zane too. He's the son of Representative 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 his nickname for her is Freckles. 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 and Lieutenant General for the Conclave military.

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

**Helios:** a doctor within the Conclave and is in charge of the week-long testing Ember agreed to in order to save Vertus. He knows Ember from before she escaped EvoGen... He calls Ember his pet.

**Rui Nishimura:** a Changed classmate and friends with Skylar, Aaron, and Zane.

**Royce:** an old school friend of Atticus. He owns the 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) 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.

**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 currently being held by Doctor Helios.

# CHAPTER I

# KLAUS



I can't take my eyes off Ember as she says her goodbyes and enters the elevator. Blood roars in my ears as the lift doors close and it descends, taking her to the basement labs.

My Anchor.

The discernment crystal was clear; I'm hers, and she's mine. But before I had a chance to speak to her, my father interfered, belittling the call my magic feels to her. And why? Some pathetic notion that she's damaged, broken. Clenching my fists at my side, I turn slowly to face the rest of the assembled males. My gaze lands on *Representative* Becer. His actions have proven time and again that his position of power means more to him than his own son. Blue eyes, so like my own, glare back at me. The difference is his eyes always have that harsh, biting edge to them. Bereft of any warmth or affection.

Before either of us can utter a word to the other, the clicking of heeled shoes announces *Representative* Chadwick's arrival. I've had enough practice over the years that I'm able to suppress the groan the sight of her elicits. Nothing good can come from my father, Dixon, and Chadwick being together, and I internally brace myself for whatever is about to unfold.

"All done?" she asks the group, not waiting for an answer before cutting her gaze to my father. "Jermaine, shall we? Updates need to be delivered before we can return to the party, given the change in circumstances."

“Of course, Lydia,” Father replies with a placating smile. “Keith, perhaps you could introduce Klaus to some of the guests he hasn’t met yet?” he asks Representative Dixon, and the coiling anger within me pulls taut. That’s just his way of trying to push me towards Changed he deems suitable for me to have any relation with. He’s manipulated everything in my life so far, especially my friends. No more. Ember is my Anchor; she’s fierce and beautiful. She captured my attention the first day she arrived at the Institute. Instead of distracting Crannick from hassling Skylar’s friend, I took the chance to speak to her. Then, when we sparred and she sent me those memories... A shudder runs up my spine at the recollection.

My father is only looking at one small aspect of Ember. He doesn’t see her beauty, her strength, her heart. He’s going too far, and it’s long past time I push back.

“If they harm her, traumatise her further, leave a single mark on her, I. Am. Done,” I say, giving the Representatives an arctic stare.

“Oh, don’t be absurd, Klaus. You’re tired. After a good night’s rest, you’ll see that having Helios fix Miss Ward will benefit all involved. Especially you, if you are called to her Sept, and if not, there are other females you can bond.” My father waves a hand dismissively as he speaks. Does he really believe the utter horse shite pouring from his mouth? Tensions rise as Skylar, Zane, and Aaron shift their stances.

“My sister isn’t broken. She doesn’t need fixing!” Skylar seethes, pushing his glasses up his nose as he glares down at the shorter man.

“Of course she does, you silly boy. How can our race continue if our strongest and most promising cannot reproduce?” Representative Chadwick splutters.

“It’s all right, Lydia. This is why she’s going with Helios. His healing magic is the strongest ever recorded,” my father placates Representative Chadwick before turning his gaze back on Skylar and me. “You’re both young. Klaus, you’re only barely a legal adult. There are many things you still have



to learn.” My father sniffs. “Do not embarrass me further tonight than you already have by causing *another* scene.”

That fucking bastard. He has someone here with that level of healing and hasn't tried to help Mum. For all his bluster and pompous attitude about duty, he neglects his to our family. Especially to my mum since she's been sick.

Now he's saying I caused a scene earlier, when he was the one who pulled me aside. All so he could disparage Ember. I snort and shake my head dismissively to disguise my anger. I knew he wouldn't be happy about the outcome of my discernment, but it's not my fault he couldn't wait until we were home. Unless he's not planning on going home again...

“Representative Becer, are you saying your son feeling the call to my daughter's Sept tonight is embarrassing for you?” Sam Ward asks. His tone makes me think of cartoons where predators are trapping their prey. Mr Ward is the python, and my father is the mouse. “Ember's the first female Anchor to be found since the last passed on fifty years ago. Surely that should be something to celebrate?”

For a normal family it probably would be. My father isn't alone on the Conclave with his warped view of life. He's controlled as many aspects of my life as possible, to make the 'best' connections. Power-hungry and self-serving. The Representatives are meant to have all Changed's best interests in mind, but I've long since given up belief in that notion. Being called to Ember's Sept is a lifeline for me, a chance to form friendships outside of my father's influence. Having an Anchor will increase my power, make me stronger. I'll have to be on my guard until Ember is of age and finds the rest of her Sept. Hopefully, whoever else is called to her won't hold my father against me.

“We, as the elected leaders for our people, are privy to information you are not, Mr Ward. I would suggest brushing up on the laws surrounding Anchors. Then we can avoid more displays like the one when you arrived—” Representative Dixon begins, but Ember's father cuts him off.

“Ah yes, when the guards separated me from my daughter, so you could, what? Play matchmaker?” Sam nods as though either Representative answered him. “I admit, I forgot about some of the more archaic laws surrounding *female* Anchors. Though I always was a diligent student, I’ll be reviewing the relevant texts this week. I was remiss not to have done so already.”

My father narrows his eyes on Sam, the muscle in his jaw twitching. A clear sign he’s unhappy. “Come, Lydia. Let’s go ensure those who need to be updated on the night’s events are,” he says, pointedly ignoring Sam’s threat.

As the two walk away, Sam’s words and my father’s reaction play in my mind. Specific laws around female Anchors, not just Anchors. There must be something in those texts he doesn’t want Sam to know. Which means it’s something I should look into too. I may not understand the nuances, but I know my father. I might be able to figure out his game plan.

“Mr Ward?” I ask, pitching my volume so my father will hear and waiting for Sam to look at me before continuing. “Sir, if you have time, I would appreciate the opportunity to learn about the laws and restrictions Ember will face from someone with *her* best interests at heart.”

“All right, Becer, don’t lay it on too thick,” Aaron Greene says, clapping my shoulder as he moves to stand next to me. Our rivalry in classes hasn’t been as intense as with his twin or Skylar. I think mending the bridge with him will be easiest. If I’m going to be in Ember’s life, in her Sept, making nice with her family is a good idea. Besides, the friendship the Greene twins have with Skylar is something I’ve always been a bit jealous of. They laugh freely together, no fear of their words being twisted and used against them. That must be nice.

“You should already know our laws, Klaus,” Representative Dixon sneers. “Your father will be most disappointed you haven’t been taking your future more seriously.”

“There must be a lot of laws from when The Change first happened that we no longer enforce? Or have simply become outdated,” I press. “Even if I had ambitions to sit on the Conclave, which I don’t, why would I have memorised those?”

Why is it always assumed a child of the Conclave wants to sit on the Conclave? I’ve never shown an interest in politics or being in power. If my father knew I’ve been sneaking off to train with a human tattoo artist, that vein in his forehead might actually burst.

“Everyone has ambitions to be the best they can be. You do raise a good point, though. There may be more laws we’ve forgotten. It’s something we’ll have to review. We would be failing our people if laws that can aid us have been forgotten,” Dixon muses quietly.

Sam turns from observing my conversation with the Representative to his son and nephews. He cants his head in silent question, and both Greene twins nod. Skylar lets out a long sigh and scrubs a hand over his hair before approaching me.

“You have my sister’s best interest at heart? You seriously felt the call to her? You’re not playing some twisted long con game here, right?”

*He’s her twin. He loves her, she loves him, even if he can be the biggest douche. Be nice. I can do this. Just be nice.*

Mentally chanting the words over and over, I take a breath before answering his onslaught of questions.

“I can be a jerk. A giant one, yeah, but I wouldn’t lie about this. That memory she sent me in training,” I swallow heavily as the images fly to the surface of my mind. “I would never want her to add to those experiences.” Shaking my head, I look past Skylar and glare at the remaining Conclave Representative, who played a part in what happened tonight. “Ember’s been through enough. She doesn’t deserve to be treated as a lab rat for pathetic power-hungry leeches with no honour.”

Dixon's face turns a shade of puce I didn't think possible. His lips twist into a sneer as he steps closer to me, but the Greene twins block him.

"Representative Dixon, we would thank you for a lovely evening, but that would be a lie," Aaron's smooth voice says.

"Come on, Klaus. Something tells me you'll need a place to crash tonight away from Conclave influence," Skylar mutters. "This doesn't mean I like you, though. Just so we're clear."

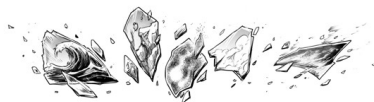
"Got it," I say with a nod. Staying with the Wards is better than a cheap hotel, right? At least I can start to mend bridges and get to know Ember's fathers.

"I will be back in one week, Representative. Seven days. And let me assure you, my firm and I *will* be brushing up on all the laws pertaining to Anchors," Sam declares with complete confidence. "Ember volunteered. Do not abuse her good nature."

"Good night, Representative," Aaron says, giving the smallest bow before straightening and ushering Zane, Skylar, and me to follow Sam.

"Oh, uh, Sam?" Aaron hedges once we're away from prying ears and waiting for their car. "Uncle T and Nik weren't home when we packed Ember's bag."

"So they don't know what's happened," Zane finishes, and Sam turns the air blue with the string of curses that fall from his lips.



"How can they do this!? Sam, why didn't you *fight* them? How could you let them take her?" Lieutenant General Nikolai Petrov-Ward rants and raves, pacing back and forth across the living area. The Ward house isn't much smaller than my father's, but it's warm, inviting. It feels like a home people enjoy living in, unlike the house I grew up in. Nikolai runs a

hand forcefully through his tawny hair, pulling at the long strands that snag on his fingers. Seeing this side of the LT-General feels wrong. As if I'm intruding on something incredibly private—which I am, but I'm not the only one.

My eyes flick to Instructor James. After we left the Conclave, Sam called him and invited him to the house too. I guess my father and Representative Chadwick interrupted him, explaining to Commander Irfan what Ember had agreed to.

Shaking my head, I focus back on the scene before me. I can't get caught up in wondering how Vertus Irfan took the news. Or put myself in his place and try to comprehend how I would feel, knowing my Anchor is likely going through her own version of hell for me.

“Sam, love, I need words.” Nikolai stops in front of his bond-mate, crouching down until they're almost eye-to-eye. With a sigh, Sam leans forward on the sofa, resting a palm on the larger man's knee. There's no jealousy, no anger, no disdain, just a desire to understand what's happened. The Wards aren't playing a game of one-upmanship like my father would. It's refreshing and gives me hope for my future.

“That first week, after Ember came home, she had her initial trial to confirm she's Changed.” He pauses until Nikolai nods. “Thomas was her adjudicator. He said Ember took the water-earth-fire-air path and mentioned that usually indicates an Anchor. Then the response from the Conclave about her *sample*,” he sneers the word. Of course, the Representatives ambushed them—ambushed Ember—just like they did tonight. The resentment brewing within me builds higher at the mistreatment she's faced, but Sam's words pull my focus back to my surroundings. “I decided to do some research. The laws around Anchors differ from those for a typical Changed individual; add in that Ember is female...” His voice trails off, and he takes a large sip from his glass.

“Just tell us, Dad. I need to understand. *We* need to understand.” Skylar's quiet plea almost breaks me. Ember hasn't been back with them for long, and now my father has taken her from them. Closing my eyes, I lean back, tilting my head to stare up at the beamed ceiling.

“How bad is it?” Tavon asks from his seat next to Sam. “You can tell us, Sam. Nobody in this room is at fault for what happened tonight. No one.”

That has me sitting back up, catching the man’s sympathetic eye, and nodding to show I understand what he’s implying. They don’t blame me for my father’s actions or for being called to Ember. The weight of that worry lessens, and hope stirs in my chest that they’ll accept me. The real me, not the persona I’ve been forced to portray.

“Right.” Sam straightens in his seat, keeping hold of Tavon’s hand. Looking around the room, he makes eye contact with each of us.

“It’s been fifty years since the last female Anchor passed on. Over fifty years since the Conclave have enforced certain laws because why enforce them when there’s no one alive that they pertain to?”

“But now they’ve dusted those old laws off and are using them to their advantage?” Zane grumbles.

“Yes,” Sam responds. “For discernment events and bonding, it was decreed that a sitting Representative would have guardianship to ensure the Anchor’s family didn’t force or coerce her decision. Apparently, as a *neutral* party, the Representative would work with only the Anchor’s best interest in mind.”

A harsh laugh erupts from Skylar. “Seriously?! When has the Conclave ever had anyone else’s best interests at heart?”

“Careful, Skylar,” the LT-General warns. “No one here necessarily disagrees, but it could still be considered treason.”

“They’ll try to stop the bonding.” Instructor James’ words are soft, as though he didn’t mean to speak them aloud. He downs the remaining whiskey in his glass before setting it on the coffee table.

“I think it’s likely,” Sam answers with a nod. “You and Vertus are both incredibly powerful—”

“Klaus too,” Skylar grunts, glancing at me before focusing back on his fathers. “Hell, Ember is powerful in her own right.

It wouldn't surprise me if her entire Sept is comprised of strong Changed."

"Which the Conclave will hate. They'll see it as her removing six powerful lines from the gene pool." Tavon sighs.

"Why, though? Why do they care? It's not like they're the only ones who can continue their family line? When was the last time a Changed had a single-child pregnancy?" Aaron asks, his frustration evident in his tone.

His faith in magic and science makes me feel jaded. While both are incredible things, they don't prevent Mother Nature. She's a fickle bitch who still manages to interfere in her cruel way. She took my twin from me before my first breath. Maybe that plays a part in my father's twisted need to "fix" Ember? I don't think it's enough to justify his treatment of her, though.

"Even if they were. There's still nothing to say they couldn't go to the egg bank and hire a surrogate—" Zane adds, but Skylar cuts him off.

"No way. Nope, she would never trust a surrogate. Not after what happened to us."

"I'm inclined to agree. Besides, while she doesn't have any eggs and only one ovary, after what EvoGen subjected her to, she still has her uterus. In theory, and *only* if she wished to, she could carry a pregnancy herself," Sam theorises, removing his glasses and cleaning them on the corner of his untucked shirt.

Are we really sitting here discussing this? I glance over at Atticus, trying to read how he's feeling about the current topic of conversation. Does he want children? Do I?

No. Not particularly, and I did say as much to my father when he insinuated Ember wouldn't be able to perform that *duty*. The man disgusts me with his view on women. I never want to be like him. If Ember wants to be a mother at some point, then I'll support her. She may never want children after all she's been through. There's no way to know without talking to her, and it's not a first date topic. Things may change after

this week too. We have no idea what will happen to her at the hands of the Conclave's doctors.

"Depending on what they're doing to her this week," Instructor James says, mimicking my thoughts. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, fingers splayed through the blonde curls.

"What do you mean?" Zane growls, scooting to the edge of his seat. Aaron places a hand on his twin's shoulder. The Instructor looks up, releasing his hair to rub one hand across his face. Straightening in his seat, he adjusts his glasses before explaining.

"They say Helios can heal almost anything. It might just be rumours, but if they're true, well," he shrugs, looking over at the LT-General. "You have higher clearance than me, sir. Have you ever heard anything about him?"

"Murmurings, rumours like you've heard about his abilities, also that he has ties to a motorcycle club, Hounds of something, but that's unlikely to affect Ember. Those rumours may not even hold any truth. I'll see if I can find a patient of his to talk to."

"Discreetly, Nik. I have a feeling we'll be under the microscope this week, if not longer," Tavon points out, and the tension in the room rises with that realisation.

I'm used to having my father and the Conclave's attention, but maybe I can use his desire for me to one day take over to Ember's advantage. He was so quick to offer an exchange; he wanted Ember in their labs, with their doctor. I don't believe it was a spur of the moment decision.

"I can see if there's anything in my father's office," I offer, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. "He keeps paper copies of everything and writes notes constantly. If this was all premeditated—which I think it was, just not for tonight—he'll have something written down."



## CHAPTER 2

# EMBER



*“You’re early, pet. It’s not winter yet.”*

Doctor Helios’ words echo in my mind as my body tries to fight the sedation. Snippets of conversation filter through when my consciousness battles to the surface. Flashes of pain and intense cold are the primary sensations.

“Why aren’t you healing her?” a feminine voice demands. “They said they wanted her healed. Fixed. Doctor, you’re not \_\_\_”

“Silence! This is *my* patient. I’m well aware of how the Representatives want this week to conclude.” The doctor pauses, and the drugs pull me back under as he continues. “There will be no rushing this process. There’s so much we can learn from Miss Ward. So much. Each scar has its own story.”

More darkness follows, where I’m drifting in the presumed safety of my mind. Is there ever safety there, though? It’s the place where all our memories are. The good, the bad, the traumatic we lock away and pretend to forget.

*“La-La! Where are you?” I call out around the coughs that rack my chest. Smoke continues to rise and thicken. There’s no heat, no orange flickering glow, no fire. Where is the smoke coming from?*

*“Pipes? Here at the window! Follow my voice. Hurry!”*

*The EvoGen staff shout out that ‘they’re getting away.’ They who? The people attacking us? Or La-La? Is Skylar going to be free?*

*The knowledge that life here will be bad, since Dom confirmed we're Changed, gives me a burst of courage. If I can find the right window, find my brother, we can be free together.*

*Glass crunches underfoot, stinging as it nicks the soles of my bare feet. Everything is so disoriented, but if La-La found us a way out... we have to take it.*

*With stumbling steps, my body hunched from coughing, I make my way in the direction of my twin's voice. "Emmy! Please, hurry!"*

*"Kid, we gotta go. It's getting light," a different hushed voice warns.*

*"Pipes! Ember! Come on, please. Please!"*

*"Hounds round up and move out!" a deep voice bellows.*

*"No. No!" Skylar screams as I finally reach the open window. His hand and blonde head disappear from view. I jump, reaching for the ledge, scrambling up in time to see a red-haired teenage boy dragging my brother over to men wearing black sleeveless jackets. He can't be that much older than us, but tattoos peek out from the collar of his leather vest. Who are these strangers? Why are they leaving without me? I'm right here!*

*"Skylar!" I shout, pulling myself through the window as a meaty hand wraps around my ankle.*

*"Oh no you don't," Dom snarls. A scream rips from my throat as the cruel man drags me back inside. My eyes are locked with the amber gaze of the red-haired, tattooed teen who saved my brother from sharing this fate.*

*"Please be safe, La-La. Be safe." As I sob the words, heat and power well up from deep inside me. It consumes me until my skin glows softly. With the last seconds of being able to see Skylar, the magic explodes out of me.*

The memory fades, and a weightlessness takes over that's almost comforting. The space inside my mind is void of everything now. Sensory deprivation. No sounds, smells, touches, or tastes. It's easy to see why some would choose to

stay, give up the daily fight, and succumb to peaceful nothingness. It's tempting, so very tempting. Life hasn't been kind to me. The mental shelves where I store all the boxes of my past experiences are proof of that. Eventually I'll open them, one by one, but not today. Not any time soon. I'm not ready, and it won't change anything anyway.

Escaping EvoGen, specifically Dom's experiments, was meant to be a fresh start. A reset. Not erasing my scars and trauma, but the first step to putting it all behind me. Instead, I'm in the same position, just in a different location.

Will I have another box or two for my shelves of compartmentalised moments by the end of this week? Does it matter either way? It means more to unpack, but I doubt whatever the Conclave put me through will scratch the surface of the resolve EvoGen built within me. I survived Dom, I can survive this.

"You're not checking that while she's unconscious!" His voice draws me back to the surface, his fury cutting through the haze of the drugs.

"Doctor, the Conclave was clear—"

"Did I stutter?" he growls, his volume increasing with the anger in his words. "Well? Did I!"

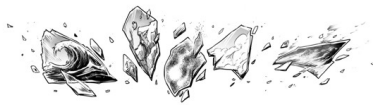
A breeze brushes against my bare legs. The soft warmth of a blanket replaces the temporary chill. What happened to my leggings?

"No, Doctor, I just—"

"You thought you would examine her in such a way simply because another says they want the answer? While Miss Ward agreed to much, she did not give up her autonomy. We are not like those employed by EvoGen and their ilk." Gratitude blooms in my chest at his words. I'm not sure what's happening, but hearing someone advocate for me has the coil of apprehension and worry in my gut easing marginally. Perhaps this week won't be as traumatic as I've been anticipating.

“Yes, Doctor. I simply thought to get it done,” the feminine voice sputters, hurrying to get her words out before the doctor reacts further. “I assumed the patient would prefer the internal examination be conducted by another female. Her hymen is broken—”

The darkness pulls me back under as the voices continue arguing. I embrace it, too tired to fight. If the Conclave’s doctor keeps me sedated for all the tests and experiments, this week will be bliss. That was the old saying from before The Change, right? Ignorance is bliss. I wonder how true that is.



Waking with a gasp, I jerk upright. My vision’s hazy, and it takes a moment of repetitive blinking to clear. My heart’s pounding, and the racing rhythm slows as I take in my surroundings. I’m back in the small room the nurse, Lottie, escorted me to after we stepped off the elevator.

The rumpled feeling of my clothes increases the need to move, to shower, to wash away the phantom hands that examined me. *His* phantom hands. He called me *pet*.

Does that mean the notes weren’t from Dom?

This whole time, I feared the known when I should have been wary of the unknown. Shaking my head, I try to dispel the thoughts. They’re not helpful now. I’m already here. I’ve already agreed to spend the week being *his* new science toy.

For Vertus. The stubborn, arrogant, pigheaded fool who got himself in trouble—court-martialled—because of me.

My silver-haired... what? Guard, instructor, potential bond-mate? The man who gave me a semblance of peace. Eventually, I’ll have to analyse my feelings around him. Not today, though. Maybe not even this month.

The door to my room slams open, interrupting my thoughts. The tall, lean figure of Doctor Helios fills the frame, and the light glints off his red hair as he storms over to my

bed. He looks so much younger than the scientists at EvoGen were. How can he be a doctor when he doesn't even look thirty?

"Who?" he seethes, jaw clenched tight. His amber eyes flash with ire and pain, though the latter makes little sense.

My words catch in my throat, and all I manage to articulate is a stuttering squeak.

"Who touched you? Tell me!" He cups my cheek with his hand. The coolness of his flesh against mine is enough to kick my brain into gear. I jerk back from him as best as I can, given the limited space.

"Touched?" I question, my brows furrowing with confusion. "Where? I-I don't... I don't understand—"

"Who violated you? Who stole your innocence? Who would *dare*—" he cuts himself off quickly, sharply inhaling before releasing the breath slowly. His tone and posture are calmer once he continues speaking. "I need to know which EvoGen facility, members—I need you to tell me who raped you."

Jerking back as though his words physically slapped me, I stare at him, blinking slowly.

"Pet, tell me," he growls.

"I-I wasn't," I stutter before swallowing and trying again to explain. "I mean, no one. N-no one raped me."

"Don't lie to me, Ember!" He drops to his knees beside the mattress. "The Conclave ordered a full examination. We've catalogued every scar, every healed bone, anything to indicate physical damage. The internal exam showed you're not a virgin." The anger in his voice builds the more he speaks, until I blink and I'm curled up in the farthest corner of the bed from him. And yet, still not far enough.

Why is he asking this? Why does he care? I thought the Conclave wanted to test my magic, learn about Anchors. This is beginning to feel a lot more personal than I anticipated. This reaction is too extreme. He's acting as though I owe him answers, as though he's not a stranger to me. I chose to give

my body to Vertus. It was my one piece of autonomy in a life of subjugation. Who is this man to demand answers to something so intimate? I owe him nothing, the same way I owed nothing to EvoGen.

Doctor Helios closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose while taking calming breaths. “I’m sorry, pet.” He lowers his hand, opening his eyes and locking gazes with me. “I, *we*, need to know the extent EvoGen went to. What lines they will and won’t cross.”

“There are no lines when one is searching for the truth and survival of their species,” I say in a flat tone, devoid of any inflexion.

“What?”

“It’s what they used to say, wh-when I would cry. The experiments started as soon as I showed as Changed.”

“You were ten, Ember.” I nod at his words before realising the truth of them.

“How do you know that?” I gasp.

“Oh, pet, you really don’t remember me?” His face contorts, a flash of hurt and sorrow barely visible before he smooths his expression into a neutral mask again.

Remember him? Why would I remember him? I open my mouth to question how we could know each other, but before I can get the words out, one of the nurses, Trex, appears in the open doorway.

“Sorry to interrupt, Doc, but your other patient is awake and ready for the next phase. Do you want them moved to the secondary lab before you begin?”

The doctor pushes back to his feet, his gaze never leaving mine, even as he answers the other male. “Yes, that will be fine. Show them in. I’ll be right there.”

“Doctor—” Trex argues, but Helios turns and pins the man with a vicious glare.

“Do not argue with me, Trex. You are replaceable. Don’t forget that.”

Trex's dark eyes harden, and a muscle in his jaw pulses before he turns and walks away. Doctor Helios looks back at me, the turmoil of ire and other emotions burning behind his eyes. "Get cleaned up. I'll have food sent to you now you're awake. We'll begin phase one in the morning." He turns to leave, pausing with one hand on the door. "Oh, and, pet, I'll be wanting a name. Whoever touched you in that manner will pay."

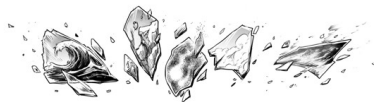
I don't even manage a nod of acknowledgement before he's left the room, the door's lock snapping into place as soon as he closes it. I try to process the strange interaction with the doctor, before Lottie arrives with a bowl of pasta. I have enough wherewithal to ask her how long I was unconscious before she leaves. Part of me was hoping I'd been out for days, but it's only been a few hours.

I eat my dinner, silently thankful that they're not withholding food until there's a breakthrough, unlike EvoGen. Focusing on the differences between the two will help keep me grounded, I decide as I shower quickly and get ready for bed.

As I sink into the mattress, I pull the chunky-knit blanket Zane made me close. Seven days. I can do this. To save Vertus, to prove to myself that I've grown, that I have the ability to make my own decisions...

I drift off to sleep, reminding myself that this was my choice.

It's only seven days. I can do this.



## HELIOS

Entering the lab, rage still burns through my veins. Ember didn't answer me, wouldn't answer me. That's fine, for now. She doesn't remember me, doesn't know she can trust me.



With all she's been through, she's probably buried many memories. Maybe one of them is the day we met. The day my father's club laid siege to EvoGen and my brother pulled Skylar out, leaving my Anchor behind. We lost good men that day, and the Hounds didn't want to risk any more lives for one girl. It was the nail in the coffin for my relationship with my father. It may have taken fourteen years, but she's finally free, and I will ensure those who harmed her most pay their debt to her. In flesh and blood.

Everyone thought my brother, Sketch, would grow up to be the most unhinged. They picked the wrong twin. I'd sneak out to check on Ember, even after my father forbade it. I even found someone to hack into EvoGen's systems; we always seemed to be one step behind. All the information I managed to gather, yet each time I formulated a plan to save her, she was moved to a new facility. Through it all, though, there was never any mention of her virginity being taken.

I have another source to gain the information from, though. If the disgusting, pathetic excuse for a man didn't violate my pet, he probably ordered it or at least knows who it was.

Stepping up to the steel medical bed, a menacing smile curls my lips. I don't utter a word as I work through my discontent at the harm EvoGen was able to inflict on Ember. Time passes in a blur until the acrid smell of urine fills the air, and a whimper leaves Dom's lips as I sigh. "Really, Dominic, I expected better control."

"Please, please, no more. I-I ca-can't take it. Please, stop," the human male begs through silent tears.

"That's not how this works. You know that," I remind him absently as I review my notes from Ember's examination. I made sure to catalogue each and every scar this miserable bastard inflicted upon her. She may not be able to exact her revenge. She's too pure, too wholesome—I would never forgive myself for allowing her to besmirch herself with this fool's blood. No. I will take that taint into my soul. I will avenge my pet.

“P-please, please...” The whimpers and cries peter out momentarily as I run a gloved finger over his newest stomach scar.

“Not once did you offer my pet pain management. Not once did you treat her with dignity. Your punishment, Dominic, is to relive each experiment you inflicted on her. You scarred her perfect body. You left her malnourished and almost broken. You allowed someone to prey on her. Was it you, Dominic? Did you take what should only be freely given?”

I lower the scalpel, slicing into his flesh as he screams and thrashes on the table.

“Tut, tut, Dominic. Ember never thrashed like that for you, did she?” I cast an assessing eye over the now jagged incision. “It won’t be a perfect match, but it will have to do. I’m not wasting my healing magic on the likes of you.”

The intercom system buzzes to life, and my assistant’s voice interrupts my contemplations.

“Doctor Helios? Sorry to disturb you, but the Representatives are here.”

Releasing a disappointed sigh, I turn back to Dominic.

“A small reprieve for you, it seems,” I murmur, securing the gag across his mouth. It wouldn’t do for him to try to alert the civilian staff to his presence. They know I’m using this lab for a private patient, but they don’t know any details, and I intend to keep it that way.

Using my magic, I check him over briefly. I have no desire for the man to die. Not yet anyway. If I have to expend energy to stabilise him, I will. I’ve worked too long and too hard to get here. Evading detection hasn’t always been easy. If the Conclave found out I’m only half-Changed, they’d strip me of my position, regardless of the fact that I’m the strongest healer ever recorded. While I have no desire to remain a Conclave lackey forever, my pet needs me here. She’s too kind-hearted despite all she’s endured, so I will be her angel of vengeance and justice.

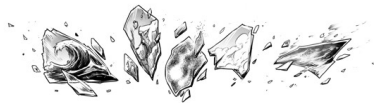
Once I'm satisfied that Dominic has no life-threatening wounds, I move across the lab to the intercom, pushing down the button so I can respond.

"I'm on my way. My office?" After releasing the button, I wait for a handful of breaths for the answer to my question.

"Yes, Doctor," she replies as I prepare the paralytic agent for Dominic. Not once did he offer Ember the comfort of unconsciousness. Which means I won't offer it to him either.

Pulling his arm out, I tap the vein before injecting the drug.

"I'll leave you to reminisce about your years with Ember. I wonder if you can determine which scar we'll recreate on you next?" Smirking down at the male, I quickly wipe my hands clean and make my way out the door, before pausing briefly to ensure the lock engages. Then I walk the two corridors to my office, using the time to shift my focus and arrange my features in a neutral poker face.



Taking a calming breath, I open my office door, finding Representatives Becer, Dixon, and Chadwick standing in different areas of the room. I would be more concerned if I hadn't taken to locking all of my important files away. It's naïve to believe they won't try to snoop, though. The Conclave Representatives can't help themselves.

"Representatives, my apologies for keeping you waiting. Please, take a seat," I say, keeping my tone light and professional as I close the door behind me and make my way behind the desk. Waving a hand to indicate the chairs waiting for them, I ask, "How can I assist you today?"

"We know you're a busy man, Doctor, so we'll cut to the chase," Chadwick simpers as she takes a seat. The woman is one of my least favourite members of the Conclave—or of the Changed community—to deal with. A necessary evil, though, to be close to my pet.

“You’ve had time to read through the files on Ember Ward, correct?” Representative Becer questions. I nod my response, not wanting to tell them I had no need to view their files. Though the minimal data they contained wouldn’t have offered much insight if I didn’t already know all the details of my pet’s past. I might have only been fourteen when I met her, but I knew the importance of research and knowledge even then.

“Doctor? Well, what do you think?” Becer’s voice snaps me from my thoughts, returning my attention to the three representatives awaiting my response to a question I failed to hear.

Thankfully, this isn’t my first time dealing with them, and I know how to play this. Taking a slow deep breath, I lean back in my chair and hum to myself.

“Well...” I let the word trail off. My eyes lose focus, giving the illusion that I’m lost in my mind, working out the variables of their demand.

“For goodness’ sake, man. Can you fix her so she’ll be useful to us or not?!” Chadwick snaps, giving me some of the information I was missing. Licking my lips, I exhale and lean forward, resting my elbows on my desk and my chin on my clasped hands.

“Useful to you?”

“Yes. Jermaine’s son has felt the call to her.” Chadwick places a hand on Representative Becer’s arm, simpering at him when he turns to nod at her. I clasp my hands together to disguise the clenching of my fists. Behind my neutral mask, a possessive rage burns. Theoretically, I knew there would be others called to her. That doesn’t mean I relish the idea of sharing my pet with them. Perhaps she’ll reject them? After all, I’m the one exacting justice for all she’s been through. Anyone who hurts her, whether physically or emotionally, will feel my wrath.

“Lydia is correct,” Becer says, pulling me back to the conversation. “Klaus felt the call at his ceremony last night. The boy is nothing if not stubborn and refuses to consider

renouncing her as his Anchor. He needs an heir, though. So, Doctor Helios, can you fix the damage EvoGen caused? Can you ensure she can carry a pregnancy to full term?”

“I would need to examine her more closely than I’ve been able to so far.”

“Yes, yes, but is it possible?” he presses.

“It should be, depending on the severity of the damage. My preliminary assessment shows there’s nothing wrong with her uterus. Carrying a pregnancy to term wouldn’t appear to be an issue. The question remains around restoring her eggs. I won’t make you a promise now, but I will do everything within my power to see her able to produce heirs,” I lie—well, bend the truth. There’s no doubt that if I wanted to, I could heal Ember. However, that is *her* choice. Dominic and EvoGen ripped it from her once before. I refuse to do the same thing to her. If my pet wishes to be a mother eventually, I will move heaven and earth to see it happen. This request from them, hidden behind closed doors and muttered away from Ember’s ears, is not one I plan to honour.

No one should be forced to become a parent. Female Changed already lack so many basic freedoms compared to the humans; I won’t take another decision from Ember.

The Representatives continue to titter on and on, outlining plans for how they can manipulate and potentially control Ember. Restraining the need not to destroy them, as they deserve, absorbs all my willpower. I will bide my time. I have my part to play here, ensuring Ember is as safe as possible. What happens when they move out of their father’s home, though? Perhaps I should give my brother a call. It’s probably overdue for Skylar to meet the club that rescued him anyway. He can thank them, and there’ll be additional security on all ventures outside until we can deal with the Conclave.

## CHAPTER 3

# EMBER



Heavy breaths and the pounding rhythm of flesh making contact fill the air. Sweat drips down my back, working a slow, leisurely trail down my spine. The need to prove myself and show I'm more than they perceive is my driving force.

I can do this.

I am more than a powerful Changed. More than an Anchor.

Every test, every time they stick electrodes to my skin and ask for a demonstration of my power, I'm one step closer to freeing Vertus.

Two days down. Five to go.

The memories of the silver-haired jerk flash across my mind, and my footing slips. Before I can correct it, gravity takes hold, dragging me down. The treadmill scrapes my chin as I fall, the momentum of the machine sending me into a bundled heap on the floor.

“Ember!”

Blinking, I look up, only slightly dazed. Golden amber eyes and the pale, freckled face of Doctor Helios appear, blocking the ceiling above. For a busy doctor, he always seems to appear as soon as I get so much as a paper cut. I still can't place him in my memories. Maybe he was mistaken? Or he's confused me with someone else? Either way, although his protectiveness confuses me, I appreciate it. I'm still all too aware of my position, but he doesn't make me feel like I did at EvoGen. He treats me like a person, not a toy or an object.

How can I resent him when he does that? Especially as I agreed to be here.

“What happened?” he barks, not at me, but at Lottie, who was my assigned nurse today.

“She slipped. Miss Ward was doing exceptionally well. I’m not sure what happened.”

“Let’s get that scrape fixed up.” Helios reaches out, cupping my chin between his thumb and forefinger. The skin warms as he gently strokes, healing the minor damage. “There. Now, go grab a shower, pet. We’ll start phase two in my office.”

I nod as he pulls me to my feet, eyes scanning over every inch of my body. “T-the cuffs?” I ask, twisting my wrists with the magic suppressors.

“Of course.” The corner of his lip lifts briefly as he unlocks the devices. “We have all the baseline data we need, there’s no need to continue limiting access to your magic,” the Doctor murmurs while rubbing soothing circles across the newly exposed flesh, his fingers lingering slightly longer than needed before I pull away. The comfort I’m beginning to feel in his presence is confusing, but I can’t put distance between us.

“I’ll meet you in your office?”

“Yes. Right across the hall from your room,” he reminds me. As if I’ve forgotten.

Lottie waits at the door, ready to escort me back. Since arriving, we’ve not passed through any of the main doors that require a magical signature to enter—or exit—yet either Lottie or Trex is always present, ready to guide me to wherever it’s deemed I’m needed.

Back in my room, I take my unpacked duffle bag with me into the bathroom. It took until the evening after the discernment ceremony to find the hidden stash of snacks. Aaron’s doing, no doubt. He’s been almost obsessed with feeding me and introducing me to new foods. A smile tugs at my lips as I trace the packets. Both Aaron and Zane welcomed



me so easily into their lives. Sometimes I find my mind wandering to thoughts of if they could be in my Sept, but it's more likely they'll be in a bond-group with my brother. Turning the shower on so the water can warm up, I drop to the floor cross-legged and grab a handful of sour cream pretzels and allow my mind to drift to the more imminent possibilities of what tests will come next.

Phase one of the Conclave's tests hasn't been related to my magic. Which makes sense, I guess. They don't have the extensive background data EvoGen had. Whereas Dom recorded every spike in my power, Doctor Helios is starting from scratch. He may be focusing on a specific area too. I won't know until things progress further, but Trex and Lottie have mentioned it's all about baselines.

"We need to understand what you're capable of without magic, while so malnourished," Lottie explained while casting a concerned eye over me. Telling them this is me well-fed seemed pointless. I've gained weight in the month I've been free from Dom and EvoGen, but it's an adjustment. Going from one meal a day, if I was lucky, to three full meals plus snacks. Admittedly, Aaron and Anya, Sam's cook, tailored the portions sizes for me, unlike the meals here. And even with the bigger portions that the Conclave has been giving me, how much can they expect my weight to change over a week?

Her comment was the first, but Trex made other similar observations. It's only been two days, but I'm under no illusion that Doctor Helios is expecting to still have access to me after the end of the week.

I didn't agree to anything else, and I won't. This is to help Vertus. To ensure the Conclave didn't kill him for breaking Representative Becer's nose, amongst other things.

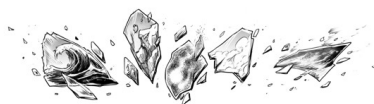
Noticing the steam filling the small bathroom, I dust the pretzel seasoning from my hands, undress, and climb into the shower. The warm water soothes my soul as it washes away the evidence of exertion. Knowing Helios is waiting for me, I make quick work of conditioning my hair, then shampooing only the roots. There's probably a way to control my curls

with magic, but that wasn't on EvoGen's list of things for me to learn.

Since being reunited with my brother, meeting my birth father and his bonded, I've realised the little acts of magic they all use to aid the everyday mundane things aren't things I know. Not surprising or shocking, really. Dom, and by extension EvoGen, wanted a weapon. They pushed me to learn offensive and defensive skills, not how to do my hair.

Brief trips down memory lane are much more frequent recently. Being in this environment, although different, isn't different enough to avoid triggers. I've had a lot of practice resealing the boxes in my mind when they crack open. At least this time there's an end in sight. Not as clear as I'd first hoped, but it's there. Once I'm home, once Vertus is safe, then I'll consider processing some of the experiences I've locked away.

"Four and a half more days," I murmur, shutting off the water and summoning a light warm breeze to dry my skin. I quickly dress in a light-weight jumper and leggings before I plait my hair into pigtails. No longer able to delay, I leave the bathroom, tucking my bag under my bed, before going across the hall to discover what phase two will bring.



"This is an aspect I would like you to continue even after this week is up," Helios begins after taking the seat next to me. "It wouldn't have to be here at the Conclave, but a weekly session to talk about life or anything could be beneficial to you."

"I'm fine," I say, while keeping my gaze focused on my hands in my lap.

"Ember," he pauses, not continuing until I look up and meet his eyes. "Forcing you to talk about things won't work. You did talk to me before—"

"What? How?" Helios made a comment about knowing me when I first woke up, but he hasn't mentioned it again

since. Sometimes I think there's something familiar about him, but as quickly as the feeling comes, it dissipates. I almost thought he could be the tattooed red-haired boy who saved Skylar, but Helios doesn't have any visible tattoos like that boy did. Plus, I didn't have a conversation with Helios like he's implying we did.

With a sigh, he leans back in his chair, a sadness seeping into his gaze as he watches me. "You really don't remember?"

My mouth drops open, but I have no idea what to say. Asking too many questions is never a good idea. And are these questions I want the answers to?

"Tell me, pet."

My muscles tense at the nickname, and I have to ask. The question bursts out before I can think whether or not I should let it go. "Why do you call me that?"

One red eyebrow rises as he regards me. "Pet?" At my nod, he continues. "It's what I've always called you, since you were ten and I was fourteen." He leans forward again, resting his forearms on his knees. So close. "What do you remember of your brother's rescue?"

Helios holds up a hand, stopping my response before I can voice it. "Not your instant memory. I want you to close your eyes and think back. Talk me through the day. Can you do that?"

Chewing my lip, I give a sharp nod and do as instructed, while hoping the tentative seals on the boxes I've built around my trauma don't break.

"No one will harm you, Ember. It may not seem like it, but you're safe here—with me. I will keep you safe." His voice lowers, soothing me as I sort through my mind, searching for the memories. "Slow calm breaths. Try to relax as much as possible. Let your mind guide you back. You don't have to describe anything to me. Just see what you can remember."

*For the first time I can remember, there are birthday balloons in the cafeteria. No, not for our birthday; they're for our status. Skylar and I are Changed. The entire facility is*

*abuzz with excitement. Dom hasn't stopped smiling, and the tension in Mum's shoulders has eased. She seems so much happier since we tested positive for magic.*

*We're led away from the aftermath of the celebrations to Dom's special office. My steps drag as we approach; we've never been allowed in here before. Mum pushes open the door. Dom stands from behind his desk with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes as he speaks.*

*"Ah, excellent. Skylar, Ember, now we know you have magic, it's time to help those who don't. We have a lot of work to do and no time to waste. So I'll be helping your magic manifest."*

Shaking my head to clear away the memory, I focus on slowing my accelerated heart rate before blinking open my eyes. With a stuttering breath that helps me push down the anxiety clawing inside me, I look at Doctor Helios.

"I don't understand how this helps me know who you are?"

"Keep going. Focus," he encourages, but again I shake my head, this time more forcefully.

Honestly, I don't know what else I need to do to make it clear to Helios that I'm not interested in his brand of therapy. In any brand of therapy, for that matter.

"I'm not here for a trip down memory lane, Doctor. I'm here for more reasons than I was told; that much is obvious. So aside from saving Vertus, why am I here?"

"What do you mean, 'save Vertus?'" he asks as the muscle in his jaw ticks. Helios moves to the edge of his seat, watching me with an intensity that makes me want to squirm. Instead, I straighten my spine and tilt my chin up to face him fully.

"That was the deal. I come down and take part in your tests and experiments. Become your lab rat for the week, and then the Representatives release Vertus. No court-martial. No sentencing him to death for defending me—"

"You're here to save another male?" His mouth twists with an incredulous sneer as his nostrils flare. Helios grips the arm

of his chair until his knuckles turn white. I blink, and his neutral mask is once again firmly in place. Will each interaction with this man be this confusing?

“Yes. He’s in my Sept. Or he will be, probably, maybe. I don’t know. I can’t feel the call until after my birthday, but he feels it to me.” I shrug, refusing to dwell on V’s current circumstances. There are so many what ifs, and if I listen to the small voice in the corner of my mind, I’ll likely drown in them. Part of me wants to forgive him for not telling me about the Conclave’s plans. For broadcasting my memories to the Representatives, but I’m not ready yet. Which is why I’m here. We can’t rebuild our relationship, our trust, if he’s in prison or dead.

“Do you know of anyone else that has felt the call to your Sept?” Helios asks with a nonchalant curiosity. His mask is firmly in place, but his eyes hold a fire I can’t quite decipher.

“Well, Vertus and Atticus both say they feel the call. Then at the ceremony the other night, when the crystal pulsed purple for Klaus, I felt a tug. Here.” I tap the centre of my chest between my breasts, letting my thoughts stray to that night. It seems it’s been so much longer than two days since the ceremony. I’ve been trying to keep an open mind about him, but I feel conflicted. On one hand, his words to Representative Becer were heart-warming. The way he advocated for me, pushed back against his father’s notions, but he also torments my brother. And whilst I’ve never witnessed him bully Rui, like his friends do, he also never calls them on it. Occasionally, he’ll divert their attention from Rui or whoever has fallen prey to Crannick that day... It’s not enough, though.

Helios shifts his weight, drawing my attention back to him. He rolls his neck, nostrils flaring slightly, before clearing his throat. “Tell me about Vertus. What is it about him that made you so willing to become my ‘lab rat’ to save him?”

Pulling my knee up to my chest, I rest my temple on my leg and look past Helios. “He was at EvoGen. Undercover, I guess. Vertus was my first real taste of kindness since Skylar was rescued. He smuggled me extra food. Vanilla ice cream and cupcakes.” A soft, dreamy smile pulls at my lips as I think

back. “We grew close. He made me feel like a person, not a possession or a commodity.”

“When I asked you the first morning about your virginity...” I flush with a mixture of embarrassment and anger at the unspoken question. Why does he care so much about this? I sit up straight, dropping my leg back down and level Helios with a glare. I won’t hide how disgusted I am that he feels this is information he’s owed.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, we were intimate. Then he was reassigned, and Steph had us move to another facility again.” I frown as the increase in relocations comes to the forefront of my mind. “All the moving was because my twenty-fifth birthday was coming up, right?” I ask. Looking up at Helios, I’m slightly taken aback by the hard set of his jaw and the intense rage behind his eyes. “I-i-is everything okay?”

“Since you’ve been home—living with the Wards—have you noticed any physical changes?” he asks.

“Uh, I’ve gained weight? Aaron and Anya are feeders.” I’m not sure what more to tell him. His question is ambiguous enough, except I can’t help but feel he’s fishing for something specific. As much as I feel comfortable in his presence, that’s only in terms of the other Changed in these labs. Besides, with all the baseline tests they’ve run, he probably knows more about my body than I do.

“You’re still medically underweight,” he says, glancing away to check his charts. “But this is an improvement from when you were first found?”

“Yes? I-I’m wearing the next size up now. W-why?” The focused line of questioning has an uncomfortable nervousness growing in my chest. I don’t want anyone at Sam’s house to get in trouble. I’ve never been so well-fed as I have since being reunited with him. Aaron always had a snack on hand for me. Little meals at frequent intervals so as not to overwhelm my stomach after the years of EvoGen practically starving me have had an obvious effect on my appearance. I like the body I see in the mirror now.

“Just gauging what you went through, I was under the impression that your current weight and energy levels were similar to when you were at EvoGen.” Helios scribbles some notes onto the chart absently as he answers me.

“Oh, no. I only had one meal a day, which I had to earn. If the goals of the day weren’t met, they’d sometimes withhold food completely.”

“What sort of goals?” He looks up, the fiery ire burning once more in his gaze. That muscle in his jaw ticks as he grinds his teeth, and a burst of apprehension has me worried about the reaction my answers will bring.

“Um, normally, it was a skill they wanted me to emulate. Fireballs or shields.”

“Offensive and defensive magic?” The storm behind his eyes stutters out, leaving them flat and devoid of emotion.

I nod sharply, suddenly desperate to be done with the topic. “Exactly. They had footage of adult Changed. I’d watch it and then have to do it. Some were easier than others.”

“Is there an element that came naturally?”

“Fire.” The answer leaves my lips before he finishes asking the question. “Anything fire related was quick to grasp. Water was harder but easier than shadows.”

“You like to play with fire, then?” A smirk pulls the corner of Helios’ mouth as he regards me. Relief that the blank lifeless quality has left him floods me. Why am I so affected by this man? Who is he?

“I guess,” I hedge. “Play seems like the wrong word...”

“Perhaps it is.” Helios pushes to his feet, circles the desk and begins sorting some papers. “I think we’ll leave it there today. We’ll talk more tomorrow. We have enough data for the baselines, so we can progress swiftly. I’d like to heal the effects of the malnutrition you’ve suffered, then begin testing how your body and magic respond.”

“Oh, okay?” The sudden shift from having his full attention to this dismissal gives me the equivalent of emotional

whiplash. What happened to cause it? Did I say something wrong?

“Good. I’ll come by after you’ve had dinner to do the healing. You can head back to your room. I’m sure you could use some rest.”

I stand and quietly leave the office, walking across the hall and into my room. As soon as the door closes behind me, I grab the dusky pink blanket Zane knitted and curl up on the bed. I’m even more confused about what’s happening here than before. And I’m still no closer to remembering Helios from my childhood. He’s not the teenager who saved Skylar, unless he had the tattoos removed? That doesn’t feel right, though. I’m missing something. No doubt a side effect of boxing everything away and compartmentalising my life.

Perhaps that’s not the healthiest way to live anymore. This week will have enough hurdles without me unpacking all that additional trauma, but maybe once I’m home? Maybe then I can look into healing instead of disregarding it.



## CHAPTER 4

# VERTUS



The cell door slams open as the revered Doctor Helios storms inside. His usually pale face is flushed red, reminding me of the last time I saw him with his old assistant. The male's been through more assistants than anyone else in this place. Throw in the rumour that he's tied to one of the most prolific motorcycle gangs and only a fool would underestimate him.

“You sick, twisted bastard!” he yells, rage pouring from him and heating the room.

“Am I? How so?” My disdain for the male is clear in my voice. Ever since our paths crossed two years ago, I've felt he was a sellout, and that hasn't changed. With his healing capabilities, he could have set up shop outside of the Conclave's influence. He could be helping anyone in need. Humans, Changed, and those who have mixed blood. There are diseases that humans still die from, when Changed have the ability to heal them. Instead of working to save lives, Helios is here, under the Representatives' thumbs.

“You slept with her? You saw Miss Ward at EvoGen while on assignment and thought she'd be a good excuse to wet your dick?” he shouts at me, spittle flying from his mouth as his manic energy sets his eyes ablaze.

“Don't speak of things you know nothing about, Doctor,” I grind out from between clenched teeth. Who does he think he is to judge my actions with Ember? Helios knows nothing of our time together, of the strength of the bond we formed. Yes, I've damaged what Ember and I once had, but I will use every breath left in my body to earn her forgiveness and prove my

devotion to her. “Ember is my Anchor. I’m called to her. She was of consenting age—”

“She was malnourished! They abused her! She was many things besides a hole for you to fill!”

How dare he! Ember was and is so much more than what he’s insinuating. Hell, we’re past insinuations, and he’s downright accusing me of deplorable things. I shouldn’t feel the need to justify myself to a man like Helios. But if he’s in charge of her care this week, I don’t want him using the time alone with Ember to poison her against me. I push myself up to my feet. A shimmer in the air between us reveals a magic wall and explains why he didn’t strike me when he first entered my cell.

“I—” Helios cuts me off before I can begin to explain.

“No! Irfan, you *will* listen to me, and you will hear me.” His voice drops back to a more normal volume. The sudden shift from explosive rage to calm, cold ire is more than slightly disconcerting. “You disgust me. You found your bond-mate; you found an Anchor that you’re called to. What was your first thought after that? Did you try to free her? Did you report her to the Conclave? Did you even *once* consider that the treatment she received at the hands of EvoGen would require her to undergo therapy? That she will need healing?”

My mouth closes as he continues to demand answers from me. Answers I don’t have. After the discernment crystal hadn’t pulsed, causing the Changed world to believe me bondless, I threw myself into my work. That’s how I found myself infiltrating EvoGen. I had a mission, which should have been my sole focus. Instead, I walked past Ember, and my magic sang inside me. When I brushed the back of my hand against hers, the call ignited my soul. I didn’t forget my mission, but it was no longer my priority.

I reported what EvoGen was doing to her. I followed every damn procedure, foolishly trusting the system, but I should’ve known better. The Conclave wasn’t interested in saving her, though. They just wanted EvoGen’s findings destroyed. I plotted and planned, all while getting closer to Ember. Earning

her trust, trying to bring her comfort without arousing suspicion. I was caught and reassigned before I could put my plans into action. The Representatives ordered me home, but I went AWOL, tracked them to a new facility, adjusted my plans, and then attacked. Ember ending up in that car and then a human hospital were the only hiccups. But she got out, and she wasn't subject to EvoGen anymore. In that, I count the whole endeavour a success, but perhaps I could've and should've done more. And sooner.

“Tell me, Irfan. When you found Ember, what was the *first* thing you did? Stick your dick in her?” His lips curl in a sneer, baring his teeth. The action has the doctor resembling a wild animal more than a man.

“No.” I swallow the lump in my throat and lick my dry lips, closing my eyes as the realisation hits. “I snuck her a cupcake.” Instead of disregarding my mission, instead of breaking her out the instant I found her, I snuck her a fucking cupcake. Ember was so thin, I knew she wasn't being treated well. I failed her by not whisking her away from EvoGen, from Dominic Carmichael.

Helios' harsh bark of laughter reverberates off the walls and exposed pipes. “A cupcake. Well, that's okay then. You're pathetic. You're given the *gift* of an Anchor, but you left her to wallow in that hell.”

“I got her free!” I yell at him in an effort to defend myself. Yes, I could have done more for Ember, but I still *did* something. Better late than never, right? Anyone can say I should have done more with hindsight. If it wasn't for me, Ember would still be in the clutches of those bastards. I might have been slow, but I still set everything in motion so she could be free.

“No! *She got herself free!* You held no part. You went rogue after being reassigned. If you had freed her, Ember would never have ended up in a human hospital!”

“Why do you care?” I glare at him, tired of this conversation that's simply going round and round in circles. He doesn't know what he's talking about, and he never truly

will. Ember's opinion is the only one that matters to me. "You got your lab rat for the week. The Representatives saw to that."

"You're a bigger fool than I thought you were. I don't want a lab rat. I want to help *my* Anchor heal."

"What?" Every muscle in my body freezes at his statement. That's not possible. It can't be. He's lying, trying to get a rise out of me. If he pushes me to react, he can petition for new charges to be levied against me. That must be it. He's trying to use me to keep Ember in his labs for longer. I won't fall for his tricks, though.

"Welcome to the game, Irfan. Think you can catch up and learn the rules? You've been playing a while and making a mess that the rest of us are tired of cleaning up," Helios gloats, his lips twisted in a sneer as he looks down at me. My mind scatters at the conviction in his words.

"Ember is—You think she's—" I stumble and stutter, trying to collect my thoughts enough to form a coherent sentence.

"I feel the call to her. Atticus James, Klaus Becer, you, and me. So we're missing two."

"Three," I correct. "An Anchor has a Sept." Everyone knows that there's seven in a Sept, hence the name. Why would he think we're only missing two?

Helios tuts, shaking his head as though I'm failing to grasp the most basic of concepts. Arrogant prick. "An Anchor is *part* of a Sept. The previous male Anchors who weren't called to a female had a seventh bond to "ensure" they had children. Another addition to the laws from the Representatives. It's one of the only times they acknowledge those of mixed blood. Did you know that? That Chum's have enough Changed DNA to complete a bond? They can even feel the call to their bond-mate."

"Right." I sigh. "Can't have the most powerful among us not reproduce. They need their prize stock for the market." Is that why Helios is the one in charge of Ember's care this

week? His healing magic is renowned. I've heard whispers of him being able to regrow entire limbs. Is that the Representatives' plan? Have him restore Ember's fertility so they can turn her into an Anchor broodmare? She'd hate that. But how can I stop it when I'm locked away in here?

"You betrayed Ember. You didn't save her when you could." Helios words cut deeper this time. Probably because I'm realising how right he is, and I hate it. If I'd kept control of my temper and not broken Representative Becer's nose, Ember wouldn't have made the deal to save me. A turmoil of self-loathing, regret, and a dozen more emotions swirl inside me.

"That's not—"

"Fair?" He cocks a brow, folding his arms across his chest. "It's very fair. And you need to earn her forgiveness. Until then, you don't touch so much as a hair on her head. She's sacrificed too much for you."

Clenching my jaw, I listen as he berates me. He can demand whatever he likes, but the final decision will be Ember's. No one but her gets to decide who touches her and in what way. If Helios thinks I'll stand back and let him dictate anything about her, he is sorely mistaken. But appeasing him for the moment won't do any harm.

"I hear you, Doctor." Lifting a hand, I motion for him to simmer down so I can try to explain. My initial anger at his accusations gives way to resignation and regret that Ember suffered more because I didn't act faster. "I didn't just jump into bed with her. She overheard a song one of the other guards had on his workout playlist. The gym wasn't too far from her room. Sound travelled. One lyric that repeated throughout was about 'fucking away the pain.' That's what *she* used *me* for. We didn't—I didn't see what we had as a casual fling. I couldn't do anything about what was happening. I never saw her scars."

"How? How did you miss them? They cover her entire body!"

“I know!” I shout, pushing myself away from the wall. Each muscle in my body screams in agony at solely supporting my weight. “I felt the ridges, the bumps. She never let me turn the light on. We had to be so careful. So sneaky, and the one time I grew lax, one minor lapse of judgement and timing, someone caught us. They caught me leaving the corridor where her room was. The next day, my reassignment to another EvoGen facility came through, and the Carmichaels moved Ember two days later.”

“You were with her for six months, Irfan. You hid behind your orders from the Conclave and wore blinders so you could get what you wanted. Best of both worlds? You’d get the info required for your mission and the closeness of your Anchor. You got to sink into her at night, take comfort in her arms.” His fist lashes out, hitting the barrier between us. “You will be the last to cement the bond with her. If I could ban you from ever feeling her warmth around you again, I would.”

“That’s not your decision!” My earlier anger returns in force. “Get off your high horse, Doctor. You weren’t there. You have no idea what it was truly like for either of us. I was one man sent on a fucking reconnaissance mission. Yes, I was the commander of the Shadow-Stalkers, and that means I’m damn fucking good at my job. It also means I have orders and procedures I have to follow. Which I did, and when they failed, I went AWOL. Extraction missions take planning. They take time. You don’t charge in half cocked and expect everything to pan out! So you can stand here and berate me, belittle me. You have no idea how you’d react to a situation until you’re *in* it. Scoff about the cupcakes, the sex, but those were things that put a fucking smile on her face. Do not think I will stand by and allow you to take away more of her control. Who Ember bonds with, and when, will *never* be your decision.”

“It’s not yours either,” he growls at me, turning and storming out of the room in as much the same rage as when he’d entered.

Sinking back to my seat on the cold hard floor, I stare at the door, not truly seeing it. A guard must have appeared to

close and lock my cell, the magical barrier dissipating. The only sound keeping my thoughts company is once again the dripping of a leaky pipe.

My Little Phoenix has been through so much. I wish I'd managed to find out some of Helios' plans for her. What tests and experiments will he run on her? He's so quick to condemn me for following orders, does that mean he won't do what the Representatives demand? Ember's his Anchor too; he won't torture her. At least not intentionally, but who knows what this week with him will trigger for her.

I'm confident he won't harm her in the way EvoGen did. He won't add to her physical scars. The question is whether he'll add to her mental ones.

Each day in this cell feels like a week. But I would stay here for eternity if it meant Ember didn't suffer again.



## CHAPTER 5

# EMBER



“Focus. *Focus*... That’s it...,” Helios encourages as my brow scrunches with concentration. Hopefully, he’ll be appeased soon, and today’s tests can finish. Then day five will be over, and there will only be two more to go. “You’re exceeding expectations dramatically, pet,” he murmurs quietly as he circles behind me. “Think you can add another?”

*Another?* He can’t be serious. I’d never even considered weaving elemental magic into my shields before this morning; now, ribbons of red and green swirl around me. Fire and earth magic intersect with my shield, creating a network of potential counter-attacks into the defensive magic. The level of concentration already required is taxing, and he wants me to add a third?

“Don’t doubt yourself, Ember. You’re more powerful than you know, and this is before you’re of age. Before you’re bonded. Once you have your Sept...” He swallows audibly, a note of awe sneaking into his voice. “You’ll be a force to be reckoned with.”

“Well, doesn’t this look interesting?” My head jerks to the open door, gaze colliding with Representative Becer. Every muscle fights to tense up under his scrutiny, but I force myself to stay relaxed. Is he here to test me further? Has he gotten the answers he wanted from this week already? No. The harsh coldness he exudes has an air of frustration and impatience. He wants more, and he’s here to push for it.

“Representative, I wasn’t expecting to see you today,” Helios says with a stiff smile. The older man waves off the

doctor's words as he strides into the testing room. His smart dress shoes clack against the polished concrete floor.

"I've found that unexpected visits allow me to get a better view of how things are truly going." His calculating gaze flicks over my shield, and he rubs the tip of his moustache. The epitome of a cartoon villain. My future father-in-law, if the tug I felt to Klaus was accurate. I really hope the adage 'like father, like son' doesn't apply to the Becers. "Fire and earth. Why those two elements?"

I'm not sure if he's asking the doctor or me, until he locks eyes with me again. I fight the urge to look to Helios for... I don't know, what? Encouragement? Permission? Support? A mix of all three, probably. Becer is the head of the Conclave; ignoring him while I'm essentially at his mercy is a foolish idea. I wet my lips, attempting to maintain my concentration while answering him.

"Fire is my strongest element, and earth seemed the least volatile to add to it first."

"What would you add next? Air or water?" Becer cants his head to the side, analysing me.

"Um... water," I answer while trying to follow his line of thought. Why is he here? Why is he asking about this?

"Show me. Let's see if you have the control."

That was what Helios instructed before Becer joined us. He could have simply waited to see what happened instead of inserting himself. Wishing I knew his agenda, I roll my shoulders to ease some of the tension settling there and focus on my breathing.

Some people—human and Changed alike—close their eyes when dropping into a meditative state. That doesn't work for me. I need to be aware of a potential threat. After all, you can't brace for pain if you don't anticipate it.

Not that I think Doctor Helios would use pain as a motivator or incentive. I still don't remember him from my past, but he's been oddly kind since I've been here, aside from his fondness for therapy sessions, where I mostly sit in silence

now. Talking about the things that happened won't change them. Revisiting memories to discuss how I felt about them at the time and whether my feelings have changed since reuniting with Skylar is not how I want to spend my days. The deal was tests and experiments, not therapy. The Conclave Representatives using pain to get what they want, though? Yeah... I wouldn't rule it out.

Shifting my gaze to the weave of my shield, I search for the pattern. Each element needs its own path, or they could collide and detonate the protective barrier around me. Mentally, I assign each one its own song. Tie it to an emotion. Make it stand out as unique in my mind's eye.

Fire has a strong, passionate beat. It flares with dramatic crescendos. Whereas earth is steady, consistent. It resembles more of a hymn or a chant.

Water needs to flow, something lilting. An emotive ballad?

Pulling on the deep blue threads of water magic within me, my eyelids droop closed of their own accord as I hum softly. The familiar melody of a lullaby guides my magic to build the defensive and healing components of the element into my protection.

"Her control is remarkable. Wouldn't you agree, Representative?" Helios asks, his voice a low murmur.

Representative Becer makes a contemplative hum. Soft footsteps approach, and the magic in my shield tingles at the proximity of another person.

"Is it truly control if it's not tested? How do we know this isn't a fluke?" His voice shifts as he continues. Quiet footsteps guide my senses to picture him circling me like a shark. "Would she be able to create this again whilst under attack? Adrenaline pumping through her veins, heart pounding, overwhelming her senses?"

The footsteps retreat, but his words and tone have my muscles tensing in preparation. Not anticipating a test would be foolish after those comments. If I hadn't spent fourteen years at the mercy of Dom and EvoGen, I wouldn't be

expecting Representative Becer to lash out with his magic right away. I *did* spend that long with Dom, though, and I don't relax fully, even after completing my song and weaving the water into my shield.

The footsteps halt, and a squeak rings through the room as someone switches direction quickly. A pulse hits the barrier around me as I open my eyes, and my shield counters the attack. A path of broken concrete erupts from the floor, spreading between Representative Becer and me, knocking him off balance as fire lashes out, wrapping around his wrists and ankles. The scent of burnt fabric and hair fills the air before a water bubble forms over his head.

A soft chuckle pulls my attention from the male on the floor to Helios. He coughs into his fist before composing his expression to something more neutral.

“Drop the water bubble, Ember,” he says, striding forward and approaching the downed Representative.

“Oh,” I almost squeak with the realisation that my magic just attacked the leader of the Conclave. Waving my hand and twisting my wrist in a tight circle, I pull the water back to me first. Becer coughs, rolling from his back to his hands and knees. Helios crouches beside him, and a soft white glow encompasses his hand as he heals the other man. By the time the light dissipates, I've reclaimed the fire and earth aspects of my shield's magic, absorbing it all back into the well inside me.

I can't keep my gaze on the two Changed males. My focus darts around the room, bouncing from one area to another as I wring my fingers together behind my back. No matter how I try to rationalise it, the fact remains: I attacked Representative Becer.

Will he void our agreement?

Will I be arrested? Thrown into a cell next to Vertus?

Could he use this as leverage? Blackmail me into rejecting his son? In the days I've been down here with Doctor Helios,

I've gone over the conversation I overheard after Klaus' discernment.

*"You don't understand what this means, son. But don't worry. We'll make sure the bonding doesn't take. We'll find you someone more suitable and appropriate..."*

*"Klaus, you are not her bond-mate! You have no idea what you're talking about. That female is probably unhinged, deranged. She's a hazard. And she cannot fulfil her duties..."*

*"She was experimented on. Mutilated! She's disfigured and cannot bear children. You are my son, and I am the head of the Conclave. How would it look when you do not produce an heir?"*

Representative Becer has no love for me beyond the additional power I can bring his son. He's so focused on what he perceives I lack that he's forgetting everyone is damaged in their own way. A lot of scars and trauma are visible across my skin, but I'm not less than any other person because of it. Still, he clearly doesn't think the same way. It's not a far leap after hearing his words to Klaus to expect him to use any advantage he has to stop us from bonding. If I want the bond...

Hearing people talk about an Anchor's Sept and realising what that means for me as an Anchor... Overwhelming feels inadequate to describe the situation.

Representative Becer pushes to his feet, wiping a hand through his hair, the salt and pepper colouring darkened by the water clinging to the strands. "Was that the intended outcome you envisioned, Miss Ward? Why would you choose to elect that water attack over others?"

Does he know that's the magic Klaus used against me the first time we sparred at the Institute? Would telling him that it feels like a form of poetic justice be a step too far? Possibly. I keep my expression as neutral as I can. My mask isn't as strong as Helios', but it keeps the majority of my thoughts and feelings from being readable.

"Klaus used it on me during training."

“Yes. I heard about that and your counter. Though, unlike my son, I don’t believe the images you sent him were memories.” The Representative fusses with his suit sleeves, straightening the cuffs. “EvoGen is many things, but they wouldn’t risk their only living Changed. They wanted to use you. If you were dead, the answers they seek would be unattainable.”

He’s so blasé about it. So dismissive of what my life was like even after seeing the memory Vertus projected for the Conclave. Becer stood there and watched as Dom cut me open. He thinks EvoGen wouldn’t almost drown me if it garnered results? Shock and anger wrestle within me. My heart pounds, the blood rushing past my ears consumes my senses, and it takes a moment for sounds to register again.

“Explain to me, Doctor, why the latest report stated she’s still scarred. I thought you were going to fix her.”

“I’m not broken,” I mutter quietly as Representative Becer pauses for breath. His harsh gaze pins me in place, but I don’t flinch. I refuse to flinch because of anyone anymore.

“Aren’t you?” he scoffs. “Female Anchors have been revered by the Changed since their discovery. Even more so than their male counterparts. Three of our most powerful men have registered feeling the call to you. That’s three lines of power that will potentially cease to exist because you’re incapable of providing heirs... unless...”

“Unless what?” Helios and I ask at the same time.

A cruel, calculating smile takes over the Representative’s face. “Yes, I believe there is a way to save the lines. You don’t strike me as a selfish girl, Miss Ward. I’m sure you’ll see sense in the proposal.”

“What proposal would that be, Representative?” Helios presses as my blood runs cold through my whole body.

“Allow the boundaries of the relationship to remain open. Her Sept will bond to her. Gain the advantages of being called to an Anchor, but will produce children with another powerful female Changed of their choosing.” A self-satisfied smile

lights his face. Pride oozes from Becer as he bounces on the balls of his feet. He truly believes he's found an obvious and viable *solution* to my infertility, allowing his son to gain the added power from bonding with me whilst also having those heirs Becer seems so desperate for.

A piece of my heart cracks with each word Becer utters. I don't know who will be in my Sept, but I'd considered the possibility that some might reject me purely because I can't give them children. Not once did the scenario being presented cross my mind.

"You think anyone would do that? Betray their bonded like that?" Disgust and venom mix in the doctor's voice.

"Wouldn't you want to be the best you could be, Doctor? We make up a fraction of the world's population compared to the humans. Humans who continue to undermine us, persecute us, exploit and experiment on us. We need strong bloodlines to protect our future generations, to ensure we don't die out."

Becer's manic tirade continues. Helios cuts in occasionally, but his words go unheard. The Representative leaves with a gleeful smile, and I only hope that my Sept refuses this plan. I don't foresee Vertus or Atticus agreeing to it, but could the Conclave order them to comply?

What will Klaus do? Or the others?

Trex appears while my mind whirls, and Becer continues his discussion with Helios. I follow the male nurse back to my room in silence. If he overheard the conversation, he doesn't mention it as we walk.

He leaves me alone with my thoughts; though, what is there to think about?

Will the decision even be mine? Or will my future rest in the hands of my Sept and the Conclave? Either way, the options are limited. Either allow them to 'fix' me so I can have children—if that's even possible—or stand by and watch the men I bond with have children with other women.

Where would they even find other Changed women? I don't think any female Changed are unbonded once they're of



age. Would the Representatives have the guys select egg donors and use surrogates? Would they force me to carry the pregnancy? A shudder racks my body at the thought. Dom didn't do anything to my uterus, so in theory, I could be the surrogate...

No. No, that's not something I want. But if Helios could restore my eggs, would I want that? After Dom extracted the last of my eggs after removing one of my ovaries, I cried at the loss of potential motherhood. It's possibly one of the few things I didn't throw in a box and lock away.

I came to terms with the idea of never being a mum. It seemed like the best option for my future when I was a captive. Now, though? I don't know if I want it, but I do know that I want to be the one in control of that decision. Which cycles back to the idea of my Sept using donors and surrogates if they want to be parents.

Sinking onto my bed, I pull the blanket Zane knitted me close. If my Sept want children, then using donors and surrogates would be better than the conventional method of conception. It wouldn't impact the power of the child. Sam used that method and got Skylar and me. As long as they're not sleeping with another woman, it might be okay? It would be a group decision, though, so there's little point in my trying to decipher the hypotheticals now.

Wrapping the blanket around me, I bury my face into the dusky pink wool. Today is day five. It won't be long before I can see my brother and Vertus. Will Atticus be there when we're released? Will Klaus? What about Aaron and Zane? The thought of seeing the Greene twins again has warmth blooming in my chest.

A sensation I'll question another time. After some rest. The fatigue of using so much magic and the emotional roller coaster of Representative Becer's visit overtakes me. My eyelids grow heavier with each blink until I succumb to my exhaustion and sleep.

## CHAPTER 6

# ATTICUS



Training, pushing my body, and honing it to be the best it can be is the perfect distraction today. The repetitive motion and exertion of using the bench press shifts all my focus to my burning muscles, taking it away from the burning pit of anxiety of what's happening to my bond-mate.

“You’ll be late to meet your Anchor and Irfan if you don’t hit the showers soon,” my second-in-command, Sergeant Trey, says. His hands reach out to support the bar, helping me rack the weights.

I sit up and nod as I check the time. “Right.” Corporal Nox passes me a small towel as he joins us, and I wipe the sweat from my face. “Thanks,” I say to the youngest member of the team. Turning back to Trey, I raise my voice just enough that all four Shadow-Stalkers will be able to hear me. “I need to head outside first and meet the Wards when they arrive. We’ll all head down together.”

“Think Becer’s kid will show too?” Nox asks, folding his arms across his chest. I shrug in answer to the Corporal’s question.

“No idea what he’ll do.” I shrug again before throwing the towel into the small laundry tub in the corner of the room. “He doesn’t strike me as one to hang back from what he wants. Just depends if Ember is what he wants.”

“Yeah, but if he does anything to upset your Anchor, we’ll be down another commander,” Sergeant Trey mumbles. My lips twitch with amusement at the chips appearing in the stoic

man's facade. Ever since he 'tested' Ember, and then Vertus' subsequent arrest, he's been less inclined to blindly follow the Representatives orders. His ambition to command the Shadow-Stalkers seems to have faded too. Before I can tease him about it, dry laughter bursts from the corner of the gym where Corporals Ellis and Ristevski, the last two members of our team, are cooling down on the treadmills.

"I don't know about you, Trey, but as soon as Irfan sets up shop, I'm handing in my commission and jumping ship," Ellis says to the sergeant with a grin. He jumps off the machine and pushes his sweat soaked hair from his face. The strands almost look black instead of their usual blue.

"Who the fuck says Irfan is setting up shop as anything?" I demand. Plans aren't in place. There wasn't time before the idiot got himself arrested. Opening up a private protection agency is something Vertus has mentioned in passing, sure. It was always in passing, though. A wistful notion of life after retiring from the Shadow-Stalkers. He doesn't even have a company name sorted yet. Or at least, he didn't. He's had plenty of time to think while locked up in that cell; maybe he's finally come up with one.

"Commander, don't even start," Ristevski laughs. "As soon as you registered as having an Anchor, the writing was on the wall, my friend."

Mentally, I concede his point. I've always toyed with the idea of joining Vertus once he retired from the Shadow-Stalkers. It's just a dishonourable discharge now instead of retirement. I served under him for years, and I do trust him with my life. Finding a team we work with, as well as Trey, Ellis, Ristevski, and Nox, will be difficult though.

"Exactly," Nox agrees with the much larger corporal. "And if you think we won't be the first ones signing up to join, you're not as smart as those glasses lead us to believe."

How would the Representatives react to all of the remaining five Shadow-Stalkers leaving to join Vertus' new company? I'd be more than happy for these four to follow us,

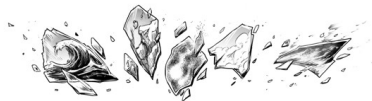
to continue being part of a team. There's a lot of logistics that will need to be figured out first though.

"Glasses don't signify intelligence, Nox," Trey sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. His exasperation with the younger man is evident in the sound.

"Guys, you're all getting ahead of yourselves," I say as I clean my glasses on my shirt. "Irfan needs to make it out of that cell first. We've been the elite team long enough to know things here aren't always as black and white as they should be." After replacing my glasses, I glance at Trey. He's always been the strictest rule follower. Until Ember. He nods sharply, and I know without a doubt that when Vertus is ready, all four of these men will be signing up to join him. "Get back to your workouts. I want progress reports at the debrief tomorrow at 0600," I order, pushing to my feet and heading towards the door to the showers.

"What? Why so early?" Ristevski calls after me.

"I've got a morning class to teach at the Institute. You'll be joining me too, Ellis. We'll rotate. Then you can each get a feel for who you can see joining the team after graduation."



"Klaus." I raise an eyebrow at the newly of age Changed. Honestly, I wasn't sure he would join us today, though I'm pleased he has. Getting to know him outside of the Institute, when I'm not his instructor, is on my to-do list. There just wasn't time this last week. Covering my jobs and Vertus' has taken up all of my free time, even with Trey stepping up as my second. I couldn't even sneak away to try to see Ember.

Well, that's not strictly true. I tried once, but the lift wouldn't unlock for my clearance level—or so the guard on duty claimed. Not that he'd look me in the eye when saying it. I didn't need Vertus' truthseer ability to know that was a lie.

"Instructor James," Klaus greets me with a nod.

“How about outside of the Institute, you call me Atticus? If you’re also registering the call to Ember, then we’ll be in the same Sept. It’d be weird to call me Instructor James in any other scenario. Plus, it’s a mouthful.”

“Sure. Yeah, I can do that.” Klaus smiles as he bobs his head before shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

We fall into a somewhat awkward silence, though by far not the worst I’ve been involved with. Thankfully, it’s only a few minutes before Ember’s father and brother arrive with the Greene twins.

“No Tavon or Nikolai?” I ask after we exchange hellos.

“Ah, no. Nik thought the six of us would cause enough of a stir without them both joining too,” Sam explains.

“That’s fair. Shall we head through? Did they tell you where we were to wait?”

“They *requested* we wait at reception,” Sam says before Skylar cuts across him.

“But we’re not doing that. Or I’m not. I’m going straight to that fucking elevator where I last saw my sister and not moving until we have her back.” I barely hold back my snort of amusement at Skylar’s response. Sam appears exasperated; I’m not sure if it’s with the situation, Skylar, or a mixture of both. Probably both. Though, on this occasion, I find myself agreeing with my Anchor’s somewhat pushy twin.

“I wouldn’t put it past my father to try something underhanded. Well, something else. This entire week was a ploy of his. I just haven’t been able to figure out the details,” Klaus says while rubbing his forehead. “He’s up to something. I just can’t fit all the pieces together yet.”

“You probably don’t have them all,” Zane grunts. I nod, agreeing with the more reticent Greene twin as we all make our way into the Conclave.

With a wave to reception, I lead our group in, retracing our steps from a week ago. An anxious excitement settles low in my gut at seeing Ember again.

How have they been treating her?

Did they feed her enough?

Will she have fresh scars? Or will they have healed the ones she had, erasing the evidence of all she endured?

“Anyone else find it odd that none of the Representatives are here too? Or, well, anyone but us?” Aaron asks, looking back down the corridor.

“It does feel ominous,” Sam acknowledges. “It’s plausible we’re reading into the situation, though. I’m sure the Representatives are all very busy. Perhaps they’re seeing to the release of Commander Irfan.”

Klaus covers a scoff with a hurried cough in response. Skylar’s brow furrows in a frown before sharing a look of pure scepticism with Aaron and Zane. It would be a lie if I said I didn’t share the sentiment. When I first graduated and completed the trials to earn my place with the Shadow-Stalkers, I never imagined the Representatives’ greed for power and control would be so absolute. It’s been a long time since I stopped blindly following orders. I never questioned them aloud, even when they assigned me to teach at the Institute. Rediverting resources to keep their children safe, while irritating, retained some logic. The attitude towards Ember, though, is something I’m unable to rationalise.

The floor counter above the elevator lights up, drawing all of our attention. With each level ascending, we’re one step closer to reuniting with Ember. Clipped footsteps approach from behind, but I can’t pull my gaze from the illuminated numbers.

“AJ,” Ristevski murmurs in a low voice against my ear.

Turning so I can see the fire Shadow-Stalker and still keep the lift doors in my peripherals, I respond in an equally low tone. “What is it, Corporal?”

The *ping* sounds loudly as the elevator reaches our floor. Ristevski’s low words of explanation go unnoticed by the others as the lift doors open.

My mind, previously whirling to tackle the problem presented by the Corporal, grinds to a halt at the first glimpse of my Anchor.

All fear over her treatment fades in an instant. She's gained weight, and her cheeks no longer have a gaunt quality to them. Her red curls shine in the few rays of sunlight cascading in from the windows. The bright, joyous smile that lights her face when she sees us takes my breath away. Dusky blue eyes scan each of us, and a frown tugs at her brow before she's engulfed in her twin's hug.

"Fuck, Pipes, it's good to have you back." Skylar releases his embrace, gripping Ember's shoulders. He takes a small step back, running his gaze over her, checking all is as well as it first appears.

"Sir?" Ristevski prompts beside me.

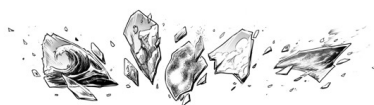
"Right, yes. Let Sam greet his daughter, then update him," I answer quietly.

"Abacus?" The old nickname that irritates me when used by anyone but Ember draws my attention back to her.

"Hey, Pol." I open my arms for a hug, and she leaves her father's embrace to step into mine. The call flares to the surface, my magic tingling across every nerve ending at our touch. The intensity will ramp up the closer we get to her birthday. Then it will be almost unbearable, until we either reject or cement the bond.

"Where is he, Atticus? Where's V?" Ember's hushed questions, full of confusion and defeat, have me tightening my hold on her. Glancing over her head, I make eye contact with Ristevski and Sam.

"I'm not sure, love. We'll find out, though. We'll get him home," I promise.





## VERTUS

Resting my head back against the icy stone wall, I count the cracks dancing across the ceiling of my cell. It's become a game of sorts, counting to a made-up melody using the drips from the cracked sewage pipe as a bass. My fingers tap against my thigh, adding another layer to the song. It's not a masterpiece. Nothing I do can ever be classed as one; my musical skills lie firmly in the mimicking of another genius. Still, it's a way to pass the time, and I can almost picture Ember humming a tune to the beat. She always clung to music after a brutal day with the EvoGen scientists. Her rooms were never as dank as my cell, though. For all their many, many, many faults, Steph and Dom ensured Ember always had a bed in a room of her own. I wonder if she'll sing to comfort me like I used to for her? She sacrificed herself for me, even when I'd betrayed her. That's a sign she's willing to forgive me. How many days has it been now?

How much longer until I can take her in my arms?

I tried to count the meals, the guard changes, anything since Atticus left. Somewhere I must have gone astray. Otherwise, someone would have come to fetch me by now.

Maybe closing my eyes for a bit will help. It's been difficult to get any rest. At first, it was the smell and the incessant *drip, drip, drip* from that blasted pipe that kept me awake. Then I was plagued with nightmares of the things Ember could be going through in an attempt to save me.

I'll clean myself up as soon as these damn cuffs are off and I have access to my magic. Then I'll make myself marginally presentable and go to my Little Phoenix. My Anchor.

Once I know she's whole, safe, and protected, I'll begin the search for office premises. There must be something out there that would serve as a home and office for a startup. I just need to find it. Then I'll use my magic and skills to help those who need me. Human, Changed, or Chum, no discrimination. Payment plans for those not flush with accessible cash. If any parent finds themselves in the position Ember's fathers did, I want to be able to help. If I can recruit some hackers, we can

do more than just physical protection. Locked up down here, it's been entertaining to imagine different ways to bring the corruption of the Representatives to the wider public. I can't believe the average Changed would continue to vote for the likes of Becer, Dixon, and Chadwick if they knew how power-hungry and totalitarian they are.

The cell door swings open, banging against the wall and revealing Sergeant Trey, my third-in-command, and Representatives Becer, Dixon, and Chadwick behind him.

"Howdy, folks. Fancy seeing you here. Sorry, no refreshments are available at this time," I quip while using the wall at my back to support some of my weight as I stand. The shock and confusion that flashes across their faces has me fighting a grin. Did they expect me to still be their good little soldier? I was barely holding onto any fucks I had to give before they locked me down here. Add in how they manipulated Ember, and I'm beyond caring about their opinions. Ember's safety and protection will be my priority going forward, but right after that is finding a way to remove these three from power.

"Is he addled?" Chadwick asks, clasping a hand to her imaginary pearls. They may be invisible, I suppose, but I like the idea of the high and mighty Representative having an imaginary necklace.

"Addled isn't politically correct terminology, Lydia. You're on the Conclave; try not to besmirch our reputation with outdated language," Dixon sniffs. Curious. I wonder what's happened to ruffle his feathers. Dixon typically simpers after Chadwick like he's a dog and she's a fresh bone from the butchers.

"The week is up. But before you're released, *Mr* Irfan, there are some... formalities to be addressed." Becer steps forward into the cell, ignoring the comments from his peers.

"What formalities would those be, Representatives? The change in my title makes it clear I'll be a civilian. What else is there?"

“You’ll need to sign a non-compete, of course, amongst other paperwork,” Chadwick answers with a wave of her hand.

“An agreement to not teach at the Institute or any human schools. Additional restrictions so you don’t leak Changed secrets to the humans,” Becer elaborates. “It’s all rudimentary. Things you wouldn’t have done in the first place, I’m sure. The lawyers like to have the paperwork as a backup, just as a precaution. You understand.”

Sergeant Trey’s stoic facade slips enough for me to notice the tick in his jaw where he’s clenched it. If the man’s not careful, he’ll crack a tooth. I watch the muscle spasm as I run a hand over my scraggly beard. I’ll need to shave before I see Ember.

The first thing I need to tackle is this proposed non-compete.

“What would you class as competing? It’s not like I’m going to set up my own military service or governing body. How would I be competing?” I just need them to let slip enough that I can ensure my company falls within the loopholes. That’s assuming their non-compete even falls within the lines of the law. They could try to change the laws, but that takes time, especially if they don’t want it deemed conspicuous.

“Using the skills we nurtured and trained you in... For example, if you were to start a private security or protection business, that could potentially take work from the Shadow-Stalkers. You see why we couldn’t allow that?” Becer states as the sound of approaching footsteps drift through the open cell door.

“Now, that doesn’t sound entirely lawful, Representative. I’m sure you’re not trying something so underhanded as to imply retired military personnel can’t work within private security. Even the humans allow that.” Sam Ward’s voice announces his presence before his blonde head is visible. The dull light down here hits his glasses, casting a glare across the lenses as he looks down at the three Representatives.

“Sergeant, I’ll take over from here. Head back up and finish running through the rest of your drills,” Atticus’ clear voice orders. The stoic sergeant snaps to attention.

“Yes, sir.” With a quick glance and wink in my direction, he turns and exits the cell. His footsteps recede as he makes his way back up to the civilised floors.

Atticus bypasses the Representatives engaged in a heated discussion with Sam about the delays of my release.

“How are you doing, Vertus?” my old friend asks once he reaches me.

“Nothing a hot meal, shower, and the removal of these fucking cuffs won’t fix,” I shrug, attempting to give off an air of nonchalance. He doesn’t buy it, arching a single brow and looking at me over the rim of his glasses.

“Vertus.”

“How is she? Have you seen her? Did they let her go? Was she hurt? If that doctor harmed her after spouting claims—”

“Whoa,” Atticus cuts me off. “Slow down. Yes, I’ve seen her. Ember’s fine; she looks good. Healthy, gained a little more weight.” A wistful smile pulls at his lips, and a glazed serenity takes over his eyes as he thinks of our Anchor. “There’s a bit more fullness to her cheeks. I think whatever they did down there helped her. I don’t think they harmed her at all.”

My grunt draws his focus back to me and the rest of my hurried questions.

“Did the doctor visit you? What did he say?” he asks as Sam claps his hands together loudly.

“Ah, a simple miscommunication. I’m sure you’ll agree now that’s cleared up that Vertus is free to go?” Sam smiles brightly while the Representatives look far less pleased. Chadwick especially looks like she’s attempting to swallow a cactus. “I have to say, the accommodation seems very subpar, even for a prison cell. Aren’t there guidelines for what’s deemed acceptable? Hmm, would you like me to look into the regulations for you, Vertus?” Sam asks while glaring around

the cell. Before I can respond, Representative Becer waves a hand in my direction.

“Commander James, please remove Mr Irfan’s suppressor cuffs and escort him and his lawyer to their vehicle,” Becer says stiffly.

“Yes, sir,” Atticus replies, but the three representatives have already left.

“Do you have sufficient magic to clean up in the car, or do you want to stop off on route? I know Ember was worried about you, Vertus, so I’d like to get us all reunited swiftly,” Sam says while Atticus removes the cuffs, and my magic surges through me once more.

“I have enough magic to make myself presentable on the drive. There’s no need to stop.”

“Let’s get out of here, then. I want to see my daughter and find out what happened this past week.” Sam turns and leads the way out of the Conclave. “And I’m filing a complaint about your treatment. It’s not likely to go anywhere, but that’s not the point. If no one pushes back, the Representatives will continue to take, and I, for one, have no desire to see any of our people lose more rights.”

I couldn’t agree with my future father-in-law more.

## CHAPTER 7

# EMBER



The sting of my nails digging into the cuticles around my thumb grounds me as I wait to hear from Sam or Atticus about Vertus. I still need to figure out where we stand with one another. Just because I didn't want him to die after he defended me doesn't mean I'm not conflicted about us being bonded eventually.

Even if I have some sweet memories from our time together at EvoGen, the loss of him still cuts deeper. What would stop him from leaving again? Or any of my Sept? Representative Becer proposed they bond me for the power benefits alone, and as much as I want to think no one would do that... it crossed Becer's mind easily enough that I can't disregard it. Especially as Klaus is his son, how far from the tree did the apple fall? The conversation I overheard between them leads me to think it fell pretty far, but I don't know him well enough to trust that impression.

The urge to move takes over as worry and anxiety build inside me, overriding the relief I'd experienced at finally being home. I can't sit and wait anymore. Deciding to get a glass of water, or maybe a snack, I stand abruptly, inadvertently interrupting the surrounding conversation.

"Em, you okay? Do you need anything?" Skylar asks, jumping to his feet.

"No. I mean, I'm fine. Just going to get a drink."

"Are you hungry? I can make you something, or we can reheat some of Anya's leftovers?" Aaron follows behind me,

making a beeline for the fridge door.

“Um, yeah, food sounds like a good idea. I was thinking maybe a snack... Do you think Vertus will be hungry? He will, right? We should have something ready for him.” I look up at the hush that’s fallen over the open living area, searching out the gaze of Nikolai. If anyone has an answer for my next question, it will be him. “They will release him, right? They’ll honour the deal, won’t they?”

The giant man sighs as he runs a hand through his shoulder-length hair. “I think so. Sam made sure to get everything you agreed to in writing and signed. If they try to back out, he’ll fight them on it.”

“There’s no way Sam will let Vertus stay in that cell. It might take a bit of time, but he will ensure Irfan’s release,” Tavon says.

I want to believe them. It’s not that I don’t have faith in Sam’s abilities; I just don’t know if I trust the Representatives.

“Hey, Freckles?” Klaus calls my attention. With my focus on Nik and Tavon, I hadn’t noticed his approach. “I’m the first to say my father is a sly, conniving git. No denying it. But he couldn’t have known you’d make that offer when you did. I don’t think he would’ve been able to throw in many—if any—loopholes, okay?”

How do you tell someone your magic calls to that you don’t trust them? I don’t know Klaus; blindly believing his words would be foolish.

“You look so conflicted.” Klaus smiles softly, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “We don’t know each other well, so I don’t expect to reassure you completely.”

“Strictly off the record,” Nik says, folding his arms across his chest as he scans over every face in the room before settling his attention on me. “I agree with Klaus. I’ve known the current Representatives since I was attending the Institute. They’re planners. Jermaine may have had something in the works—”



“More like definitely,” Klaus cuts in with a mumble. Nik nods his head in concession.

“Considering how quickly they had the labs ready for Ember? Yeah, I’ll agree with that.” Nik looks back at me. “They would’ve managed to get you down there, eventually. You just sped up the timeline.”

“Helios didn’t seem happy about it. Which makes sense, I guess.” Wrapping my arms around myself, I look over at my brother. “Skylar, do you remember—”

The back door opens, cutting off my words. A very gaunt and exhausted-looking Vertus enters the house with Atticus and Sam. His azure eyes lock onto me as soon as he’s inside, scanning every inch of my body. I take in every aspect of him as well. His clothes are the same black fatigues he was wearing when I last saw him, but they don’t hug his physique in the same way. He’s clearly lost some weight, but otherwise appears unharmed. A weight lifts from me, and relief washes over me as the realisation hits. V’s here.

“You’re okay?” we both ask the other at the same time.

“You hungry? Ember and I were gonna find some snacks,” Aaron says, breaking the moment of awkward silence. Vertus nods, and Aaron’s eyes light up as he turns to continue rummaging in the fridge. “How do we all feel about burgers?”

There’s an unspoken consensus to hold off on asking questions until after the food is ready. Once we’re all seated around the table, I manage to get two bites into my burger before someone speaks.

“I’m gonna ask the rude question first,” Skylar says, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

“Skylar, there are napkins,” Sam admonishes, pushing the pile of paper napkins towards my brother. Skylar grabs one, scrunching it in his fist, and rolls his eyes at me before sobering quickly.

“Okay, Ems, did you gain weight?”

A collection of groans resound around the table. Zane leans to the side, reaching around Aaron to clip the back of

Skylar's head with his palm. "You don't ask shit like that, dude."

"Ow." My brother rubs the back of his head, frowning at his friend. "I know that, and I did say I was gonna start with the rude question."

"It's fine. Doctor Helios' healing magic brought me back to a healthier weight. He fixed my nose too; I can smell again." Taking a sip of water, I glance fleetingly at each man. "Also, he, uh, he's the one who sent me those notes," I rush out.

There's a beat of silence before Skylar and Vertus explode, jumping to their feet and toppling their chairs as they shout over each other. Atticus tries to calm Vertus, while Aaron attempts the same with Skylar. Tavon is talking quickly to enraged-looking Sam and Nik.

Maybe I shouldn't have told them quite so bluntly? Wringing my hands together, I focus on my half-eaten burger, unsure whether or not to continue eating. Knots clench and tighten in my stomach, making the choice for me.

Large hands grip my waist, lifting me from my chair and drawing a squeak of surprise from me. Zane wraps an arm around me, taking my seat and settling me on his lap.

"You did the right thing. Don't cry, Peanut," he murmurs in that gravelly tone while wiping a thumb across my cheek.

"I didn't mean to upset anyone, but—"

"Shh, Ember, stop." Zane tightens his grip, pulling me into his chest. "Listen to me. You. Did. The. Right. Thing."

"He's right," Klaus says, crouching to the side of the chair. "They're not mad at you. They're upset at the situation. Now, I don't know what the notes were, but clearly, they weren't a good thing."

It's not a question per se, but I shake my head in answer anyway.

"They were creepy as fuck, talking about her being his pet again and forever, that her freedom would be gone by winter.

They mentioned stuff that'd been happening too, like with the snow and shit." With each word of Zane's explanation, Klaus' lips thin and a muscle in his cheek twitches as he clenches his jaw. He takes a moment before speaking again.

"Well, I'd say that everyone is upset you just spent an entire week with the individual responsible for those notes." Klaus rests a palm on my knee, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "He didn't hurt you, did he?" he asks in a low voice. The room falls quiet, and a quick glance shows all attention is back on me.

"No. He—" I pause, chewing my lip. How do I explain the strange sense of security I felt with Helios? It'll sound like I have Stockholm syndrome or something similar.

"He, what, Ember?" Atticus prompts me when I don't finish my sentence.

Shifting in Zane's lap, drawing a restrained grunt from him, I seek out Skylar's gaze. "He said I knew him. He asked about when you were rescued."

"Okay?" Skylar drags the word out, his eyes flicking back and forth between my own. "Did he elaborate on that?"

"Do you remember the boy who pulled you away from the window?"

"Sketch?" Skylar's brow furrows. "Yeah, what about him?"

"Red hair, amber eyes?" I press, needing to know if they're one and the same. Though having the same hair and eye colour wouldn't be a definitive match.

"And tattooed. Yeah, I know what he looks like, Pipes."

"Where are you going with this, Ember, sweetheart?" Sam moves to stand beside my twin, casting a confused look between the two of us.

"Doctor Helios has red hair and amber eyes that look like they hold molten gold," I answer.

"Well, shit," someone mutters. My focus stays on Sam as his nostrils flare, and he cuts a glance at his bond-mates. I'm

not the only one to notice it, either.

“Dad? Everything okay?” Skylar hedges, his eyes darting between his three father figures.

“Of course,” Sam replies with a strained smile. “So, Vertus, what are your plans going forward?”

The not-so-subtle subject shift doesn't go unnoticed, but no one questions it. Vertus sighs, rubbing a hand over his face before taking his seat at the table again.

“Step one will be finding somewhere to live. I can't stay at the barracks anymore; though, we would've needed to move in a month or so anyway. If I can find somewhere that will work as office space too, that will be ideal.” He pulls his plate closer before taking a large bite of his burger. His eyes drift closed as he chews, and I wonder what they fed him while he was in his cell. If they fed him at all.

“Why would you have needed to move if you'd stayed with the Shadow-Stalkers?” I ask. “I can understand why you can't stay there now, but if you were still working for the Conclave...” My words trail off as Vertus tilts his head to the side, looking at me as though I'm a puzzle he can't figure out. Zane's hand flexes against my waist as V explains.

“Little Phoenix, the barracks is no place for a bonded Sept. You deserve the home of your dreams.”

“What?” Skylar stares at the silver-haired man like he's grown another head. I think my expression is similar. My home here is more than I ever dreamed of.

“We just got her back, and you want to take her from us?” Nik narrows his eyes at Vertus.

Atticus takes off his glasses with an exasperated groan. “You really need to work on recognising when it's the time and place for bombs like this, V.”

“Even I know this was not the time or way to bring that up,” Klaus mutters.

“I'm not saying Ember moves right away! I wouldn't push her into leaving her family after such a short time with them,

but there's not the space here for a Sept."

"It's not as though we have a small house," Sam points out, crossing his arms over his chest.

"To be fair, he didn't say it was small," Aaron interjects. "But he's also not wrong. Ember's an Anchor. She'll have at least six bonded mates; that many people won't fit in her room."

"Doesn't mean we should be packing her bags, though," Skylar grumps.

"No one is saying that, Skylar. Right, Vertus?" Tavon levels a heavy glare on the ex-Shadow-Stalker.

"No. I just want—"

"You would like Ember's input, correct?" Atticus cuts V off.

"Yes." Vertus sighs heavily before meeting my gaze. "As much as I want to believe this past week means you've forgiven me, I'm not quite that delusional. I would like to think I still have a chance of you accepting our bond, and if you do, then we'd live together."

"So you want my input on the house you buy?" I ask, but what I want to question is why now? Why is this something that needs to be discussed *right now*? There's no rush. I'm not even of age yet. We have more than enough time to explore our relationship before my discernment ceremony. Wouldn't it make more sense to wait until the crystals confirm we're all called together before buying a house? How can he even afford to buy somewhere big enough for seven people?

Vertus nods, waving a hand between himself and Atticus. "We buy, but yes. Living in the barracks with minimal outgoings means we have more than enough saved to purchase somewhere."

"What if you don't like the others?" I press. "How can you buy somewhere that someone else in the Sept might not like? What if the others reject me because I'm broken—"

My rambling words are cut off abruptly by multiple voices chorusing, “You’re not broken.”

“In your opinion,” I stress. “Not everyone holds the same opinion. If the last week has proven anything, it’s that.”

“Why? What happened?” Aaron asks.

“It... it doesn’t matter. The details, they’re just details. My point is that some people will always view me as broken or damaged.” I look down at my hands. The skin looks so pale, resting against Zane’s umber tones. “Some people will want to be bonded to me for the power boost alone. I’d rather be alone than used like that.”

“If anyone tries to use you like that, Little Phoenix, I’ll kill them,” Vertus snarls. Warmth spreads through me at his proclamation, which is probably not a healthy response. There’s a comfort in knowing the extremes he’ll go to for me, though. Now that he’s free of the Conclave’s direct influence, there’s a lightness to V that wasn’t there before. The idea that he’ll protect me no matter what takes root, and I feel another crack form in the metaphorical wall between us.

“This conversation isn’t going to get us anywhere,” Tavon, the voice of reason tonight, points out. He turns his gaze to my three potential Sept members. “How likely is it that you three won’t be crashing on our sofas tonight?”

“I don’t think your father will like you staying here, Klaus,” I mumble.

“He doesn’t like much of anything I do. Hasn’t for a while,” Klaus scoffs. “I haven’t been home since the discernment ceremony. He won’t miss me.”

“Oh.” What else do I say to that? Do I apologise? Is Klaus feeling the call to me the reason he hasn’t been home? Where has he been staying?

“Freckles, get out of your head. I’ve been living a life of room service luxury at a hotel. Besides, I’m of age now, which means I have access to my trust. I wasn’t going to stay living with my father after I could afford to move anyway. I just haven’t found anywhere to move to, yet.”

“Guess that means you’re coming house hunting with us then, little Becer,” Vertus says with a soft smile in my direction.

“She hasn’t accepted you numbskulls yet,” Skylar huffs. “If you’re staying here, though, you may as well be comfortable. If the two of you don’t mind sharing, you can take my room.”

“We’re called to the same Anchor. If there are issues with sharing, they’ll need to be resolved sooner rather than later,” Vertus deadpans, and my face flushes as red as my hair.

## CHAPTER 8



# EMBER



After sorting out sleeping arrangements, we all head up to get ready for bed. Skylar detours by his room to grab pyjamas and a change of clothes for the morning before joining me. While I wait for him, I take the opportunity to soak in the twilight view from my balcony. The cool night air is refreshing and helps soothe away the last of the blush that's been on my face since Vertus' comment about sharing.

"Em? Where are you?" Skylar's hushed voice sounds loud in the almost silence of the night.

"Out here," I whisper-shout back to him from the balcony.

"It's fucking freezing. Why are you out here instead of wrapped up warm in bed?"

"I'm plenty warm." I wave a hand, indicating the blanket Zane made me that's pulled over my shoulders. "Just needed the air. I was in a basement for an entire week, La-La. I'm not used to that anymore."

He's quiet for a moment as my words sink in.

"You know, you never should've been used to it. Dom only ran a couple of tests on me after we showed as Changed. I should've fought against Sketch more... made him go back for you."

"Don't," I say, turning to look at him. "Don't punish yourself like that. We can't change the past."

"Well, we should!" He gesticulates with his hands as he vents. "There's all this magic in the world, and we can't go

back and stop children being abused—”

I cut him off, pulling him into a tight hug.

“No. We can’t.” Leaning back, I look up, meeting his serious blue eyes. “And for every child saved, another would take their place. There will always be evil in the world, Skylar. You can’t have good without bad.”

“I know that! I just—it shouldn’t have been you.” He deflates, finally returning my hug. Not that long ago, the thought of initiating a hug with anyone would have been such a daunting task. Ignoring the melancholy of our conversation, I take a moment to enjoy the progress I’ve made.

“Then who?” I ask quietly, returning to the topic. “Show me the ten-year-old you think should’ve taken my place.”

“That’s not—Christ, Ember.” Skylar releases me, stepping back and scrubbing a hand through his ruffled blonde hair. “I couldn’t do that.”

“I know.” Turning back for another glance at the view, I sigh. “The doctor, Helios, had me do some therapy sessions,” I say, still not looking at my twin. “He thought I needed to address and process the trauma of my life.”

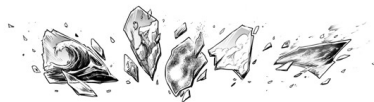
“He said that?”

“Mhmm.” I head back inside, moving to sit cross-legged on top of the bed. My brother follows behind me, closing and locking the balcony doors. “He wants me to go back once a week to continue... Anyway,” I rush so Skylar doesn’t interrupt. “Reliving what happened to me doesn’t change that it happened. I can look at it from another perspective; I can try to rationalise why they did those tests and why they pushed me to learn some forms of magic over others. I don’t want to, though.”

“Why not?” he asks, taking a seat next to me.

“Because it doesn’t change anything.” I shrug, focusing on the pattern of my pyjama bottoms. If I look at Skylar, I’m not sure I’ll be able to get these next words out. “And what if, once I rationalise it... I might... I might understand?”

“No. You won’t. At least not in the way you’re thinking you will. You’ve got a good heart, Ems. Just because you understand EvoGen’s rationalisation for their behaviour doesn’t mean you’d agree with it. Understanding and agreeing are not the same thing.” He tilts my face up, so I can’t avoid his eyes. “I mean it, Pipes. Now, tell me how you’re feeling about the whole ‘Klaus Becer will be in your Sept’ thing. ‘Cause that’s gotta be a mind fuck.”



“Do you two always sleep together? Is that something I need to account for in the house search?” Vertus’ voice drags me from the last vestiges of sleep. Squinting, I glare up at him.

“Why are you in here, dude? It’s barely daylight,” Skylar grumbles, turning over to face the wall and pulling the duvet over his head. “Em, go deal with your... whatever he is. I’m sleeping.” He nudges me with his foot, pushing me to the edge of the mattress.

“It’s my bed. I should’ve made you take the sofa,” I mutter, rubbing my eyes.

“Still not a morning person, Little Phoenix,” Vertus chuckles softly.

“Why are we awake, V?” I ask, pushing my curls out of my face so I can see him more clearly.

“It’s nine, Ember. It’s not that early.” He scratches the side of his jaw, glancing towards the balcony doors. “I thought we could go out for breakfast. You, Atticus, the Becer kid, and me... or maybe lunch?”

My eyebrows rise as he fumbles his sentences. I don’t think I’ve seen this side of Vertus before. He’s always seemed so cocky and confident.

“Breakfast sounds good. I’ll meet you downstairs?”

“Sounds good. I’ll let Atticus and BK know.”

“You can’t call Klaus BK. It sounds like you’re talking about Burger King,” I admonish. Though, I don’t think it’s very effective since I can’t keep a straight face and a laugh slips out. His answering grin lights up his whole face, making him look lighter as his eyes sparkle with humour.

“All right. For you, I’ll play nice and call him by his name.” The resigned tone of his voice has a smile tugging at my lips.

“I’m sure you’ll survive,” I quip, drawing a smirk from him.

“Always, I have you to come back to.”

A groan draws my attention back to the bed. “Oh my god. Stop, or I’m gonna puke. The sickly sweetness of your flirting is choking me.” Skylar finishes his complaint with exaggerated fake coughs and gags.

“I’ll wait for you downstairs; let the am-dram king get his beauty rest,” Vertus says as he turns and exits the room, closing the door softly behind him.

“You two are seriously puke inducing. Please, for the love of all things, do *not* get like that with Klaus. I will beg,” Skylar pleads as he sits up, the duvet pooling around his waist. “Seriously, I could probably cope if you get cutesy with Atticus, but not Klaus.”

“Why do you dislike him so much? Other than his dad being his dad?” I ask while collecting clothes for the day.

“I don’t know. It’s not really a dislike, I guess. More a rivalry that’s gone on too long and morphed into something else. He’s never taken an active roll in the bullying Crannick and his other friends do, but he doesn’t stop it either. He’s not the worst of the Rep kids.” He shrugs, flicking a piece of fluff from his T-shirt before lying back down. “Anyway, go. Go have fun with your breakfast date. I’m gonna sleep some more.”

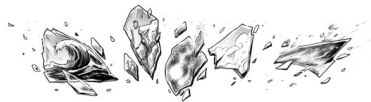
“Okay, you do that.” I can’t stop the chuckle that bubbles out when he salutes me.

“Hey, La-La?” I ask once I’m ready, hand on the door handle. At my twin’s grunt to show he’s listening, I continue. “Once we get back, how about doing something fun? Like a family day out?”

“Oooh, okay. Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good. I’ll ask Dad, Pop, and Pa, see if they’re all free. How’d you feel about paintball?”

I shrug. “Don’t know. Never played.”

“Aaron, Zane, and me against you and your Sept. The dads can fill in the gaps... Maybe Nik should ref... Leave it with me. Go on, get down there before one of them comes back up.”



Atticus pulls open the door to The Griddle Pan, motioning for me to enter with a wave of his hand. Vertus and Klaus follow behind, flanking me. Atticus’ palm warms my lower back where he’s resting it, applying a small amount of pressure.

“Let’s see if there’s a booth open.” He pitches his voice low as he guides me farther into the diner, the other two males trailing after us.

“I graciously come up with an idea for us to all spend time together, and you take over. Next time I won’t remember to invite you, Major,” Vertus grumbles. Glancing over my shoulder, my worry that he feels pushed out fades at the twitch of his lips and the spark of humour in his eyes.

“Graciously?” Atticus scoffs. “Vertus, you haven’t got a gracious bone in your body. You included Klaus and me because if you didn’t, it would set a precedent. If our Anchor accepts us, we’ll all have to cohabit, amongst other things. We need to at least be civil with one another. That’s the bare minimum we’ll need to make this work.”

“Plus, this place has the best blueberry pancakes, and I’d be pissed if I missed the first time Freckles tasted them.”

Klaus grins, snagging me around the waist and sinking into the booth bench. “You good sitting next to me?” he asks, deep blue eyes scanning mine.

“Sure,” I answer with a small nod. His eyes crinkle in the corners as his smile grows wider.

“Here, take the inside seat.” Klaus barely finishes the sentence before he slides me over his lap to sit tucked into the corner. My cheeks flush at the realisation of what I felt as I passed over his crotch.

“Do you want to look at the menu, Little Phoenix?” Vertus holds one of the laminated cards out to me.

“Sure, thanks.” Taking the menu, I dip my head, so my hair hides my flaming cheeks from view.

“Have you been here before, Ember?” Klaus asks. “If you like blueberries, then the pancakes, as I said, are amazing. I love them with extra crispy bacon.”

“Hmmm, what kind of bacon?” A beat of silence follows my question before all three guys laugh.

“I get the feeling there’s a right and wrong answer for you on this, Pol.” Atticus raises his eyebrow at me.

“Y-you can have a different preference...” I trail off, chewing the inside of my lip. Vertus reaches across the table, tapping my nose.

“Don’t do that. We’re teasing. No one is going to get upset with you for having opinions. Especially not strong ones about bacon.”

“Bacon is life. I’d be worried if you didn’t have a strong opinion,” Klaus adds, folding his hands on the table and levelling me with an intense look. “So, Freckles, which holds your heart? Streaky bacon or back bacon?”

The mirth dancing in his gaze is no doubt mirrored in my own as I grin back at him.

“Back. Always back bacon,” I reply. Klaus nods appreciatively as Atticus grins and Vertus groans. “But it has

to be crispy. Though... just not *as* crispy as places that do the streaky bacon.”

“Little Phoenix, you wound me with your choice.” Vertus clasps a hand to his chest. He tilts his head to the side as a slow, wistful smile takes over his features. “It’s nice to see you have a preference, though.”

“What can I getcha?” the waitress asks as she approaches the table. All three men look at me to order first.

“Um, can I get a coffee, please? And the blueberry pancakes with a side of crispy bacon?”

“Sure thing, hun. Back bacon, crispy.” She winks at me as she writes it down on her pad. “What about you fellas?”

They each place an order. Klaus gets the same as me, but Vertus opts for plain pancakes and streaky bacon, while Atticus gets tea instead of coffee, crispy back bacon, and scrambled eggs.

“Skylar had a suggestion for this afternoon if you’re free?” I broach after the waitress drops off our drinks.

“Did he now? And what would that be?” Atticus asks as he stirs the milk into his mug.

“He thought—well, I guess both of us. I mentioned doing something fun, and he suggested the activity, but—”

“Fun sounds good.” Klaus nudges my shoulder gently. “What’s the activity?”

“Uh, paintball?” I’m not sure why I was worried about asking them if they want to join in. Three smiling faces look back at me with excitement and matching grins. Their eyes are bright with a child-like energy that’s infectious.

“If I’m on your team, Freckles, I’m in,” Klaus says as our food arrives, and he pours a liberal amount of syrup over his plate.

“Eat up, Pol. We can discuss strategies while we eat. You’ll have an unstoppable team.” Atticus smirks behind his mug of tea.

## CHAPTER 9



# AARON



I narrow my eyes on the back of Skylar's head as he leads the way to the opposite side of the lake. "You're sure this was Ember's idea? Paintball?" I question while helping Zane carry the enchanted guns. No need to carry refills of paint or different colours when the gun can do it all for you.

"Yes, Aaron. She wanted a family fun day. I've said this, what? Three times now?" My step-cousin huffs in exasperation. I'm not going to look too closely at when and why I started making the distinction between us being cousins and step-cousins. We're not blood related, something that hadn't been a necessary focus until recently.

*Don't go looking to borrow trouble, Aaron.*

"Yeah, and that's not the bit we're questioning, dude. It's that she specifically said paintball," Zane chips in with his signature growly timbre. I know we're not identical twins, but even if I smoked fifty a day and drank my weight in booze, my voice would never manage that rasp he has naturally.

"Okay, paintball specifically *might* have been my suggestion. She looked so freaking excited, though, guys." Skylar looks over his shoulder at us and promptly falls over an exposed tree root.

"And the teams have already been decided?" I ask, reaching out a hand to pull him back to his feet. "No chance we can be on Ember's team?"

"What's wrong with my team?" Skylar releases my hand and dusts off the bracken on his trousers.

“Dude, you’re clumsy as fuck. You’ll end up shooting us by mistake.”

“Fuck off. You know I’m top of the class, and if I want to, I’ll be able to join the Shadow-Stalkers after we graduate.” He wags a finger between Zane and me. “Playing against me would be picking the losing side.”

His confidence is short-lived as a soft *pop pop* sounds, and two red splats of paint appear on Skylar’s chest. Nikolai steps out from behind a tree, shaking his head. “You’re not joining basic training if you walk into an ambush like that, boys.”

“In fairness, Ember does have two Shadow-Stalkers and the second best in my training class on her team,” Atticus says as he drops from a tree behind us, already armed. Where did he even get that paintball gun? Does he have one stashed in the boot of his car or something?

“I guess to balance out the teams, Nik should join Skylar’s,” Tavon says, looking over the group as everyone makes themselves known.

“Em, you okay if Rui joins us?” Skylar asks, pulling out his phone from his back pocket. “I was talking to him earlier, and he said it sounded fun, but I wanted to check with you.”

“Um, sure,” Ember replies, glancing around at our little gathering. Her brows furrow before she looks back at her brother. “I like Rui, but won’t that make the teams odd numbers?”

“He can bring a couple friends or his brother,” Skylar explains as he quickly taps out a message.

“All right, let them know to use blue paint if they’re on your team, Skylar. Red if they join Ember’s. Did you want to go for a last man standing or capture the flag game?” Sam asks, nudging his glasses up his nose.

“And you kids need to pick which of you gets T and which gets Sam,” Nik says, crossing his arms. He’s doing a good job of hiding his smile. I’m not sure Ember knows one is a *much* better shot than the other, though.

Sam joins our team, leaving Ember with Tavon. Considering she has Atticus, Vertus, and Klaus, it probably balances us out as evenly as possible. At least until Rui and his friends get here. Rui is on a level with Zane and me in class, so I'm not worried about him. I have no idea who he's bringing with him, though.

"Last man standing? Winner picks dinner?" I ask as I pass out the paintball guns. No one has decided on the game style yet, and it's always more fun when there's a prize.

"I'm more interested in what dessert will be," I hear Vertus mutter behind Ember. Her cheeks flush an adorable pink as she takes a gun from me.

"I don't think you're on Anya's approved list, V. Last I heard, she and Keryn were of the opinion your dessert goes to Em," I say with a narrowed gaze.

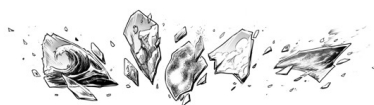
"It's okay, Aaron. You can stand down, unless you catch him during the game. Then I guess you can let the protective bear out." Ember's smile as she looks up at me is blinding.

"Oh, you know it, Sprite. Us Greenes," I wave a hand between Zane, Uncle Tavon and myself, "are very competitive. I guarantee this squishy bear will be on the hunt for the win."

"Okay, *squishy bear*," Tavon says, rolling his eyes. "Go join your team. Blue team base at Frog Rock. Red team base at Pebble Bridge Creek. Got it?" His gaze darts around the group as we all nod or voice our agreement. A grin spreads across my uncle's face, his eyes lingering on Nik. "Then move out!"

Nik groans, running a hand slowly down his face. Sam chuckles, shaking his head softly at his bond-mates before turning and leading Blue team to Frog Rock.

Let the games begin.



## EMBER

A giggle slips past as my red paint hits Sam squarely on the back.

“What?” He spins around, scanning the forest floor for any signs of me. When Vertus said to take the high ground, I hadn’t been convinced. I guess I’m learning to trust him, though, because Sam hasn’t looked up into the tree branches once.

“Taken out by my own daughter.” Sam shakes his head, still trying to spot me. “I know it was you, Ember. I heard that giggle,” he calls out with a grin.

I don’t stick around for anyone to catch up. There can’t be many of Skylar’s team left, and they all seem to have forgotten I figured out how to teleport. You’d think they’d remember me siphoning power from V and Skylar at the Institute, relocating myself to the lake here, and bursting into flames. There was also the side effect of making it snow at the end of August. Thankfully, that’s no longer a symptom of my teleportation. Also that EvoGen wanted me to be an asset for them. Typical schooling is something I didn’t get, but I did learn strategy.

My magic reserves are feeling a little depleted, so instead of teleporting, I manoeuvre carefully through the branches. If I were a human, I wouldn’t attempt to hop from tree to tree like this. Parkour is an incredibly impressive skill. It’s just not one I would hone without knowing magic can catch me if I fall.

Low voices draw my attention, and I crouch low, holding still so as not to be noticed. They sound familiar, yet not. My mind whirls, trying to pinpoint where I’ve heard him before.

“I still don’t think this is the right way to introduce yourselves or the Hounds.”

“Yeah, Cloud, you already said that.”

Why do I feel like I should know who’s speaking? The realisation niggles on the edge of my understanding as a voice I *do* recognise joins the conversation.

“Back off, Sketch. He’s just worried. We’re literally outing ourselves to the fucking Lieutenant General of the Conclave

and blowing my cover too.” Rui comes into view as he continues talking, and I realise the first voice reminded me of him. It must have been his brother, and the second voice must be one of his friends that Skylar mentioned were coming to join us. “You’re the press now, so if this is how you wanna play your hand...” He shrugs as his words trail off.

“Your opinion counts, Ghost. You’re VP for a reason.” I barely contain my gasp as the owner of the second voice, a heavily tattooed version of Doctor Helios, steps out from the shadows behind Rui, clapping my classmate on the back. “Now, who’s joining me on Skylar’s team?”

“Ember knows Ghost—sorry, *Rui*—and me. It makes sense if we join her team,” Helios says as he moves into view.

*What the fuck? How does Rui know Helios?*

“I still think you tagging along is a bad fucking idea, Helios. Just try not to come across like the stalker you are, yeah?” a white-haired version of Rui says as he joins them below my tree.

“Fuck off, Cloud. I’m not a stalker. I’m her protector.” Helios glares at Rui’s twin.

*Protector? Protector!*

Where was he when I was being held by EvoGen? When I didn’t have food for days or weeks? When Dom kept me conscious for his experiments, where was this alleged protector for the fourteen years of abuse?

Shifting my grip on the paintball gun, I take a deep breath, pushing my magic to help me move faster.

*Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.*

Red paint splatters across the chests of the four men. The earth beneath their feet opens, dragging them down until closing once it reaches mid-calf.

“Fuck!” Rui and his twin curse. While Helios throws his head back and lets loose a deep belly laugh.

“Where are you, pet?” he asks, turning his head to look for me.

“How do you know it’s her and not one of her teammates?” Helios’ twin asks with raised brows.

“Ember, stay wherever you are!” Nikolai’s voice rings through the area as he strides towards the four men trapped in the ground. Sparks of blue and red shoot into the sky through the treetops from his hand, summoning a halt to the game.

“Pops, what’s going on? Why’d you call the game?” Skylar questions as he appears with Sam. His eyes widen when he sees Rui and his three companions. “Sketch? What? Rui... What the fuck is going on?”

“I’d like to know the answer to that too.” Vertus’ voice is colder than I’ve ever heard it as he approaches with Atticus. “*Doctor*, what brings you here?”

“We were invited to join the game.” Helios tilts his head to the side, eyes flicking over Vertus clinically. “You’re looking a little peaky there, Irfan. Has no one healed you since your release?”

Vertus ignores the doctor’s question as Tavon, Klaus, Aaron and Zane arrive together, scanning the gathered group.

“Where’s Ember?” Tavon asks.

“That’s a question I’m interested in hearing an answer to. We didn’t even notice we weren’t alone before she shot and trapped us,” Sketch states; his eyes roam over my family, Atticus, Klaus, and Vertus, but linger on Skylar.

“Don’t give away your position, Little Phoenix,” Vertus orders, crossing his arms over his chest.

“This could be a good time to practise your teleporting, Ember. I want you to try using it more, test your limits,” Atticus adds after Vertus finishes speaking.

That man is going to turn every scenario into a training moment at this rate. Reminding myself that no one knows what happened to Dom or if the other EvoGen facilities are searching for me, I close my eyes, quickly taking stock of my magic reserves and evaluating if I have the energy for the task. I’m close enough to the guys that I could syphon off a trickle

from each of them to bolster my supply. For the short distance, I'll probably be okay, though.

Pulling on my magic, I visualise appearing between Klaus and Zane. The now somewhat familiar sensation of pressure presses tightly against my body. A hand grips my arm as I wobble. Regaining my balance and opening my eyes, I smile up at Zane. "Thanks."

"Welcome," he says in that familiar low grunt.

"Ember, pet—"

"Don't call her that! What the hell? Where do you get off coming to our home and calling Ember that name?" Skylar explodes at Helios.

"That's the name I've always called Ember. Since my brother pulled you out and had to leave her behind. I watched over her every chance I had, waiting, searching for an opportunity."

"You knew where she was? For how long?" Skylar asks, but the hurt in his tone, the angle of his head... I don't think he's speaking to Helios anymore.

"I've always known," Sketch answers.

"Hounds of Charon," Nikolai turns to look at Tavon. "Any chance that 'deal with the devil' you refused to talk about once we got Skylar back has any connection to there being four Hounds of Charon members on our property and on a first-name basis with our children?"

Tavon clears his throat. "Perhaps we should take this inside?" He runs a hand over his bald head before turning away from Nik to look at me. "Ember, would you mind releasing them, so we can go in and talk? I think it's time all the details of Skylar's rescue were known."

Klaus' hand slips into mine, giving it a quick squeeze. "Syphon what you need, Freckles."

Once I release the magic around Rui, Helios, Sketch, and Cloud, I finally take in the paint splattered clothing of the

others. Only Klaus and Nik appear unscathed from our paintball game.

*Pop. Pop.*

Two spots of red paint appear on Klaus' thigh and ribs, eliciting a hiss of pain from him. "What the fuck?" he curses, looking back at the group, all of whom are staring at Rui with a mixture of surprise and amusement in their expressions.

"Whoops. Sorry, I slipped, Becer," Rui shrugs. His eyes wide with feigned innocence.

Klaus coughs and nods slowly. "You know what? That's fair. I've hopefully not been as big a dick to you as Crannick, but I never stopped Felix from hassling you either. I probably deserve those shots and worse."

"Yup, you do," Cloud says before taking the paintball gun from his twin and firing off two more shots.

"Okay!" I step in front of Klaus. "This isn't going to get us anywhere, and I want to hear about Skylar's rescue. Atticus can pair Klaus and Rui up in class for sparring or something."

"Well said, love," Atticus says before pointing in the direction of the house. "Shall we?"



## CHAPTER 10

# EMBER



The walk back to the house feels like it takes an age. No one speaks aloud, but Sam, Nik, and Tavon's facial expressions shift as though they're communicating mentally. As soon as we walk through the large glass bi-folding doors at the back of the house, Tavon indicates for everyone to take a seat in the living room while Sam busies himself in the kitchen.

Nik and Tavon each take one of the cream armchairs while I find myself on the corner sofa between Zane and Atticus.

"Could we start with some introductions?" Sam asks as he sets a large tray of refreshments on the coffee table in the living room. Helios, Rui, and their brothers sit together on the corner sofa facing the wall of windows. "Rui, I know, but I'm guessing that's not the name you're normally associated with? Anything else we're in the dark about?"

"Uh, well, to start, my road name is Ghost. I'm the new vice president of the club," Rui says, leaning forward to make himself a cup of coffee. "I'm of age... have been for a couple of years. I'll finish out the year at the Institute, and then I guess the protection service on Skylar—and now Ember—will be reevaluated."

"Protection service? On me?" Skylar's gaze bounces between Rui and Sketch. "Why am I under protection?"

"Don't be dense, Skylar." Sketch rolls his eyes, shaking his head slightly. They seem comfortable with each other. The little signs that Skylar and Sketch know one another keep building. It's something I want to ask my brother about. Later,

though, now isn't the time. Zane makes up two coffees, passing one to me as Sketch continues. "I pulled you out of an EvoGen facility window when you were ten, and they shot at us. The Hounds lost several good men that day. We weren't about to let those bastards get their hands on you again. Besides, it was part of the deal my father made with Tavon."

"Yes, we'll circle back to that," Sam mutters, casting a disgruntled look at his bond-mate before looking back at the four men. "You're two sets of twins?"

"What gave it away, Dad? The fact they're practically identical?" Humour laces Skylar's sarcastic comment. His blue eyes sparkle with amusement as he looks at Sam. I hide my smile behind my coffee mug. It was a silly question. The only difference between Sketch and Helios is the tattoos covering every visible part of Sketch from the neck down.

And Rui has black hair compared to his brother's white hair. Otherwise, they're the spitting image of one another. Lithe, lean muscles, naturally tan skin and brown eyes they almost look black. Rui doesn't have his glasses today. I wonder if Cloud wears them too or if it's another difference between them.

"Yes," Sketch answers before Sam can respond to Skylar, drawing all attention back to him. "You've probably gathered already, but my name's Sketch. I'm the current president of the Hounds. Ghost is my VP, or vice president, and his twin, Cloud, is the club secretary. Helios, here, is the club doctor. Though, he's on something like a secondment to the Conclave for now."

"Helios..." Sam looks at me, and I can feel the weight of everyone else's gazes bearing down on me too. "Doctor Helios, who had my daughter for tests this past week?" Sam continues looking at the red-haired twins.

"The one and the same." Helios turns his amber gaze on me. "You need to eat. Your energy is running low."

"I'm fine," I say as Aaron gets up from his seat between Rui and Zane.

“I’ll put something together for all of us. We can eat while Uncle T explains his *deal with the devil*.”

“Right. Well, I would have told you both, and you knew I was going to source other—” Tavon pauses, wiggling his hand as he searches for the right words. “—less traditional means to find Dom and Steph. I couldn’t give you details. Your jobs would’ve required you to inform the Representatives; they would have tried to stop us or hinder us. They made it very clear that searching for our surrogate wasn’t a top priority.”

“And part of the deal my father made was that the Conclave not know of the Hounds’ involvement. We’re a mix of Changed and Chum. The Conclave isn’t known for their acceptance of Chum unless they’re like Ghost,” Sketch says, leaning forward, his arms resting on his knees.

“Wh-what does that mean?” I ask hesitantly, unsure if asking will completely derail the explanation.

“My dad’s Changed, my mum’s human. Where I’m different is my magic isn’t limited. Some Chum only have access to one element, but they excel in that one area. I have access to all the elements like a full-blooded Changed,” Rui explains. “You did the trial? The one where you go into the caves and find your path?” The question is rhetorical, but I nod anyway. “Right, well, my path identified I have enough magic to be allowed to attend the Institute. We delayed by two years, so I’d be able to help protect Skylar.”

“Not all Changed attend classes there?” I ask, surprised. Soft chuckles sound around the room at my question. My shoulders hunch as my cheeks heat with embarrassment. Zane nudges my knee with his, and Atticus wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side and dropping a light kiss on top of my head.

“No one is laughing at you, Pol. But no, not all Changed attend the same Institute. There are more of us than that. We split the training up by level. Those with lower reserve pools attend elsewhere, so instructors can tailor the lessons to their abilities. Chum typically attend one of the lower two Institutes, if they attend at all.”

“The idea behind it is that no one feels less than because they weren’t born with the power to achieve certain feats,” Tavon clarifies. “A lot of Chums are raised by their human parent—typically mother—so never go through the trials. We’re trying to get new legislation approved but so far, it’s been blocked.”

“While I agree Chums are treated unfairly and deserve more rights in both Changed and human society, can we come back to it later?” Skylar asks before turning his attention on Sketch. “Right now, I’m more interested in why, if you knew where Ember was all these years, you didn’t rescue her?”

“We couldn’t right away,” Helios says. “I wanted to, but Father and his council deemed it too high risk.”

“A member with an affinity for technology and hacking broke into EvoGen’s network. We kept tabs that way for a while. Helios would sneak off, if we had a run nearby, to check on Ember,” Sketch explains. “He’d be gone for hours, but after almost getting caught and leading security to the drop we were handling for... a client,” he hedges. “Anyway, my brother earned himself a ban from any runs that bypassed EvoGen facilities. Fuck knows what Dad did, but Hel physically couldn’t get near any property owned by EvoGen after that.”

“Why didn’t Phantom inform me you knew where she was?” Tavon asks, a hint of demand in his tone.

“I can’t answer for certain. He never told me, but if I were to make an educated guess?” Sketch muses, pausing to make himself a coffee. “I would say he didn’t want to risk the deaths of more Hounds on top of bringing the club to the attention of the Conclave. When Skylar was rescued, Phantom lost two bond-mates. EvoGen tightened security around Ember. They moved her regularly. The element of surprise played a big part in us securing Sky-lar.” Sketch finishes my brother’s name with a cough.

“You could have given *us* the details of her location. We could’ve set up a rescue,” Nik says, glaring at the Hounds’ president.

“I don’t think it’s going to help anyone to dwell on what could have happened if we had made different choices,” Helios states. “You have your daughter back; you’ll have time with her before she comes of age and bonds with her Sept and moves out.”

“Why is everyone in such a rush for Ember to move out?” Skylar grumbles. “We just got her back. Her Sept won’t take her from me.” He looks at me with a determined gaze. “I’m not losing my twin again.”

“No one said anything about losing her,” Vertus says from behind me. He’s spent the entire conversation so far standing as a silent sentinel with Klaus. “As lovely as this house is, there isn’t space here for a Sept. Every room is already occupied.”

“We have magic; I’m sure an extension or something could be added,” my brother says, folding his arms across his chest.

“Or,” I cut in. “What if there was a portal linking the houses? Would that work?”

“Yes, Pol. It would.” Atticus squeezes my shoulder again encouragingly. “If your fathers agree, we could set one up in the music room. Then you can still use it, and we can conduct additional training at the gym here.”

“Not planning on having a gym in your own place, Major James?” Nik asks with a raised brow.

A phone chimes, and Klaus curses under his breath.

“I gotta go. It’s my mum,” he says, leaning over the back of the sofa to rest a hand on my shoulder. “Can I talk to you before classes tomorrow? I’ll meet you at your locker?”

His deep blue eyes plead with me, and his phone chimes again as I nod.

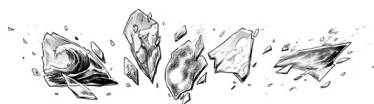
“Thanks, Freckles. I’d explain today—which was the original plan—but I really have to go.” His phone releases a string of chimes, and with a heavy sigh, he waves before rushing out the door.

I extricate myself from between Atticus and Zane, keeping my gaze on Sam, Nik, and Tavon. “I... I’m going to go down to the music room, if that’s okay? This conversation is—it’s a bit overwhelming.”

“Of course, sweetheart.” Sam moves from standing between Nik’s and Tavon’s seats and gives me a quick hug. “Go unwind. Someone will come down and let you know when dinner’s ready.”

With a weak smile, I walk around the arm of the sofa, heading to the main entrance hall and the stairs down to the basement. Part of me wants to stay and listen to what the Hounds and Tavon have to say, but a bigger part wants some time to decompress. I’d forgotten that tomorrow was Monday, my first day back at the Institute since Klaus’ discernment ceremony.

What could he want to talk about? Do people know he’s called to me? Does he want to keep it quiet? Or will he expect me to hang around him and his friends? I’m not sure that’s something I feel comfortable with. Chadwick and Crannick specifically come across as assholes. Spending time with them voluntarily will never make it onto my to-do list.



When we pull into the Institute car park, Rui is waiting for us next to the space where Skylar usually parks. After the standard morning pleasantries, we head towards the main building. Rui and Skylar walk slightly ahead, while Zane and Aaron flank me on either side. I can’t help but search the other students for a sign of Klaus.

“We’re running a bit late. He’s probably inside, already waiting at your locker or something,” Aaron says, no doubt noticing my visual search.

“Yeah, he said he’d meet me there. Do you think he wants to keep the call between us quiet? Since it’s unconfirmed?” I ask, voicing the worry that’s been occupying my mind since

yesterday. I wish I could figure out why the idea of him not wanting people to know upsets me so much. We barely know each other. Not having it public knowledge is probably the smart decision until we can figure out if we want the bond.

“You have more of a confirmation with him than Atticus or Vertus. You felt the pull when he touched the crystal, right?” Rui asks over his shoulder as we reach the main doors. In answer, I nod. Wrapping my mind around a crystal indicating who my bond-mates are is going to take a bit longer. It’s probably less about the actual crystal and more my disbelief that the Conclave hasn’t interfered or at least tampered with the magic. Then again, Representative Becer was *not* happy Klaus felt the call to me, so if he could alter the matches, I’m sure he would.

The hallways of the Institute are abuzz with slightly more than the typical Monday morning student chatter. I’m still too new to fly under the radar completely, but I’m not the centre of attention either. There are a few hushed whispers as I walk with my brother, Aaron, Zane, and Rui towards my locker.

“No, Myra, what are you doing?” a feminine voice hisses before I feel a tap on my shoulder. Turning, I find myself face-to-face with one of the other female Changed. Her black hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, and a heavy fringe almost completely obscures her perfectly shaped brows. Behind her stands her friend, wringing her hands nervously.

“Hey, Ember. I’m Myra Lhuthal. We haven’t officially met, like, properly. Obviously, we’re in training and defence together. You were *amazing* against Commander Irfan, like, seriously. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that the whole compatibility dinner thing with Klaus was totally *not* my idea. Actually, I doubt it was his either. Our parents arranged it and, well, yeah, anyway, I just wanted you to know.” Her words flow together in a seemingly endless breath. My brain takes a moment as I blink at her to process the flood of information.

Compatibility dinner? With Klaus? My Klaus?



“Did you know about this?” one of the twins whispers behind me. I can’t tell if they’re asking each other, Skylar, or me, though.

“Lhuthal!” Klaus’ voice rings out in the suddenly quiet hallway as he appears beside us, eyes darting from my face to hers.

“You went to a compatibility dinner,” Zane growls, narrowing his eyes on Klaus.

“I was going to tell you, Ember.” His expression is almost pleading with me to let him explain before reacting. I chew my lip, unsure how to react. Maybe it’s not something to worry about? But the reactions around me and the instinctive sting of hurt flashing through me indicates a compatibility dinner isn’t a good thing for our bond.

“Oh... shit. You didn’t know?” Lhuthal stares at me with wide brown eyes.

“Um, no. But thank you for telling me, I think?” My gaze bounces between Klaus, Lhuthal, and the surrounding crowd of onlookers. “What’s a compatibility dinner?”

“Oh. Okay, so when someone doesn’t have a match at the discernment, parents sometimes set up these dinners to see if there’s potential compatibility between two underage Changed \_\_\_”

“In our case, one of age,” Klaus points at himself, “and one under.” He waves towards Myra.

“I wanted you to know, no matter what my parents push for, I have zero interest in interfering with your Sept.” She reaches out and grips my hand briefly before dropping it. Myra’s eyes flick over me, and when she continues, there’s an earnestness to her words. “Anyone who refuses you is insane. There’s a reason we’re called to who we’re called to, ya know? It’s not just about magic and power.”

“It’s not?” I ask before I can stop myself. Representative Becer’s words are still prominent in my mind.

“Oh, girl, no. I mean, that plays a part of it, but if it were just about the strongest matches, then no one would ever be

called to a Chum.”

“Myra Ann Lhuthal! You can’t *say* that!” The other girl steps forward, grabbing her friend’s arm as the first bell rings, her hazel eyes wide with consternation.

“Is it offensive?” I ask, turning to look at Rui—I can’t think of him as Ghost. “You said it yesterday…” I trail off, not sure if people at the Institute know he’s a Chum.

“Nah, it’s a pretty common term for those of us born from Changed/human relationships,” Rui explains with a shrug, and Myra’s eyes grow impossibly wider. He laughs lightly when he notices her discomfort. “Relax, Lhuthal. Some people find it offensive, but there are definitely worse names for us out there.”

At that moment, the late bell rings out, causing the two other females to groan.

“Shit, we’re late again. Instructor James is going to kill us with drills,” Lhuthal’s friend says with a resigned sigh.

“Em?” Skylar asks, a lilting sweetness in his tone that lets me know he’s after something. “Think you can do that teleporting thing with all of us? At—Instructor James will make us run extra laps and drills like Willow just said. But you can syphon from me, and I’m sure Becer will donate to the cause of us not being late.”

Klaus nods and holds out his hand. “Take whatever you need.”

“You can *teleport*?” Myra whispers in awe. “That’s so freaking cool!”

“We all have his class now, right?” I ask, looking at the group. At their nods and murmured agreements, I take stock of my power levels. “Okay. Hold onto me, and yeah, I might need to syphon once we get to the pit.” I lift my arms out, and Skylar places a hand on my shoulder. The others follow suit with a spark of excitement in their eyes. The trust they’re putting in me is mind-boggling, but I push the thought to one side.

With a focused breath, I pull on my magic, opening myself up to syphon from Skylar and Klaus, just in case. Picturing the training pit in my mind, I release the magic, teleporting the eight of us to class.

## CHAPTER II

# KLAUS



I feel a trickle of my power flowing into Ember as we all touch her. Pressure builds in the surrounding air, heavy and restrictive against my skin. My ears pop as the eight of us appear on the edge of the training pit.

“Holy shit,” Myra gasps, clutching onto her friend’s arm. “I gotta learn that.” She looks at Ember. “We’re gonna be friends, I’ve decided. You know so much cool shit. Please teach me, so I can beat Crannick’s self-righteous butt next time Instructor James pairs me against him.”

“So nice of you all to join the class. I’m not sure there was a need to show off like that instead of walking from the main building like everyone else, though.” My spine straightens at the sound of the Dean’s drawling voice. “Really, Instructor James, is this what you’re allowing students to do? Teleporting is an exhaustive waste of magical energies.”

“Is it? Or are you simply lacking the reserves to achieve it?” Atticus asks in a glacial tone.

“You expect me to believe anyone else in this class could teleport like that?” The Dean wags his finger while shaking his head. “No. No, Atticus, I won’t fall for that. Teleportation requires more energy than an unbonded has. That display was all down to Miss Ward, no doubt syphoning magic from those around her like a leech.”

“Dean Calvert, are you implying Anchors, like my father, are leeches?” Daniels asks from amongst the gathered Changed.

“There are other Anchors?” Ember asks in a whisper, her brows pulled down in confusion.

“Male Anchors, yeah. You’re the only female one alive that we know of,” I whisper back while the Dean splutters and tries to backtrack his statement.

“Dean Calvert, were you staying to observe today’s class, or do you need something else from one of the students or me?” Atticus queries, hands clasped behind his back.

“I have a meeting, but I will observe tomorrow with a Conclave member. Our Institute is providing education for the most promising of our young people. We need to ensure their instructors are providing them with the very best.”

“And you find my students lacking?” Atticus tilts his head. “I’m sure you have time for a short demonstration, sir.” Without giving the other man a chance to answer, Instructor James calls out for Skylar and me to join him in the centre of the pit.

“Try not to maim each other. I doubt a certain redhead will appreciate it.” Atticus smiles, nodding in Ember’s direction.

“Of course, sir,” Skylar says before taking his position across the central line.

I move to stand opposite him, my magic buzzing through my veins. Sparring against Skylar is always a challenge. He thinks outside the box. I think it’s partly because of his clumsiness. When you trip and fall over thin air, it will either be a detriment to you or your opponent, and Skylar has mastered using it against his adversary.

“Fight.” Atticus’ command rings loud and clear in the arena.

I launch a blast of water at Skylar’s right side, dropping to the ground and rolling backwards to dodge his ice attack. Vines erupt from the packed earth, wrapping around my wrists and ankles. Fire roars over my forearms, burning the sleeves of my Henley but successfully destroying the restraints.

Water encases my head, a stark reminder of the attack I performed on Ember previously. Recalling the way she

distracted me with a memory, I attempt to do the same to Skylar. I split my focus between countering his attack in the expected way while pushing my recollection of Ember's memory to her brother.

I could use my own memories. My childhood has its own unique elements of trauma, but I know Skylar Ward enough that my pain isn't going to sway him. I need to give him a moment of doubt. A momentary blip where he's not sure who he's fighting.

The tricky part I didn't account for was being pulled into the memory of her abuse with him.

*The large metal sink full of water looms closer and closer. The hand in my hair tightens, shoving me forward. My scream rips from my lungs as I thrash from side to side. If I can dislodge him, break his grip. I just need a decent lungful of air before being dunked again.*

"Skylar! Klaus!" My name on her lips pulls me back to the present, to the sparring pit. Coughs rack my chest, echoing those from Skylar, as I roll to my back. I look up to see him watching me warily, bent double with his hands on his knees.

"You don't... get to... use her... against me," he chokes out between coughs.

"What just happened? What did you do, Mr Becer?" Dean Calvert appears above me. "You were both screaming, thrashing around as if your lives were in real danger."

"Memories can feel incredibly real, sir. I tried something new and pushed a memory at Ward," I shrug, trying to downplay the complexity of the attack.

"But why did it affect you like that?"

"Probably because it wasn't my memory. I'll practise and gain more control over it, so I don't get dragged into it too in future," I answer absentmindedly. It's a strong tactic; it worked so well against me. It was my first attempt, though. Maybe it's a simple case of needing to practice more.

"Whose memory did you use?" Ember's soft voice enquires, and my chest clenches. Hearing her now, the

resignation in her voice, I know she suspects I used her memory. A huge violation of her trust. And right after she found out about the stupid dinners with Lhuthal. She'll never trust me or accept me if I keep fucking up like this. I need to do better by her. The last thing I want is to make her feel like I'm my father's son. I've spent so many years focusing on being the best, on getting to the top of the class, that I forgot to take Ember's feelings into account. There's no way she's going to be okay with what I did.

I can't look Ember in the eye as I mutter, "Yours. Fuck, I'm sorry, Freck—Ember."

"Miss Ward, step back outside of the pit. The match has not been called to an end." Atticus' words are authoritative and mildly chastising. Enough so that Ember moves away before he finishes his last sentence.

Ice daggers land between my legs in a line from ankle to crotch. Placing my palms flat on the ground on either side of my head, I kick up, flipping over and blasting Skylar with a water and icy wind combo. His clothes freeze, turning brittle and throwing off his aim. I dodge the icicles, relishing in the sound of them shattering against the packed earth of the pit.

Skylar thaws his frozen clothing and charges at me. I'm not sure if he trips or if he deliberately collides his shoulder into my stomach. Either way, the result is the same. The breath is knocked out of me as we crash to the ground. Skylar has a good few inches on me, but we're fairly even weight wise. Thank fuck for magic, or shifting him off of me would be a challenge.

I channel my magic into forming air pockets between us, expanding them until I can encompass him in one giant bubble. Instructor James raises his hand, distracting me.

Who is he signalling?

The answer is obvious the instant he drops his hand and the earth beneath me opens up.

"Always be aware of your surroundings. Sparring one-on-one is all well and good, but in the real world, no one will be



that polite. Your opponents will not wait their turn. They'll bide their time until they can attack you while you're distracted." Atticus' loud, clear voice resounds in the eerily quiet space.

Aaron's satisfied face appears above me, letting me know who's responsible for my little mud hole.

"Zane, bring Skylar back down. Aaron, bring Klaus up. Restore the pit, and then we'll break off to run drills for the remainder of the lesson. Unless you'd like to see something else, Dean?" Atticus asks as the earth below me moves, inching me back to the surface.

"Will these drills include the lightning whips I've heard so much about? Is that something you taught Miss Ward outside of class to give her an edge?"

"No. That's something Miss Ward knew prior to arriving here." The ambient temperature of the pit seems to drop several degrees at Atticus' words. Dean Calvert bristles, leaning into the instructor's personal space. The two exchange words, the Dean's hands moving animatedly with each sentence he utters. By the time we've all split off into groups for drills, Calvert is storming back to the main building.

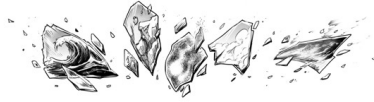
"Not keen on keeping his job today, is he?" Felix mutters beside me.

"Not like he needs it anymore. Now Commander Irfan has resigned from his commission, Instructor James can stop playing pretend here and take command of the Shadow-Stalkers. Why slum it here when you're in charge of the Conclave's elite military team?" I reply absently.

"Dude, what the fuck? How is our teacher a fucking Shadow-Stalker?" Mason asks.

I look at my friends staring at me with wide eyes and gaping mouths and shake my head. "How do you *not* know that? Your mums are on the Conclave." It's the whole reason we're friends. Our parents shoved us together, and my father in particular refused to allow me to attend birthday parties or playdates with anyone not connected directly to the Conclave.

“Enough chatter! Work through the drill combos. Stance one!” Atticus orders, effectively putting an end to my conversation with the apparently clueless offspring of Representatives Crannick and Chadwick.



## EMBER

At the end of class, several Changed ask to see a demonstration of my lightning whips. I know Atticus would never force me to be the centre of attention, but making it into a secret will bring more focus to me, and I'd really like to fly under the radar, fade into the background for the rest of the year.

The number of questions they shout at me, demanding to know how I'm controlling the elements, becomes a sensory overload. Thankfully, the bell rings, and Atticus dismisses the class. I hurry over to Skylar, Aaron, Zane, and Rui, walking with them back to the main building. Klaus seems to have disappeared into the crowd, but he has his own friends and his own life. I want to talk to him about the compatibility dinners, though. Last night, he said there was something he wanted to talk to me about, and I'm sure it was the dinners...

I wish he'd mentioned them over breakfast, or he could have asked to hang back at the creek during the paintball game. There were opportunities, so why did he wait?

“He used your memory against me. That's shady. It's sneaky and underhanded.” Skylar's disgruntled voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“Wh-what?” I ask, looking up at him.

“Pipes,” he sighs, shaking his head and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “It's fine. We can talk about it later.” He looks at Aaron, Zane, and Rui. “Do any of you have the next class with Ember?”

“I do,” Rui answers, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“I’ll see you at lunch then. Maybe we can head out for something? Poke bowls?” my brother asks, glancing at the others but focusing on me.

“Not sure Ember will like it,” Aaron says, looking down at me. “It’s a rice bowl with raw fish, tuna, or salmon. There’s normally an option for tofu too.”

“Um, I can try it.” I shrug. “There’ll be options for cooked food too, right?”

The four guys chuckle and nod.

“Yeah, Sprite. If you don’t like the poke bowl, we can stop somewhere else and get you some tacos or pizza or whatever takes your fancy,” Aaron says with a soft smile.

“Come on, or we’ll be late.” Rui tugs the hem of my top, drawing me towards the left hallway while Skylar and the twins take the right.

“See you by the car!” Skylar calls as I follow Rui.

Once we enter the classroom, he taps a seat in the middle before taking the one behind it. Before I can think to question why he’s sitting behind me instead of next to me, Myra and her friend from this morning enter.

“I want to learn that lightning whip thing you did. Can you teach me?” The words rush from Myra’s mouth as soon as she reaches the desk next to me.

“Um, hi?” I say with a small laugh.

“Right, yeah. Hi, sorry.” She shakes her head, dropping into the seat beside me. “Starting off with a greeting is polite. Sorry. I just—I *really* want to understand the offensive side of our magic. The things we can do should be almost limitless. Think it, believe it, achieve it, ya know? But there’s so few of us with vaginas, and apparently, that means we’re fragile, and,” she pauses, no doubt at my open-mouthed expression. She smiles sheepishly and takes a breath. “Sorry. Again. I’ve wanted to talk to you about all this since that first class. The one where you kicked Commander Irfan’s arse. Like, *dang, girl*. That’s the stuff I want to be able to do. The Conclave

already takes our eggs; why can't we learn the offensive magic? Why keep us so... sheltered? What does that do?"

"It keeps us safe, Myra. We're targets," Myra's friend says with a long sigh. "Isn't Ember proof of that? No offence," she adds, looking at me apologetically. "But there has to be a reason they rescued your brother instead of you. The Conclave would've wanted *you*. The fact they got Skylar out and then didn't try again for you tells me you were better protected."

"Holy shit, Willow, you can't say stuff like that!" Myra stares at the other girl with wide eyes before turning to me. "I am so sorry she said that stuff—"

"It... it's okay. She's not exactly wrong." Chewing on my lip, I think back to Skylar's rescue, then the conversation last night with the Hounds of Charon. I don't want to say a fourteen-year-old biker rescued my brother, but I also don't want the Conclave getting credit. "I'm not sure it was the Conclave, though."

"What do you mean?" Myra asks at the same time her friend asks. "Who else would want to save you?"

"Wow, Willow, really?" Myra stares at her friend like she's grown another head. Her expression almost makes me laugh.

Willow winces. "Sorry, that came out wrong. Just the Conclave has the military. The Shadow-Stalkers. So if not them, who would go up against a human faction like EvoGen to save two kids?"

"Okay, well, when you put it like that." Myra shrugs. "Yeah, I can't say I disagree. I can't think of anyone."

Both girls look at me. I glance around the classroom, noting everyone else appears absorbed in their own conversations and ignoring us. Rui is doodling in a notebook, seemingly uninterested, but I'm pretty sure he's listening in. There's nothing in his body language to make me think I shouldn't say anything. It's better to be safe than sorry, though.

"It was chaotic, so maybe I'm not remembering the details, right? It was fourteen years ago, and memories fade," I hedge.

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” Myra waves my excuses away. “What makes you think it wasn’t Shadow-Stalkers, though?”

“Um, well, the... man who grabbed Skylar, he wasn’t in all black. I guess he might’ve been a Shadow-Stalker. The outfit was similar to ones I’ve seen Vertus and Atticus wear—”

“First name basis with two instructors, not even trying to hide your floozy ways, Ward.” My head snaps up at the male voice, and I lock eyes with Mason, Representative Chadwick’s son.

“They’re two of her future bond. It’d be weird if she didn’t call them by their names,” Myra points out, rolling her eyes.

“And who the fuck says floozy? When were you born, Chadwick, pre-The Change?” Willow scoffs at Mason.

“That’s enough. Settle down, everyone,” Instructor Hauser calls as he enters the room. “You can continue your little chit-chats at lunch.” He turns his back to us, waving a hand in front of the wall and making the lesson notes appear in clean, precise handwriting.

“Mother said the Conclave has plans for you. They won’t let a broken, useless female steal some of the best and brightest males. You won’t be allowed to destroy our race from the inside. We all know you’re just EvoGen’s pawn,” Chadwick sneers in a low voice as he moves past to take a seat behind Willow.

“Shame the Conclave can’t actually do anything to dictate bond matches, Chadwick. If they could, your grandmother would have selected stronger mates for your mum,” Rui mutters loud enough for the entire class to hear. Chadwick glowers at him while a few people chuckle.

“I’m aware that, anatomically, the majority of you are no better than human teenagers, but you are in your twenties, so perhaps try not to act like *children*.” Instructor Hauser turns, quirking an eyebrow as he looks out at us. “Now, as I was saying...” Hauser continues, but I don’t hear his lecture. My brain keeps replaying Mason’s words on a loop.

*The Conclave has plans for you.*

*Destroy our race.*

*EvoGen's pawn.*

The rest of the day passes in a blur. I don't retain any information from the classes, and as soon as we get home, I head down to the music room, losing myself in melodies and lyrics.

## CHAPTER 12

# EMBER



All week, Chadwick's taunts play in my mind. I want to ignore them, but the conviction in his tone has an unease settling over me. No matter how hard I try, I can't shake it. Especially now that I'm back in the basement of the Conclave, sitting with Doctor Helios in his office for my first outpatient therapy session.

He's so focused on making me confront my past. And not just him. Sam, Vertus, and Atticus have made comments about therapy helping me heal. I don't need to heal, though. Well, maybe I do, but it should be on my terms. I shouldn't be forced to come here by the Conclave or anyone else. And while they may order I attend, they can't order me to speak or actively partake.

Steph and Dom happened. EvoGen happened. Talking about it, reliving the memories, won't change that.

"I'm disappointed, Ember." Helios draws my attention back to him and away from my spiralling thoughts. "We were making progress with the daily sessions last week. I knew after you returned to your life we couldn't meet as frequently, but not speaking for the entire session doesn't do either of us any good."

I glance at the doctor from the corner of my eye before shrugging. "In between classes and additional training with Atticus and Vertus, I'm tired. Mentally and somewhat physically exhausted. That's all."



“Why don’t you tell me about the Institute? We don’t need to talk about EvoGen,” he says, leaning forward in his chair. “You’ve had a week of classes since finding out Klaus Becer feels the call to you. Has that changed anything?”

*Like what? What could that have changed?*

I shift in my seat, adjusting position so I can look at Helios without straining. After sitting in silence for a few minutes, he sighs and rubs the back of his hair, mussing it. The rumpled look makes him look younger, more approachable. I find myself drawn to this more relaxed version of the doctor.

“You’re only hurting yourself in the long term. You know that? All those neat, little boxes you store your trauma in will eventually open because your brain can only compartmentalise so much. It will overwhelm you. These sessions will help avoid that. Pick a box, Ember, any box. We can open it together and make steps towards decluttering your mental shelves.”

With a sigh, I lean back in my seat, hardening my resolve. I won’t allow myself to be distracted by his appearance. “These additional sessions weren’t part of my agreement for Vertus’ release.”

“Maybe not. But you still agreed to them.”

“No, the representative who designated themselves as my guardians agreed to them.” I want to say it with conviction, condemnation even. Instead, my words are a weak whisper.

“I tried to get to you once,” Helios says, barely audible even in the quiet room. “It was about a year after we’d gotten your brother out. I used every favour I had with the other club members to get access to Resource. His affinity with technology is second only to one of his hacker friends. I begged, borrowed, and stole to earn a meeting with him. All for you.” He looks up at me, his amber eyes swirling with emotion. “Your haunted blue eyes. The way the fading sun would catch the light dusting of freckles across your nose. Those have been my last thoughts every night since we had to leave you with those bastards.”

“W-why are you telling me this?” I stammer.

“So you know that you were never forgotten. Not by your fathers, your brother, and not by me,” Helios says with a heavy seriousness that weighs on me.

“In the woods, before I shot you with the paintball, you called yourself my protector.” I watch as Helios nods, the anger I felt at hearing him rising once more. “Your brother said they knew where I was the whole time.”

“We did.” He nods. Helios’ hard gaze stares through me as though he can see directly into my soul. Maybe he can? He obviously has a healing affinity, but no one has said he only has one affinity.

“Then don’t lie and say you didn’t forget me. I had to free myself. You knew where I was and did nothing. I don’t think you tried to rescue me. Yes, I always had guards, but they were human, and you have magic.”

“So do you. Why didn’t you use it against them? I watched the footage they stored of you. You’re remarkable. Your control is exquisite, especially for your age. Why not turn your powers against your captors and tormentors? Why wait?”

“I couldn’t before. They built in a failsafe,” I mumble before being pulled into the memories.

*Straps cinch against my wrists and ankles, digging into the skin. Another band wraps tightly across my forehead, preventing me from moving my head. The unseen assistant shoves something hard into my mouth, blocking my tongue from my teeth.*

*“Can’t have you counteract all our hard work now, can we?” Dom gloats as he moves into my field of vision. Footsteps retreat and the door seals shut with a hiss. “How do I smell today, pet? I made sure I worked up a sweat for you.” He runs a finger from my temple to my jaw. “Not long now. Then you won’t be able to pluck a hair from my head with ill intent.” Dom leans down, a cruel grin on his lips revealing yellowed teeth. The putrid stench of stale coffee and tobacco on his breath assaults me. “Any hope of using your magic*

*against me? Poof. Gone. Even if you get your suppressors off, you'll be unable to hurt me. You're my pet, and all good pets need training. It's time to continue yours."*

"Ember!" Helios shouts as hands grip my shoulders, shaking me. "Ember, where did you go? What did you remember? Talk to me; we can break the hold they have on you."

A knock on the door saves me from having to answer. At least for now. A low growling sound rises from the back of Helios' throat as he gets up and stalks to the door. He throws it open with a bang, no doubt glaring at the poor soul on the other side.

"What?" he snarls.

"Uh, sorry, Doctor. Klaus Becer is here to collect Miss Ward. Her session time is over, and you have the, er, patient waiting in the secondary lab."

Instantly, I'm on my feet and moving past Helios and out of his office. "We weren't finished here," he grinds out from between clenched teeth.

"I-I can't do more today. I-I can't," I stutter and stumble, forcing me to take a breath. I can't meet Klaus while unable to string together a complete sentence. He's already been on compatibility dinners, even if they weren't his idea. I refuse to give credence to his father's assessment of me. Though, if Klaus wants to bond with me, he should be prepared for all versions of me. I won't always be able to put my best self forward.

Do I want that? For him to accept all versions of me? Can I accept all versions of him? And not just him, but the others called to me too. I don't know. Everything has been so overwhelming, so much pressure. Why do I have to be an Anchor? Why do I have to be Changed? How different would my life have been if I'd never manifested powers? That's a dangerous path of thought, one I shy away from quickly.

"Fine." Helios scans me with his eyes. "I'm giving you homework. Next week, I want you to come with a specific

memory in mind. We will discuss it, process it, and you will then begin to heal from it. Am I clear?"

I nod, turning to leave, but Helios grips my arm.

"I didn't hear you. Use your words, Ember."

Closing my eyes, hating him for forcing this, I take a breath and look back at him. "Yes. I will have a memory prepared to discuss for the next session." No promises it will be one from EvoGen, though, I add silently.

"Good girl." Helios lets go of my arm, and I hurry away, only slowing my steps as I near the double doors that require a staff member's signature to open.

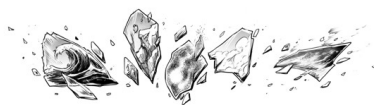
"There you are, Miss Ward. One moment, I'll get the doors open and escort you to Mr Becer," the Changed who interrupted the session says as he comes up behind me. His hand brushes against my back as the doors open, and I jump away from him. "Skittish little thing, aren't you?" he chuckles.

Glancing back, I recognise him from my week long stay here as Nurse Trex. A smile slowly curls his lips as I stare at him.

*Stop staring at the man, Ember,* I mentally chide myself. Each interaction I have with Trex increases my wariness of him. There's just something off about the vibe he throws out. Something a little creepy in how his eyes linger on my frame.

"Y-you said Klaus was here?" I ask, hoping to distract him. I think it works as his smile falls at the mention of my future bond-mate. Potential bond-mate? One of the men called to me? I need to figure out what to call them.

"Yes. This way, I trust you can find your way from the elevator?" He walks past me, pausing briefly for my nod of acknowledgement before continuing down the corridor.



Stepping out of the Conclave building, I raise a hand to shield my eyes from the almost blinding sunlight until they adjust.

“My car’s just down here. I thought maybe we could get some ice cream and talk? Are you up for that? If not, we could still get ice cream, and I can talk, or we can sit in silence. I just... I figure I owe you a ton of explanations for the compatibility dinners and being kind of MIA this week,” Klaus says with a nervous energy I would never have predicted. It’s oddly soothing.

“Ice cream is good. Do you have a favourite flavour?” I ask.

“Hmm, probably chocolate, but the kind with the chunks of chocolate in it. Drizzle some hot fudge sauce over the top.” He kisses his fingers. “Perfection. What about you? What’s your favourite?”

“I’m still deciding. There’s a lot of good flavours.”

“Yeah. That’s fair,” he says with a nod as we reach his car. Klaus opens the passenger door for me with a soft smile. The arrogance I expect from him is missing, making him much more approachable. “The place I wanted to take you isn’t far. You can pick the music for the drive if you want.”

“Ice cream and music control? Who told you my weaknesses?” I ask once he’s settled behind the wheel.

“Maybe I’m just creepily observant and noticed you hum when you’re concentrating and when there’s ice cream at the Institute cafe, you never pick one tub.”

I stare at him, my hand hovering over the radio controls.

“I’m kidding... kinda. You *do* hum and always take two of the tiny tubs. Who wouldn’t, though? One tub is never enough ice cream.” He glances at me quickly before looking back at the road. “Please don’t think I’m creepy. Atticus might’ve mentioned taking you for ice cream as a potential ice breaker date when I asked him after class.”

“So far Atticus is the only one to take me on a date,” I say, fiddling with the radio until I find a song I know. “It was a pretty perfect date.” I smile wistfully. That could be a good

memory for the next session with Helios. A happy memory that won't hurt to revisit.

“This is more of me grovelling and apologising for being an insensitive pillock than a date,” Klaus admits somewhat sheepishly. “I have a date idea in mind. We can come back to that after you forgive me for the whole ‘being an insensitive pillock’ thing.”

“Okay,” I shrug, a smile toying with the edge of my lips. How he's managed to pull me from the dark, raw, emotional state I was in after my session with Helios, I don't know. But I am truly grateful. Wallowing in that state, on top of how I've been feeling thanks to Mason Chadwick's comments, would have been an awful way to spend the weekend.

Klaus parks the car and hops out, rounding the front to open my door for me.

“Thank you,” I say, taking his offered hand.

“Is this okay?” he asks, indicating where he's still holding my hand after I'm standing next to him. I don't feel skittish with Klaus. Even though I jumped when Nurse Trex touched my back, there's a sense of peace and rightness about holding Klaus' hand. My magic hums under my skin as I nod at him with a smile. His eyes light up, a grin spreading across his face in response, making my heart soar. “This way then.”

Klaus leads the way towards a storefront with a rainbow awning that stretches over the pavement. A few people sit outside on the white wrought iron bistro tables and chairs, eating giant sundaes that make my mouth water.

“They make everything on site. The owner's family has a dairy farm a few miles out of town, so it's all local and fresh. And, well, it's just really good,” Klaus explains, opening the shop door and letting me enter first.

I make my way to the counter, momentarily distracted by the bright colours of the walls and tables. Klaus smiles as he passes me, heading straight to the display cases.

“They do a taster sundae if you want to try that? Ten flavours in one dish,” he says, pointing at the black chalkboard

menu filling the wall space behind the glass counter.

“Really? That sounds amazing.”

He grins and orders a triple chocolate fudge sundae for himself and the taster for me. After paying, Klaus gestures towards the various booths.

“Where would you like to sit?”

Chewing my lip, I look around the shop. The booths all have the same white leather bench seating, but one is tucked in the corner. I’ll be able to see anyone approaching us if we sit there. As soon as I decide, before I can voice a preference to Klaus, he walks over and takes a seat with his back to the door.

Settling across from him, I study his expression. “How did you know?”

“I’m observant. Your shoulders dropped when you spotted this booth. I know where you were before I picked you up. And with your past, I figured you’d want to keep sight of the exit.” He shrugs. “I want you to be comfortable. That’s the least I can do. If anyone comes in, you can use me as a shield.”

It’s so considerate of him and such an alien experience for me. I don’t think even Skylar would have made that connection. A smile tugs at my lips, and a sudden bout of butterflies erupt in my stomach.

We fall silent until our ice creams are ready. Klaus jumps up to collect them from the counter and sets a huge overflowing glass in front of me. He eats a mouthful of his sundae while I contemplate which flavour to start with.

“While you figure out how you’re going to tackle that, can I explain about the dinners?” he asks, his tone and posture turning serious.

“Yeah... I’d like to know why you didn’t tell me.”

“But not *why* I went?” he asks, tilting his head to the side and raising his eyebrows.

“I think your dad covered those whys,” I mumble before shoving a spoonful of mint choc chip ice cream into my

mouth. A pleased hum escapes as the flavour bursts across my tongue.

“Well, for starters, my dad’s opinions are his own. I don’t share them. We don’t agree on very much, and his attitude towards you is disgusting. If the dinners had been solely his idea, I never would’ve gone.” Klaus rubs the bridge of his nose. “He got my mum involved. She set the dinner up with Myra’s parents. My mum’s sick. Has been for a while, since her other bond-mates died, really. But she didn’t know about you. She couldn’t attend my discernment ceremony, and I didn’t go home that night...” He rolls his spoon between his forefinger and thumb. “Anyway, my dad told her I didn’t get a match, that I’d need compatibility dinners in hopes my magic *settled* for another Changed.”

“I thought not getting a match was practically unheard of?”

“Yes, and no. I’m aware of Vertus and Atticus. It makes sense, though, since you didn’t go through the trials when you were a kid. Your signature wasn’t in the crystal when they had their ceremonies.” He takes a bite, giving himself a moment to think. “There’ve been others over the years. It normally means they’re matched with a Chum.”

I stutter, trying to form my questions into sentences another person could understand and answer. Klaus smiles softly at me and nods as though he can hear my incoherent thoughts and make sense of them.

“Not every Chum goes through the trials. It depends on which parent raises them,” he explains. “Human parents wouldn’t know to get their kid tested. We are getting side-tracked, but I will answer all the questions you have. If I can. I might not have the answer, but I won’t lie to you, Ember. I can’t promise not to be an asshole, but I won’t lie.”

“Okay. So you had dinner with Myra because your mum arranged it?” I ask, and he winces.

“Yeah, worded like that, I sound like even more of a douche.” Klaus sets his spoon down on the table, giving me his entire focus. “My mum hasn’t been excited about anything in a long time. When she called me, her voice was full of life.



Then she said why, and my stomach almost fell out of my arse. I'm not proud of my actions. I should've told her about you, but she said the dinner was with Myra, and I know she doesn't have any interest in me." He sighs, running both hands through his short black hair. "This all sounds like a lame excuse for hurting you. Fuck."

"We're not dating. We're not officially a couple or bonded or whatever—" I don't know why I'm trying to give him more excuses. Thankfully, he cuts me off.

"That's not the point, Freckles. The very first time I laid eyes on you, I felt drawn to you. Maybe it was the call or at least a weaker version of it. Felix—Crannick," he clarifies at my confused frown, "bugged me about you for days, weeks, probably. Both him and Mason—Chadwick—could tell something was up with me. Especially this last week."

"What made this week different?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

"I don't know," he hedges, casting a sheepish look my way. "Maybe because I used *your* memory against Skylar in Monday's training class. It was a shitty thing to do," he adds apologetically before shrugging. "Pretty much backfired anyway, since I got pulled in and relived it. I'm guessing it wasn't the most... intense one you have either."

I shake my head, not looking at him. Seeing the pity in his eyes will break something fragile inside me. We fall quiet, both focusing on eating our ice cream before it melts further. After finishing half of my sundae, I remember something Klaus said in the car, and curiosity itches at me.

"Wh-what's the date idea you have? You mentioned it in the car. Will you tell me?"

"How do you really feel about your scars?"

I jerk my head up at Klaus' question.

"What? Why?" I ask, searching his warm blue eyes with my own.

"Don't overthink it. There's no hidden agenda behind my asking. Well, not one like you're probably thinking." He rubs

the back of his neck, a slow blush tinting his cheeks. “I just thought, well, if you wanted to keep them but disguise them—no, that’s not the right word.”

“Klaus?”

“Sorry. What I’m trying to say is we could incorporate them into tattoos. If you wanted.”

“Tattoos?” His date idea is for me to get a tattoo?

“Yeah. My dad’s always gone on, and on, *and on*, about me taking a seat on the Conclave. That’s his dream, though. Not mine. I started sneaking out to a human tattoo shop when I was sixteen and got an official apprenticeship at eighteen.” He coughs lightly, glancing around to see if anyone else is listening to us. “Anyway, I’m fully qualified, and I’ve been working on combining tattooing with magic. Tattooing scar tissue is difficult because the skin doesn’t always take the pigment, but with magic—”

“You can counteract that,” I interrupt, finishing his sentence. At his nod, images flash across my mind of how my skin could look. Excitement builds, and I can’t fight the smile that pulls at my lips. “Did you have designs in mind?”

His eyes light up at my eagerness, and his shoulders relax as the tension I hadn’t noticed evaporates. “I might have sketched a couple of ideas, but it’s your body, Freckles. You need to have the most input into the design. So I won’t let you pick one of the samples without alterations. This is about you, though. You’re in control of your body, your creativity, your story. I’m just a tool to help showcase it, if you’ll let me.”

## CHAPTER 13

# ZANE



I should be asleep, not staring unseeing at my bedroom ceiling. My magic's restless under my skin, not helping the current bout of insomnia. With a disgruntled huff, I roll onto my side, accepting the futility of sleep when the clock shows it's already half past four. I'd be getting up in an hour anyway, may as well start the day early.

After pulling on a loose T-shirt and sweatpants, I pad down the two flights of stairs to the basement. Soft music drifts from the right, the glow under the door providing more proof that I'm not the only one unable to sleep. Indecision wars in me, but my curiosity over what Ember is singing wins out over my original plan to hit the gym. Atticus will be coming by for additional training again this morning anyway, so I'll still get a workout in before classes.

Approaching the music room door, the words of Ember's song reaches me. Full of angst and anger, she sings about injustice and inequality. How her body, or I guess any female's body, isn't someone's crime. They aren't property that anyone has rights to. It doesn't take a genius to connect her words with how the Conclave treats females.

As I stand glued to the spot, captivated by the passion and emotion pouring from her, I'm consumed by shame. How did I never notice the unfairness? Why did I just accept the Conclave's rules and laws?

Snippets of conversations I've overheard Myra have with Ember and the other girls in our year play in my head. Why do we limit their training? Why can't they learn offensive magic?

The Conclave claims it's to keep them safe, to ensure future generations are born... but they take the egg samples. That's our future generation right there.

Fuck, I've been so blind to the manipulations. We all have. A harrowing thought flits across my mind as I turn, walking to the gym as Ember's song comes to an end.

*If the Conclave is this blatant with their agenda, what else are they doing in the shadows?*

Sweat drips down my forehead into my eyes. I shake my head in an attempt to dislodge the remaining droplets without stilling the skipping rope. It doesn't work, and I mistime a jump, stumbling briefly before righting myself.

"Where's my postcard, Zane?"

I drop the rope, turning to face Skylar as my brother follows him into the gym. "What?"

"My postcard," he repeats. "From your trip."

Aaron groans, shaking his head at Skylar before downing the last of his morning green smoothie.

"What? It's a play on words. I was being witty."

"If you have to declare you're witty, then you're not," Aaron says. "Now, can we get to the warm-ups? Atticus will be here soon, and I don't want to give him any reason to torture us."

The door opens, revealing the man in question and Vertus.

"Who's torturing you?" Atticus asks, his eyes scanning the room quickly. "And where's Ember?"

"She was in the music room when I came down," I answer, moving off to the side and grabbing my water bottle.

"I'll go get her," Vertus says, heading back out into the hallway. "I have some houses I want her to look at, anyway."

"Ember isn't moving out!" Skylar seethes, clenching his fists at his sides.

*Here we go.*

“Of course she is. So will you. No one would expect their children to move their new bond-groups into a childhood bedroom. You may only match with one or two Changed, but Ember is an Anchor.”

“I know what she is,” Skylar snaps. “I’m the one she first syphoned from.”

“Then you know she’ll be part of a Sept. That’s six bond-mates. How do you propose six fully grown men and all their stuff move into her bedroom?” Vertus asks, folding his arms over his chest. When Skylar remains quiet, the ex-Commander nods once, dropping his hands back to his side. “Precisely. That’s why she’ll move out. Not to mention, I need suitable space to set up my company.”

“Uh huh, because she’ll definitely want to live in a house where your mercenaries are traipsing in and out at all hours.” His tone drips with a mixture of sarcasm and petulance. Skylar’s always had a bit of a spoilt brat streak. After he came home, his fathers, but especially Sam, gave him everything he could possibly want. I’d thought he’d grown out of this attitude when he left his teenage years behind him. I want to believe there’s more to his surly attitude than the prospect of Ember eventually moving house.

“*Shit*, Skylar. Can you go back to bed and wake up on the other side?” Aaron stares at our cousin like he’s never seen him before. This prickly side isn’t new so much as amplified.

“I’m fine. I just don’t want to lose my sister.”

“La-La.” Every head in the gym turns to the door where Ember stands. Her eyes lock onto Skylar. “Eventually, we’ll both move out. You’ll have your bond, and I’ll have my Sept... Neither of those things means we’ll lose each other.”

“I know that. I just don’t see what the rush is,” he grumbles. Ember walks over to him, reaching up to place her hands on his shoulders.

“Skylar, don’t try to trap me or control me.”

“I’m not doing that,” he protests, and I’m sure I hear Vertus scoff.

“Not yet, but you’re on that path. I-I can’t live like that again. I won’t. Please don’t push me away by trying to keep me close.”

This feels like a conversation that shouldn’t have an audience, but I’m worried if I move to leave, it will shatter the moment and they won’t have this much needed conversation.

“I’m not asking you to!”

“You’re not asking *me* anything, Skylar. That’s my point.” Ember shakes her head. “I’m going to skip this morning’s workout,” she tells Atticus as she walks back to the door.

I step forward, clasping a hand on Skylar’s shoulder to keep him from following her. “Leave it.” I shake my head when he opens his mouth to argue. “Let what she said sink in. Then talk to her.”

“He’s right, you’re too worked up right now. You need to burn off some of your frustration. This isn’t like you, dude,” Aaron adds. “You go after her now and it’ll just blow up into an argument, and you’ll say shit you don’t mean.”

“All this angst because of something that is inevitable?” Vertus tilts his head to the side, eyeing Skylar. “Nah, I don’t buy it. Something else is pissing you off, and you’re lashing out at Ember.” He stalks across the room until his finger pokes into the centre of Skylar’s chest. “Let me be clear. Fix your shit, and stop taking it out on her. Whether it’s some twisted guilt because the Hounds saved you and not her. Or if it’s your own love life that’s got you tied in knots, I really don’t care. Just fix it before you hurt her.”

Skylar’s cheeks flush a deep pink, but he doesn’t say anything. With a final poke, Vertus turns and exits the gym.

The atmosphere is tense after Ember and Vertus leave. Atticus doesn’t mention what happened, and neither does Skylar, so I keep my mouth shut too. After we finish and split off to shower and get ready for the day, I find my mind replaying the whole morning in my head. Ember’s song, the realisation that I’ve missed all the signs of how unfairly female Changed are treated, the outburst in the gym.

This isn't the Skylar I know, and I don't want to stand by silently anymore. Watching him drive his twin away, creating that distance between them, hurts something deep inside me. Which is why, after getting dressed, I find myself crossing the hallway to knock on Skylar's bedroom door.

"Yeah?" Skylar calls from inside, and I take that as permission to enter. He's sat on his unmade bed, pulling on a sock as I open the door.

"Hey," I say, leaning against the doorframe.

Skylar lets out a sigh after glancing up at my face and scratches the back of his head. "What is it, man?"

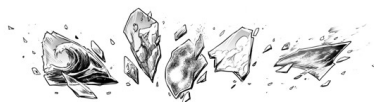
"I was gonna ask you that. Something's going on with you. You're barely home, and when you are, there's this tension... It's weird. So I'm checking in."

"Nothing's going on with me. I've just been busy, and I hate that everyone is so quick to push Ember to move out. I just got her back, Zane. Could you imagine if this was you and Aaron?" he asks, face twisting with emotion. "Fuck, dude. I can't lose her again. We're not even of age, and everyone is talking about bonding ceremonies and the caves, moving house." He ruffles his hair with both hands. "It's too much."

"Yeah, but if you're overwhelmed, she probably is too. Except for Em, she also has to deal with you acting like a dick —" Skylar shoves his feet into his trainers and jumps up, cutting me off before I can continue.

"Fuck you, Zane. I'm not that bad. I'm looking out for my sister, who has been through enough. We don't even know if Vertus and Atticus are really called to her. They could be manipulating her for power!" He storms past me, knocking his shoulder into my arm as he passes. "I'm leaving in five minutes; if you want a ride, make sure you're in the car."

Well, that didn't go as I'd hoped.





## EMBER

Ditching training this morning gave me some time to think but not enough. The car ride to the Institute is tense and mostly silent. Aaron and Zane keep sharing loaded looks, having a conversation with their eyes over my head.

The pattern and monotony of the day takes over, and I float along, only engaging when I have to. When Myra and Willow invite me to lunch with Willow's half-sister, Sawyer, I jump at the chance to avoid Skylar for a bit longer.

By the time four o'clock rolls around, I'm still in no hurry to go home. As we leave the main building, Aaron nudges my shoulder.

"Isn't that Vertus?" He points towards the car park, and my mood lifts seeing V leaning against Skylar's car.

"Little Phoenix, how about an ice cream date with your future Sept?"

"I'm not going to turn down ice cream. Do we need to wait for Atticus and Klaus?" I ask with a smile.

"They'll meet us there. Don't wait up for her, boys," Vertus calls over his shoulder, walking away as I quickly say I'll see Skylar, Aaron, and Zane later.

Vertus waits, holding the passenger door open for me, and checks my seatbelt before rounding the car and getting behind the wheel. Fifteen minutes later, he pulls into a parking spot outside the same ice cream shop Klaus brought me to before.

"What do you fancy?" V asks, wrapping an arm around my shoulder as we walk into the shop and up to the counter.

"Um, honeycomb?"

"Good choice. The other two are in the corner booth. Klaus said you liked that one last time. I'll order. Go sit." He shoos me away with a smile and a wink.

I don't argue; there's no point for something like this.

"Hi," I say, sinking into the bench opposite Atticus and Klaus. Both of whom already have their sundaes.

“Hi, love. I’m glad you could join us. We thought after this morning, you might like to get out for a bit.” Atticus smiles before offering me a bite of his sundae. Spotting the crumbled peanuts on top, I shake my head.

“No, thank you. I don’t like peanuts.”

“Are you allergic?” Klaus asks, and again, I shake my head.

“No. Not that I’m aware of. I just don’t like the taste or texture,” I shrug.

“Fair enough. More for me.” Atticus grins, taking a large mouthful and making me laugh. “So how have your other classes been going?” he asks with a nonchalance that feels forced.

A frown pulls at my brows as I look across the table at him. “Why?”

A smile curls his lips as he twists his spoon between his thumb and forefinger. “Well, Instructor Hauser might have mentioned a few minor disturbances in his class.”

“Those were—”

“Don’t say they were nothing,” Vertus grumps as he slides into the booth next to me.

“I-I wasn’t.” Klaus snorts, while Atticus and Vertus look at me with differing levels of disbelief and scepticism on their faces. “Okay, I might’ve been about to say that. But it really wasn’t a big deal. Myra and Willow were talking with me about offensive magic and EvoGen.” I raise a finger when Vertus opens his mouth to interrupt. “Mason Chadwick called me a floozy because I called you both by name.” I wave my spoon between Atticus and Vertus. “And then he made a comment about the Conclave not ‘letting me steal’ Changed into my Sept.”

After I finish explaining, I shove the spoon into my mouth, relishing the slight sting of brain freeze as the flavour explodes over my tongue. I manage to eat four more spoonfuls before either Atticus or Vertus form a vocal response.

“*Steal*. Are they out of their minds? You can’t steal something that’s yours!” Vertus explodes.

“He threatened you? Us?” Atticus asks. Klaus clenches his jaw, breathing heavily and flexing his fists.

“I can’t *steal* you. You’re your own person, not a possession or property,” I tell Vertus before turning to look back at Atticus and Klaus. “And no, I don’t think it was a threat as such. More like a warning?”

“That’s just another way of saying it was a threat, Ember,” Vertus sighs exasperatedly.

“A threat would be them trying to arrest you again, or actually doing *something* to prevent us from bonding,” I argue.

“Yes, but they also know we can’t bond until after your birthday. You also need to identify the rest of your Sept, then we’d need to arrange the vow ceremony and be granted access to the bonding caves... They could quite easily not allow access,” Atticus states before returning to his own ice cream.

Setting my spoon down, I think over his words. Vertus draws my attention to him when he runs his thumb along my bottom lip, freeing it from between my teeth.

“What’s occupying that beautiful mind of yours?” he asks softly.

“I just... The bonding caves, why are they important? What part do they play? Are there other caves, or does every Changed have to travel here to cement their bond? That seems excessive, right? The world is all one continent now, but it’s still a huge land mass. Multiple time zones. I can’t believe that every Changed has to be *here* to complete their bond.” Question after question pours from my lips, and all three men stare at me once I finish.

Atticus clears his throat, his hazel eyes dark with heat. “Some things we don’t even consider questioning because growing up, the answer would’ve been ‘it just is,’ but you, my darling Pol, you ask anyway.” He rubs his scruff covered chin and looks at Vertus. “I think our Anchor might be onto something. She’s right, it makes little sense for everyone to

travel here for bonding. We know not everyone attends the discernment ceremonies here, the crystal travels. The caves can't travel, though."

"All my father's ever told me about the caves is how, for a bonding to be viewed as authentic and complete, it must be formed and sealed in them," Klaus parrots, doing an incredibly accurate impression of Representative Becer's voice.

"Which doesn't mean there's not an alternative, just that the bond-group wouldn't be recognised by the Conclave. So if the Representatives were to try and block us, there's likely a way to complete the bond without the cave, that's what we're saying?" Vertus' eyes light up with mischief as the rest of us nod. "The tech and hacking duo I've been talking to about helping once I have the company up and running may be able to dig up some more information. I'll send them a message."

"How's that going? Do you have a name for it yet?" I ask, curious about his plans.

"Eh, no. I'm toying with a few ideas. Shade Sec. Boots on the Ground or B.O.T.G. Neither feel right, though. The main issue is finding premises," he says, stirring his ice cream. "I have no interest in owning multiple buildings. We'll get jobs at all hours of the day and night, so I don't want to have to travel far if I get a call once I'm in bed."

"Finding somewhere would be easier if our Anchor would have some opinions on location, square footage, anything really," Atticus adds with a playful smirk. I duck my head, attempting to hide behind my hair. "Pol, I'm teasing. We'd love your input, but I also can understand wanting to wait." He reaches out across the table and tucks my hair behind my ear.

"I can't add any money to the pot, and what if you buy somewhere and the other members of the Sept don't like it? Or they feel slighted because they didn't contribute to the purchase? Or—"

"Ember, breathe," Klaus says as Vertus rubs soothing circles across my lower back. "Between the three of us, we have more than enough money. Hell, my trust alone could

probably cover it. It would leave the account empty, but I never planned to live off that money anyway.”

“Each member of your Sept, including you, will bring something unique to the bond-group. Some of us have money, some won’t. That doesn’t mean any one person is more important than another,” Atticus states before looking at Vertus who nods.

“I’ve been pushy, and I apologise for that.” Vertus’ hand on my lower back stills as he tugs me into his side for a hug. “How about instead of showing you everything, I go through the list of potential properties with Atticus and Klaus, then once we have a short list, we’ll show you them?”

“Yeah, I think I can handle that,” I agree before returning my focus to my ice cream.

“Cool, glad that’s settled,” Klaus smiles. He’s oozing curiosity as he turns his gaze back to Vertus. “So what’s this about a hacker duo?”

“Precisely what I said,” Vertus says as he leans back into the bench seat. “Two individuals I’m hoping will agree to work with my company.”

“Okay, but why help. Why not hire them? And how can they help?” It’s Atticus rather than Vertus who answers Klaus’ questions.

“Well, hackers tend to be freelance. They take the jobs they want, they have their own moral and ethical code. As to why we need them...” he trails off, tilting his head from side to side as he debates his wording. “Some jobs will be more covert than others. We may have need for cameras to be looped or blueprint access.”

“Some retrieval jobs aren’t about physical people, objects, or data,” Vertus clarifies. I listen intently as the two of them answer Klaus’ questions, impressed with how well they work together. They don’t quite finish each other’s sentences, but it’s clear working together is second nature to them.

“Anyway,” Vertus says, casting a glance at me. “We should probably change topic before our Anchor falls asleep from

boredom.”

“I’m not bored.” I sit up straighter, twisting slightly in my seat to look at him. “I’m interested in what you plan to do. You’ll be helping people who need it. That’s important. I know firsthand what it’s like to hope for a rescue, no matter how improbable. If the hackers agree to help, then that’s one step closer to being someone else’s miracle.”

His eyes soften at my words and leans in, dropping a kiss on my forehead. “You’re our miracle, Ember.” He smiles at the blush that takes over my cheeks before shifting back in his seat and focusing on the last of his ice cream. “Besides, I think Resource will be more open to negotiating since Rui can vouch for me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, glancing from Vertus to Atticus and Klaus. The latter has a frown marring his brows in the same confusion I feel.

“Rui, aka Ghost, is the vice president of the Hounds of Charon.” I nod, waiting for him to explain what that has to do with the hacker. “Resource is also a patched member of the Hounds,” V explains, and the world almost feels like it becomes one step smaller.

“Which means Helios has the hacker’s ear too,” Atticus points out, causing Vertus to frown and Klaus to chuckle.

“Oof, so you need to make nice with the stalkery, note leaving doctor? Good luck with that.”

I open my mouth to disagree that Helios isn’t that bad but stop myself. Why would I defend him to my Sept? Shaking off the thought, I relax and listen to the three men discuss movies and other date ideas. I get the strong impression that after this morning’s scene with Skylar, they want to keep me out of the house as much as possible. Which is surprisingly fine with me. I don’t like the distance growing between Skylar and me, but I don’t think it’s something I can fix alone.

## CHAPTER 14

# EMBER



“It’s Friday, which means?” Skylar prompts, walking backwards towards the car park as we leave the Institute after another long week. At least his mood has improved. He’s not packing my bags, but he’s been helping me look through Vertus’ shortlist of properties. It’s a step in the right direction.

“It’s the weekend?” I hedge. “And Atticus won’t torture me with early morning training?”

Rui grins at me, shaking his head, while Zane and Aaron chuckle as we follow my brother back to his car.

“Torture seems a bit of an extreme descriptor, Miss Ward.” I wince at Atticus’ voice, turning slowly to face him. “Besides, it’s Vertus’ turn to run your morning session tomorrow.” He smirks knowingly as a sigh of resignation leaves me.

“When does Klaus get his session, Ember?” Crannick calls as he walks past. “You should be spreading—” A large blast of water cuts off the end of his sentence as it slaps him across his face.

“I’m not telling you this again, Felix. Don’t talk shit about Ember. You’ve never even tried to get to know her. She’s my Anchor, and I *thought* you were my friend. Guess I was wrong, huh?” Klaus appears from behind Aaron and Zane, the height of the twins having blocked him from view.

“Klaus...” I have no idea how I’m going to finish my sentence, but he cuts me off before I have to come up with anything.



“No, Ember, I’m over this shit. People don’t get to insinuate shit about you when *sharing* mates is a core fucking foundation of our society.” Klaus doesn’t take his eyes from his friend—former friend. “Stop acting like a twat-faced bog monster who does nothing but what his mummy says.”

“Leave my mother out of this, Becer,” Crannick snarls, leaning towards Klaus, fists clenching at his sides.

“Sure. As soon as you leave my Anchor alone,” Klaus says, crossing his arms over his chest. If looks could kill, well, Crannick might not be dead but definitely maimed.

“That’s enough, gentlemen,” Atticus says, stepping up to the two men. “It’s Friday night. I doubt either of you wants to be stuck here and detained for unsanctioned fighting. If you need to work out your differences, I’m more than happy to pair you up in class for the foreseeable future.”

Felix curls his lip, sneering at Klaus before walking away.

“You make it really hard to not like you when you stick up for her like that,” Skylar grouses, and I burst out laughing at the exaggerated pout on his face.

“Yeah, yeah. You never really disliked *me*. You disliked my last name and who I’m related to.” Klaus swaggers back over to us, throwing an arm around my shoulder. “What were you saying about it being Friday?” he asks my brother.

“Friday night is movie night. Ember has *so* many to catch up on.”

There are so many movies from before *The Change*, but I don’t think anyone could watch them all. It feels like Skylar is willing to try, though. I like watching them; some of the stories are captivating and suck me in. The escape from reality is nice, and after this past week, I’m looking forward to switching my brain off and getting lost in the fictional world on screen.

“Just so we’re clear, Klaus, I am pairing you with Crannick for the next week,” Atticus declares, joining the group again. He glances around briefly, checking who else is still present. “She’s my Anchor too, and I’m not fond of the attitude the

Representatives' children are vocalising. If anyone wants to exert their frustrations in class? I'll see the match comes up."

"Won't you get in trouble for that?" Rui asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Maybe, but this was only a temporary assignment. I have another job I can take if need be." Atticus shrugs, exuding an air of nonchalance. "Enjoy movie night. Text me what you decide to watch." His hazel eyes bore into me. "Royce said he has the next books in. We can go pick them up whenever you're ready."

My eyes light up at the prospect of going back to the labyrinth of books where we shared our first kiss. I run a finger against my lips, remembering how he sucked and nipped it. A repeat performance would be amazing. "Tomorrow?" I ask, the husky quality to my voice has his eyes darkening with heated desire. Someone coughs, and I clear my throat, and when I continue, my voice is back to its normal cadence. "I don't have much left of the current book."

"Tomorrow. *After* your training with V." Atticus smirks as I scrunch my nose, expressing my feelings on the early morning training. The other guys laugh, and Klaus boops my nose.

"It could be worse. You could have to go see Doctor Helios for another exhilarating round of silence."

"No, that's Sunday. He'll stop scheduling them at some point, though, right?" It's a rhetorical question. I don't expect any of them to answer.

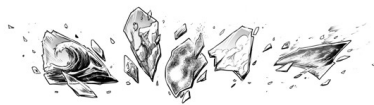
"I've already said this to you, Sprite, but I'll say it again. Talking about shit can help." Aaron ruffles my hair. "Entirely your decision. I just don't think he'll give up after only three sessions."

No, Helios is stubborn and determined. I actually think I might enjoy his company if we interacted outside of the mandated sessions. There are times when I think I remember him. Hazy dreams of a boy outside the gates, waiting in the shadows of the trees to quietly offer humour and comfort. It's

probably wishful thinking. My brain trying to create a presence that wasn't purely negative prior to V arriving at EvoGen.

Still, I can hold onto the hope, however minuscule, that he'll stop insisting on these therapy sessions sooner rather than later.

"Maybe. Anyway, movie night. What are we starting with? And can we get ice cream on the way home?" I ask, deflecting to a more pleasant topic.



Gorging on triple chocolate fudge ice cream, I fall into something of a food coma during the second movie of the night. I'm not sure how long I've been asleep when a panicked shout wakes me.

Before I can move, every muscle in my body tenses. Magical energy crackles through my veins, pulling a ragged gasp from my lips at the sensation. I fight to turn my head, searching for anyone else who might be in the dark cinema room.

What the hell is happening?

At least it's not painful. It's definitely not pleasant either, but it's bearable, minus not being able to move. Static white noise drowns out all other sounds. Panic claws at my chest, but I breathe through it. Pins and needles dance across my limbs as a cold sweat breaks out all over my body.

*Focus. Breathe.*

This is not the worst situation I've woken up to. I survived Dom and EvoGen's experiments. This is tolerable. I just have to keep breathing. The pain will subside. It will get better.

*Why can't I move?*

What could be causing this? My time at EvoGen flashes when they'd drug me with paralytics, invade my mind. This

isn't like that, though. I fell asleep in the cinema room with Skylar, Aaron, Zane, Rui, and Klaus. Not one part of me believes any of them would put me in harm's way.

My magic coils, writhing within me like it's a wild animal that's been caged for too long. It's desperate for freedom to run without restriction. Chains and shackles are cast aside, so it can fulfil its true, full potential.

Warmth overtakes me; the fire magic that's always been so quick to answer me now comes unbidden. Flames flicker under the surface of my skin, heating me from the inside.

A whimper escapes as fear and panic that I'll set the house on fire overwhelm me. I hope someone warns Sam, Nik, and Tavon. I'll never forgive myself if my magic causes them harm. The static fades, letting in sounds from around the room.

"This isn't possible. It's too soon," Sam utters with a gasp.

"Clearly, it's not. They must have been born early," Nik's gruff voice states.

*Who was born early? Skylar and me? Is that what this is?*

"Arguing their birth date isn't going to help them now!" Tavon snaps at his bond-mates.

"Ember's burning up! Her skin is fucking glowing," Klaus calls out.

"Shit. Shit, her affinity is fire. We need to get them both outside." Sam's voice gets closer, and a mewling whimper of pain escapes me. After leaving EvoGen, I didn't think I'd experience pain like this again. No one mentions coming of age hurts.

"Klaus, you're *sure* you're called to her? If you touch her and you're not, she'll burn you to a crisp," Tavon demands, taking charge.

"I'm sure," Klaus replies with so much confidence. "It's pulling me to her."

A hand rests on my forearm, cooling the raging lava inside me, but then it's gone. Another whimper leaves me at the loss as the heat from my magic intensifies.

“Aaron, don’t touch her! She could burn you. Fuck, we need Atticus or Vertus,” Tavon berates his nephew. Internally, something tries to scream that I’d never harm him. That I need the comfort his touch gave.

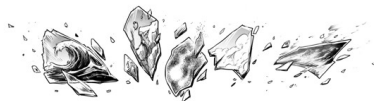
“I can carry her on my own. She’s still tiny. Focus on getting Skylar out before he floods the room.”

The others must agree with Klaus. No one says anything else as cool, soothing arms slide under my knees and behind my back. Blinking, I look up at the hard set of Klaus’ jaw. Another small whimper slips out, drawing his attention. His dark blue eyes meet mine, his face softening instantly.

“I got you, Freckles. How’s a dip in the lake sound? The water will help cool you off. Sound good? Blink once for yes or twice for no.”

I blink once. The prospect of the freezing lake water dousing the fire raging beneath my skin pulls another strained noise from me.

“Shh, Ember, I know. I know you’re uncomfortable and probably freaked out. I bet no one explained this bit yet. It’s just a little longer. I promise you’ll be okay. Once your fire settles, you’ll be able to move and talk again.”



## VERTUS

I fight the urge to sigh. Negotiations are tedious but necessary when starting up a business and attempting to recruit partners. Muscle will be easy to find. I know my Shadow-Stalkers will follow me. They made their positions and opinions clear many times over the years. Boots on the ground isn’t what my company will lack. Tech support is the issue and why I’m having a faceless meeting with two of the best.

Cracking my neck, I read over the latest message from Source. Anonymity guarantee, non-exclusivity contracts, all

are acceptable. We've already agreed to non-disclosure agreements.

"I have a few hypothetical scenarios for you to consider," I say into the microphone, waiting for either Source or Resource to reply.

"The anonymity clause will be solid, but there may be cases where we need a tech expert on the ground. Are you willing to comply with that? Or, in those instances, would I need to hire someone else?"

Text scrolls across the screen.

THIS WOULD NEED TO BE DETERMINED  
ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS TO BEGIN  
WITH.

HOWEVER, AS LONG AS ALL PARTIES  
INVOLVED SIGN AND ADHERE TO THE  
CONTRACTS AND ANONYMITY CLAUSE, IT  
SHOULDN'T BE A PROBLEM.

"Thank you. I appreciate the fact you want to keep yourselves safe. There will be missions that require your presence on site, but they will only be assigned to a single team, limiting exposure of your identities."

THAT IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.

DOES THAT CONCLUDE TONIGHT'S  
AGENDA? OR DID YOU WISH TO DISCUSS  
SOMETHING ELSE?

"Atticus, anything you wish to add?" I ask, looking away from the screen to the man by my side.

"No, I think we can end tonight's meeting there. Once we have the contracts drawn up, we can schedule a time to go over the final parameters and sign on the dotted line."

AGREED.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.  
GOODNIGHT, GENTLEMEN.

The messaging site shuts down, and the monitor flickers as we're booted from the server or network. I have no idea, which is why we need to recruit individuals with the skill sets of Source and Resource. My mind briefly wonders if they knew each other before or after picking their hacker names.

Atticus' phone blasts a custom ringtone at the same time as mine vibrates across the desk.

'Ward House' flashes across my screen, and I grab the device up, answering at the same time as Atticus.

"It's Ember. We got the dates wrong. Both her and Skylar are manifesting. *Now.*" Nik's harried voice fills my ears before I can utter a greeting. "Get your arse here asap."

He hangs up, and I look over at Atticus, my friend's face slightly pale. "Shit," he breathes out, scrambling to his feet and shoving his phone in the back pocket of his trousers.

I grab my keys from the desk, jumping to my feet, glad I hadn't removed my boots since returning to my suite.

"Let's go. Our Anchor needs us," I bark, marching towards the door.

The drive from my hotel to the Ward's house takes a fraction of the usual time as I ignore every road law created. Atticus sends his magic signature to the gates as soon as we're close enough for them to register it. My fingers tap frantically on the wheel as we wait excruciating moments for the gates to open.

Just a little more. I don't need them to open fully, just enough to fit the car through.

"Pull round the back. It'll be tight, but they'll have taken her to the lake," Atticus says, his voice full of the same urgency I feel.

Tyres screech as I floor the accelerator, no longer willing to wait to reach Ember. The wing mirrors clip the gate as we speed up the driveway. I'll deal with any damage tomorrow—

or the day after. Pulling on the handbrake, we jerk to a stop at the back patio. The belt jerks me back into my seat when I try to exit the car before unbuckling. Rectifying my error, I run after Atticus as he leads the way down to the lake.

“Ember!” I cry out, desperation slamming into my chest at the sight of her limp body in Klaus’ arms.

“Help me get her into the water. Even being called to her, I’m starting to blister,” the younger male shouts, snapping me into action.

*There’s no reason to panic. This is all perfectly normal, especially with a fire affinity,* I keep reminding myself. My twin had a similar reaction when we came of age. Admittedly, we were inside the caves, so the crystals absorbed all the excess magic, limiting the potential danger and damage he could inflict.

Atticus curses as he takes Ember from Klaus. The scent of singed fabric wafts on the breeze, and I notice the younger male’s top is blackened where he had contact with Ember’s skin.

The three of us work together to carry our Anchor the final stretch to the pier.

“Klaus, get in the water with me. Atticus can pass her down to us,” I order, falling back on my years commanding the Shadow-Stalkers. I’m vaguely aware of Sam and Nik manoeuvring Skylar through the water towards the centre of the lake.

“Let’s hope Skylar’s water affinity counters Ember’s fire, or any fish in this lake are gonna have a really shit evening,” Klaus mutters before jumping into the water.

As soon as Ember touches the lake, steam rises and a hiss fills the air. Flakes of fabric drift away as Ember’s body temperature continues to climb, destroying her clothes.

“Atticus, she’ll need new clothes. These won’t survive much longer,” I say, resting my hand gingerly under Ember’s neck.



“I’ve got stuff,” Aaron calls out as he and Zane come into view. “We grabbed clothes for everyone.” His eyes never waver from Ember’s face as she floats between Klaus and me.

“What happened? I didn’t think her birthday was for another month?” Atticus asks, crouching on the pier and using his air magic to dissipate the steam surrounding us.

“We were watching movies. Eating ice cream, just chillin’,” Aaron explains. “Then Skylar locked up. He went all rigid and made this weird choking gasp sound.” He shudders. “It was... fuck. I don’t know. Then Ember made a similar noise, but not...” He runs his hands over his face and into his hair.

“They must have been born early.” Tavon’s quiet voice drifts from behind Aaron. “The dates don’t match up. Whether they were premature or the Carmichaels induced, it doesn’t matter now. They’re both of age.” His light green eyes lock onto me, and I swallow at the stark fear revealed in his gaze. “The Representatives will be even more invested in them both, and so will EvoGen and their ilk.”

“More? You make it sound like they’ve been watching Skylar already,” Zane grunts with a heavy frown.

“Of course they have. He wasn’t born under their care, and both he and Ember are extraordinarily powerful,” Tavon says.

“Yeah, but that’s just the bloodlines. Isn’t it?” Klaus asks, gaze flicking between us all.

“We didn’t pick an egg donor from a powerful line. They gave us *many* recommendations while suggesting we pick a different donor to ‘give our children the best chance at achieving their potential.’ It did not go down well when we selected outside of their suggestions.”

“So, what? You think the Carmichaels did something to Skylar and Ember? To make them powerful?” I ask, attempting to follow his logic.

“EvoGen are looking for ways to unlock the powers of the Changed in humans. Perhaps not a first step, but definitely an early one would be to enhance Changed offspring. If they can

identify the genomes to increase a Changed's reserve pool, they could get access to volunteers." Tavon looks down at me. "How many Changed do you know who would jump at the chance of being more powerful? And how many of those would do so at any cost?"

A stunned silence settles over our group. The lake water surrounding Klaus, Ember, and me bubbles as her temperature jumps again. The heat sears my skin, and I grit my teeth against the pain.

The water swells, pulling away from the shore, gathering around Skylar in the centre of the lake.

"That's your cue to climb out. Once he releases that wave, Ember will light up like a bonfire." Tavon reaches a hand down to help Klaus out while Atticus clasps my forearm. We gather on the pier as Sam and Nik swim back to shore. They barely make it before a pillar of water rises around Skylar, climbing to the heavens.

"Shields up!" Nik bellows as the pillar collapses in on itself, sending a tsunami-esque wave to consume the shoreline on all sides.

"Hold them!" Nik orders as we all strain to hold back the weight of the lake's contents. There's no rest after the water settles. Ember's small body glows brightly before bursting into flames, just like my brother's did. Her fire burns brighter than his did, though, and I send my shadow magic out to try and conceal the majority of the flare she emits. It's a futile attempt. Even if I can shield Ember's column of fire, it's unlikely no one noticed the entire contents of the lake rising up as it did a moment ago.

"If the Conclave didn't know they were powerful, they will now. No way that display hasn't been reported," Rui mutters, confirming my own thoughts.

"Let's get them out and to their beds. They'll need to rest for at least a day," Sam sighs, looking exhausted. "I'll have to inform Doctor Helios that Ember won't be attending therapy this week."

That is a conversation I do not envy him.

## CHAPTER 15

# HELIOS



Rage. Uncontrollable, all-consuming rage courses through my body at the words my assistant relays to me.

“Say. That. Again,” I demand, forcing each word out through my gritted teeth. I couldn’t have heard her right. She must be mistaken.

“S-Samuelson Ward called to postpone his daughter’s therapy session for tomorrow. I-it would appear she and her twin came of a-age tonight.”

“Leave!” The word is a seething command as I all but spit it at her. She squeaks like a frightened mouse before scurrying away.

I want to shout. Scream. To give voice to the anger at not being there for my pet. Fire affinity is one of the most volatile. There’s no comforting the Changed like there is with the other elements. The inferno raging beneath her skin would burn any not called by the fates and crystals to be in her Sept. Were any of the others of her Sept there? Did they soothe her? Would they know how to?

Possibly. The thought doesn’t appease me. No, nor will it appease my brother to find out Skylar came of age without the proper precautions. What damage will the two of them have wrought as their powers manifested for the final time? Most would fear for their surroundings. Water and fire can easily bring down buildings or lay waste to the scenic countryside. But I’m more concerned with the individual. Specifically,

Ember. My brother will worry over Skylar enough for an entire coop of mother hens once he knows what's happened.

With a deep breath, I acknowledge that it's time to be the bearer of bad news. I shed my white coat, hanging it on the hook at the back of my office door as my phone rings. The shrill sound disturbing the stillness of the room.

"Doctor Helios," I answer with a grunt, unimpressed with the delay in my exit. I have no time for the whims of the Representatives. My Anchor, my pet, needs me.

"They manifested. He manifested, and I wasn't there," my brother growls. "Ghost was there. *Ghost*. Skylar is fucking *mine*, and my VP was there for him instead of me."

"*Why didn't he call?*" The question flies from me in a snarl.

"He couldn't. What was he meant to do? Excuse himself to make a call? That would have been suspicious *and* out of character. Besides... I, er, haven't exactly told him or the others about Sky and me. Or you and Ember. They know you're obsessed with her, but not about... well, you know."

I grunt, telling him I understand. "Now might be the time to come clean to them, brother. You've hidden it this long."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I will." He sighs. "There's just too many factors." He pauses, and my impatience grows. I'm contemplating hanging up when he finally speaks again. "Are you heading over there? Will you check on Skylar as well as Ember? I need to know he's okay, but I have to explain everything to the guys first, and that won't be a quick chat," Sketch mumbles the last sentence.

"I was on my way to get you before going to the Ward house. If I don't need to detour to the compound, I'll go right to them." I fish my keys from my pocket, twirling the keyring around my finger once. "Don't worry, brother. I'll take good care of both our futures." I hang up, not waiting for him to say anything else. There's no need to exchange goodbyes or other time consuming niceties. Sketch is my twin. He knows my

eccentricities better than anyone else. He shares enough of them with me.

I lock up quickly, not even pausing to check in on Dom like I usually would, before marching purposefully to the exit.

The occasional squeak of my boots on the linoleum floor is the only sound in the hallway as I navigate to the elevator. A side door opens behind me. Someone calls out, but I continue on my way. My sole focus is on reaching Ember, checking her over, and healing away her exhaustion. The *click, click, click* of heels quickly approaching has my lip pulling up in a silent snarl. There isn't time for more interruptions.

“Doctor Helios, sir, before you go, Representative—”

“It can wait,” I cut off my assistant's words. “It's late, and I have a family matter to attend to.”

“I-I'm sorry, sir. They were really quite insistent,” she stammers as I growl my frustrations in the back of my throat. “They just want access to some additional reports on some of your patients.”

“Is Miss Ward's file amongst those requested?” I ask as we reach the elevator, and I hit the call button with far more force than necessary.

“N-no, sir.”

“Fine. Give them the reports. If they require any terminology to be simplified, they'll need to wait a few days. I'll be back in on Monday.” I jam my finger on the call button again. Why is the damn thing taking so long to descend?

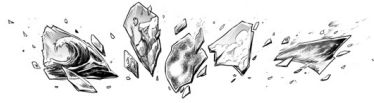
“You're taking the whole weekend off?” she asks, not masking her shock.

“Yes, Greta, I have a family matter that needs my attention for the next two days.” I step into the lift, slamming my finger against the button for the ground floor.

“I-it's Gretchen, sir, not Greta. My name, that is,” she murmurs softly before the doors close and the lift ascends.

“Greta, Gretchen, I was close enough.” I shrug before pushing the woman from my mind. Ember deserves my full

focus and attention. And no matter what, I intend to ensure she always has it.



## AARON

*You're sure you're called to her? If you touch her and you're not, she'll burn you to a crisp.*

Uncle Tavon's words play over and over as I stare down at my hand. The hand that touched Ember as her magic coursed through her at full strength.

Undamaged.

No blisters. No pain. No redness. Nothing. The skin is completely unmarked.

Am I called to Ember?

*If you touch her and you're not, she'll burn you to a crisp.*

I'm not burnt. I touched her.

I'm hers.

A smile takes over as the realisation settles within me. I hadn't acknowledged my hope that I might be called to Ember. There's something about her that stirs my protective side, drawing it to the surface. But then again, it could've been a fluke. Maybe her core temperature wasn't hot enough to burn when I touched her?

I'll have to wait until after my birthday in less than two weeks or this month's discernment ceremony. It's probably best to wait for the crystal to confirm the match. If I get my hopes up and it was a fluke... that wouldn't be fair to whoever my bond-mate is.

"Aaron?" Uncle Tavon grips my shoulder, giving me a small shake.

"Huh? What? Did you say something, T?" I ask, blinking up at him from my position on the sofa. Tavon's brow furrows,



his eyes scrutinising me.

“I asked if you’re okay. You touched her after I told Klaus the danger. Did she burn you?”

“No, I’m fine. I don’t think her skin had taken on enough heat to do damage.” I raise both hands for him to see. “Guess I’m a little tired maybe?” I run a hand over my face, rubbing my eyes to clear the gritty feeling from them. “That was intense. I didn’t realise the final manifestation would be so... all-consuming.”

“It can be overwhelming,” he nods. “It’s rarely that chaotic, though. We were caught off guard tonight, not knowing it was their birthday. For Zane and you, we’ll have preventative measures in place. You’ll be in the caves, and the crystals absorb the excess magic. It’s always more intense with a fire affinity.” Uncle T runs a hand over his bald head as his eyes lose some of their focus.

“Right. Yeah, that’s good. I imagine my earth affinity could trigger an earthquake or something.”

Tavon nods, his full attention back on me. “And Zane’s air affinity could cause a tornado.”

“So the Changed are all walking talking ticking time bombs? No wonder humans hate us,” I grunt. The full ramifications of what we could cause if we lost control hits me.

“Some humans do. Not all. It’s easy to fear the unknown, the different, especially when you can’t control it,” Sam says, walking through the door from the main entrance. He heads around the island counter towards the fridge. “Everyone for beer? I have the feeling I’m going to need a drink before our *guest* arrives.”

“Guest?” Uncle T frowns at his husband. “What guest?”

“I left a message with Doctor Helios’ assistant. He was with a patient.” Sam pops the cap off his beer, taking a large drink. “He just called me back. Apparently, he’s on his way to ensure Ember and Skylar haven’t suffered any undue side effects at not having the standard safety measures around

them.” He glares at the bottle before draining the remaining contents. “He makes it sound like I’m at fault. How were we to know they’d been born early? How?” Sam slams the empty beer bottle on the counter.

The gate alarm rings out, stopping Tavon or me from attempting to answer Sam. I climb to my feet and move to the control panel, checking the camera.

“Well, that’s different,” I say, staring at the feed.

“What?” Tavon and Sam move to join me, and I shift so they can see the lone rider astride an impressive-looking motorbike.

“The doctor really is a Hound, after all,” Uncle T murmurs. “Let him in. I’ll let Nik know the *good* doctor is here.”

I send the command through the system to open the gates for Helios to ride through before setting them to close again. Sam wanders back into the kitchen, grabbing another beer.

“I don’t think I can handle that crazy bastard tonight.”

I’m not sure if he’s talking to himself or me. Possibly a bit of both. I let out an acknowledging grunt as I head past Sam through the main entrance to the front door. The rumbling roar of Helios’ motorbike grows louder as he approaches the house, and I pull the door open for him as soon as it cuts off.

“Where is she?” he demands, kicking the stand down and climbing off.

“Hi to you too.” Rolling my eyes at his death glare, I point to the stairs. “She’s in her room resting.”

“Alone? You left her *alone*?”

“No. Her future bond-mates are with her. Atticus, Vertus, and Klaus. My brother and Nik are with Skylar in his room. There are six men here who have all been through this process before—”

“With the proper safety measures and precautions. They would have been sequestered in the crystal caves before they risked manifesting. Not out in the open and vulnerable.”

“And how would you have handled the situation, Doctor?” Sam asks from behind me. “We didn’t have their correct date of birth. Should we have had them live in the caves for the entire year?”

“Of course not. That wouldn’t be sanitary, there’s no plumbing,” Helios states, and I can’t for the life of me tell if he’s serious or attempting to make a joke.

“Um, so why are you here?” I ask the doctor. “They’re both fine, just tired, so why do you think they need you?”

“The crystals in the caves help stem the flow of magic and absorb it. Without them, a Changed’s magic has been known to cause permanent damage,” he says slowly, like he’s talking to a child. Arrogant prick. “Fried nerve endings are the most common side effect. I’d say Ember especially has endured enough in her life and doesn’t need additional pains.” He levels us all with a challenging glare, but I doubt any of us would disagree with him on that last statement.

“And you can heal something that would otherwise be permanent?” Sam scoffs.

“My affinity is healing. I’m the best, so yes. If anyone can heal your children, it’s me. If Ember wished it, I could remove every scar and blemish on her body. I could restore her missing ovary and replenish all her eggs.”

“Why didn’t you, then?” I ask, watching the doctor closely.

“Because she didn’t wish it. If she wants the reminders on her skin, I won’t take them from her. If she ever changes her mind, I’ll be there to erase every bit of evidence of their abuse and mistreatment.”

“Why do you care so much for our daughter?” Tavon asks, making me jump as I hadn’t noticed him join us.

“Irfan didn’t tell you?”

Confusion fills me, and I see a flash of the same emotion cross Tavon and Sam’s faces as they glance at each other.

“Tell us what?” Uncle T asks.

Helios turns his bright, cold eyes on my uncle, and I suppress a shiver at the flash of something unhinged behind his gaze. “She’s my Anchor.”

*Well, shit.*

## CHAPTER 16

# EMBER



Every part of my body tingles with residual pain. Burning, sharp, agonising pain fluctuates through me as I float in darkness. This place of sight deprivation is almost like an old friend, welcoming me into its embrace.

“Is she humming?” a voice asks in the distance.

“Yeah, she is. Do you recognise the song?” This voice sounds closer. I should know the owner, but his name feels like sand running through my fingers. It’s there on the tip of my tongue.

“It’s kind of depressing... bit morbid sounding,” the first voice responds, each word ringing more clearly. “She’s not dying, is she? She can’t fucking die.”

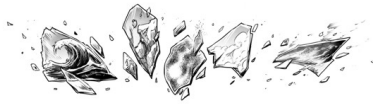
The darkness shifts, growing lighter as hands grip my shoulders.

“Ember, love, you’re scaring BK—” The third voice is interrupted by the second.

“BK? What the fuck nickname is that, Vertus?”

“—I know you hate it when I call him that. Come on, Little Phoenix, rise from these ashes for me. Open those deep baby blues.”

“Her eyes are not *baby* blue. Do you know your Anchor at all?” a fourth male all but growls. Waves of disapproval roll off of him. “Now, move out of the way so I can heal her.”



“Are you sure you two should be going to classes? You only surfaced from your rooms yesterday, and you still look a little peaky,” Anya fusses as Aaron takes over packing the lunches she made for us.

“We would’ve been fine to get up earlier, but Dad was adamant we stay put. If he wants me to be lazy and sleep away the weekend, who am I to argue?” Skylar smiles, spreading his arms out and giving a defeated shrug. Sam’s laughter rings out from the dining table.

“Yes, I’m sure it was a chore for both of you. You needed it. Even with Doctor Helios stopping by, your bodies went through a lot. Rest is the best medicine, in this instance,” Nik says, ruffling Skylar’s hair as he walks past. “Don’t worry, though. Atticus and Vertus will be here each morning to give you additional training. We’re not going to give the Representatives any excuse to take you away again,” he mumbles the last part as he readies his coffee.

“Your lunch, Sprite.” Aaron passes me the containers, his fingers brushing mine. At the touch, sparks dance along my veins, and I bite my tongue to keep from reacting. The sensation is a more intense version of when I first touched Atticus. I shove the food into my bag and hurry out of the kitchen, waving goodbye to Sam, Nik, and Anya.

It could be a fluke. Static electricity would give the same sensation, right?

I can’t be called to Aaron. Not that Aaron is a bad guy, he’s not. He’s charming in his own way, and he gives the best hugs. He makes me feel warm, safe, protected, but it would devastate Skylar. I can’t hurt my brother like that by taking away his friend.

Zane could be in Skylar’s bond group, though.

“Earth to Pipes, come in, Pipes.” Skylar nudges me, pulling me from my whirlwind thoughts.

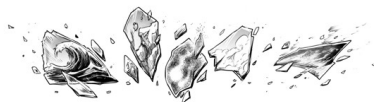
“Hmm, what? Sorry, I spaced out.”

He frowns down at me, concern oozing from his very being. “Em, you okay? If you’re still tired, you can stay home and rest some more.”

“No. No, I’m okay.” I wave a hand, dismissing his worries. “Honestly, La-La, I’m fine. I just got lost in my head. I want to go today. Myra and Willow have been practising, and I think they’re going to use offensive magic in Atticus’ class. Plus, Klaus is fighting Felix.”

“Sparring. Officially, we spar in class, not fight,” Zane’s deep voice rumbles from behind me as he opens the passenger door for me.

“Yeah, but that’s semantics. Klaus and Felix will be fighting. They both feel they have something to prove,” Aaron points out before shrugging and climbing into the back seat. “Now, come on, let’s go, or we’ll be late.”



The week doesn’t pass without hiccups. Myra and Willow opting to use offensive magic isn’t something everyone at the Institute approves of. Dean Calvert supervises each lesson after hearing about their ‘antics’ on Monday. His expression turns more and more sour, as by Friday, Myra wins her match. And the other two female Changed in our class ask about learning to wield offensive magic too.

Meanwhile, I’ve been pushing my worry that at least one of the Greene twins will be called to my Sept to the back of my mind. And avoiding their touch, which has been harder to do. Apparently, my aversion to touch from my childhood has faded, especially around the men in this house and my Sept.

Since coming of age and feeling the full force of the call, my body has been very loud and clear on how touch-starved I



am. Whenever I'm around one of my men—my future Sept—my skin crackles, and all I want is to crawl into their arms, their laps, and their beds.

I don't, though. There's a small part of me that's worried the discernment crystal won't match us next week. I just have to wait seven days until the ceremony, and then I'll know who's called to me.

I just need to distract myself. Which would be much easier if I weren't in the dark cinema room with Atticus, Vertus, and Klaus. Just us. Aaron and Zane turn twenty-five tomorrow and left earlier tonight to head to the caves. Skylar went out with Rui, mumbling something about bowling. No one gets *that* nervous about bowling, though.

The crackle of the call races over my skin once more, eliciting a full body shiver.

"How did you cope with this?" I ask Atticus, Vertus, and Klaus, giving up the pretence of watching the movie they picked out.

"Cope with what?" Atticus twists in his seat to look at me.

"The call. When it's not crackling over me like electricity, it's like an itch under the skin in an out of reach place. How are you not scratched raw?"

"It's only like that now because you're of age. When you were under twenty-five, it wasn't so insistent," Atticus answers, and Vertus grunts his agreement.

"It's only for a week, Ember. Once you know who the other three are, you can schedule the bonding or reject them... us," Vertus says, whispering the last word so quietly, I don't think he meant for me to hear.

Klaus puts his arm around me, a content sigh leaving him as the call settles at our contact. "We'll hug more to appease the fates until you make a decision," he murmurs, dropping a kiss to the top of my head. "Watch the movie. Distractions help."

Two movies later, the call is a pleasant buzz coiling deep within me. Heavy breaths of sleep drift from Atticus and

Vertus, who are in front of Klaus and me. Desire spikes as callused fingers brush my waist under my top. The roughness sends a shiver coursing through my body, reigniting the call with fervour. I shift slightly, trying to ease the sudden need for more without moving away from Klaus.

“This okay?” he asks quietly, not disturbing the others of my soon-to-be Sept. With a nod, I snuggle back into his side, keeping my eyes on the movie. His nose trails the side of my face before his soft lips press a kiss to the base of my ear.

“You’re amazing, you know that, Em?” Klaus murmurs, kissing my jaw this time. “Your strength. Kindness. Compassion.” Another kiss follows each word he lists. Tilting my head back, I look up at him.

“Hmm, I think you’re biased,” I say with a smile before glancing around the cinema room. “I think you all are. You ignore the flaws.”

“No. No, we see them, acknowledge them, but we don’t let you hide behind them.” Klaus rests his forehead against mine, staring into my eyes with emotions I didn’t expect to see. At least not yet.

“Klaus.” His name is a breathy whisper on my lips before his mouth crashes against them. Heat, desire, want, all pour through, wrapped in unbridled passion as his tongue caresses mine.

The sound of a body shifting in one of the other chairs has us pulling apart. Sheepishly, I glance around the room to see if anyone is awake or paying us any attention. Subconscious magic strokes against my mental shield. A quick look at Klaus, and his subtle nod lets me know it’s him, and I open my mind.

*Can I touch you?*

My breath catches in my throat, desire shooting through me at the huskiness of his mental voice. Biting my bottom lip, I nod.

His smile is devilishly handsome as he reaches out, pulling my lip free from my teeth.

*The only one biting that lip tonight is me, Freckles.*

His fingers run along the waistband of my leggings, tracing swirling patterns that have me craving friction.

*Relax, pretty girl. Watch the film, and let me help you feel good. Try not to wake the others... unless you want to.*

Klaus kisses my neck as his hand dips lower into my leggings and underwear. He hums softly against my ear as his fingers slip through my folds.

*So wet for me, my Anchor. Will you come for me? Will you give me that gift? Watching you reach the highs of ecstasy at my hand would make me the happiest man.*

How am I meant to focus on the movie when he's whispering things like *that* in my mind?

My back arches as he pushes first one finger, then a second inside me. The heel of his hand delivers the pressure and friction I desperately crave against my clit. Klaus takes my mouth in a toe curling kiss, smothering the salacious sounds that escape me.

*Are you ready to be shared, Ember?*

No. I give a minute shake of my head, and he hums in response, pulling my earlobe between his teeth and nipping it gently.

*Keep quiet then. Can you do that for me? Can you contain those delicious sounds?*

Yes. I nod, then bite down on the inside of my cheek as he curls his fingers inside me. Klaus massages and strokes that sensitive spot in my channel while grinding his palm into my clit.

Reaching up, I cup my hand against his jaw, revelling in the scruff of his short beard. Images of his head between my thighs, his tongue replacing his hand, flash across our shared connection. Another set depicting his hard cock thrusting into me, claiming me, and bonding me to him, follows.

Our breaths are heavy as we kiss again, tongues entangled as we taste each other. I push my hand under his T-shirt,

feeling each dip of his corded muscles and tracing each line of his abs until my hand comes to rest over his heart.

*Come for me, my Anchor. Trust me enough to shatter before me, knowing I'll always catch you.*

With his words and a final curved pump of his fingers, my orgasm explodes. Klaus steals my cry with a desperate, passion-filled kiss as my hand heats against his chest.

*That's it, Freckles. Fuck, look at you. So fucking stunning, coming undone over my hand.*

He pulls back, breaking the kiss and pulling his hand free of my leggings. Klaus brings his fingers glistening with my cum to his mouth, sucking and licking them clean. His other hand wraps around mine on his chest.

*Don't move until it cools. You taste so fucking good, Em. So good.*

“Why can't I move?” I whisper.

*Because—*

“Because you just bond-marked him, Little Phoenix. If you pull back before it heals, it'll hurt like hell.” Vertus' quiet voice snaps my attention to him. Atticus is still asleep—or pretending to be. Vertus' azure gaze sears across my skin.

“I didn't know it could happen like this,” Klaus says in an equally low tone.

“I'm not aware of it happening without full intercourse.” Vertus tilts his head to the side, a range of emotions flitting across his eyes even as his face remains neutral. “Atticus is the bookworm. He'll know better. But I can sense Ember's magic within you. It's subtle, but it's there.”

I look back at Klaus, eyes wide with the realisation that this ties us together permanently. “I'm sorry—”

Klaus' hands grip either side of my face. His thumbs stroke my cheekbones as his fingers twine into my hair.

“Don't. Don't be sorry. You are everything,” he whispers before slamming his lips to mine. His kiss consumes me. I

don't know whose mouth opens first, but suddenly, our tongues are dancing together. Teeth clash as the ferocity of passion increases.

Klaus slides his hands further back, firmly gripping my hair, pulling my head back, and exposing my neck. His lips leave mine as he trails hot open-mouthed kisses across my jaw and down my neck until he reaches my collarbone. He nips it before pulling back and resting his forehead against mine.

“Everything, Ember. You're my everything. Being bonded to you is what I want. Never apologise to me for this... unless you didn't want it?” His eyes search mine, seeking answers.

“You're not who I first thought you were,” I admit. “But that's a good thing. I want you, Klaus, and I want that date you promised me.”

His grin blinds me, and a thrum of happiness and elation that's not my own sparks inside me. “This week? I can book it in.”

I nod my agreement as Atticus snorts awake. He blinks a few times before turning in his chair. His eyes zero in on my hand against Klaus' chest.

“Well, I slept through an interesting development.”

## CHAPTER 17

# ATTICUS



*Explain why we're coming to your friend's book emporium when we could be cementing our own bonds with Ember?* Vertus questions in my mind as we walk down the road towards Royce's place. Ember and Klaus follow a few steps behind us.

"Because Ember didn't intend to bond Klaus. Neither of them were prepared to take on another set of emotions. For us, we only take on hers, but by the time she's bonded with her entire Sept, she'll have seven lots of individual emotions swirling inside her. The very thought is overwhelming to me, and it's not going to be *my* reality," I answer absently as we reach the door leading to Royce's bookstore and home. My thumb presses down on the buzzer. Once. Twice. The third time brings the grumpy bastard's voice crackling through the speaker.

"Fuck off, you shit."

"Royce, it's Atticus... and Ember," I say into the little microphone.

"Bully for you. It's two in the fucking morning. Now, piss off."

"*Royce.*" I push every ounce of urgency into his name. He releases a string of curses before sighing.

"Fine." The door unlocks, and I push it open, ushering Vertus, Klaus, and Ember inside. "Lead the way, Pol." I grin at her wide-eyed stare.

“What?” she squeaks, eyes darting between me and the staircase. “I-I think you should go first.”

“Don’t throw your Anchor at my wrath, Abacus. Get the fuck up here, and tell me why you woke me,” Royce hollers.

“Put the coffee on; we’re gonna need it,” I tell him, climbing the stairs and walking through the open door into his maze of shelves.

“Holy shit,” Klaus gasps behind me. Every inch of the space has been utilised to fit as many bookshelves in as possible. Royce doesn’t have the limitless magic of a full-blooded Changed, but I know he’s put as much as he can into this place. Each stack connects to another, some cases functioning as doors. I’ve been coming here since he opened the shop, and I still haven’t uncovered half of the secrets.

“I know, isn’t it amazing,” Ember whispers to him, her voice full of awe.

A soft smile settles on my lips as I take in the look of joy on my Anchor’s face. She really loves books, and it makes my heart happy that we share a love of reading. There’s something about falling into a good story, escaping into an epic adventure, a cosy mystery, or a steamy romance. The latter isn’t typically my choice, but they do give excellent inspiration for some bedroom scenarios. Also some outside of the bedroom. Which is something I’m looking forward to exploring with Ember when she’s ready.

“Coffee’s in the kitchen, if you remember the way,” Royce grumbles the last part. I lead the other three through the stacks of books to the small corner kitchen. Royce places a carafe of coffee on his little round dining table before leaning against the fridge and crossing his arms.

“Well?” he prompts after the four of us sit and fix ourselves a mug of coffee each.

“Ember came of age last week,” I begin, but he interrupts as expected.

“Congrats, you’re an adult,” he says, glancing at her before turning his attention back on me. “Why are you here?”



“I was about to tell you, but you cut me off to be a sarcastic dick.” I raise an eyebrow in his direction, sipping my coffee until he glares at me. “Ember bonded Klaus to her tonight. Without going to the caves, without having had a discernment ceremony. In fact, none of the prerequisites the Conclave insists upon were involved.”

“No sex? Really?” he asks with a surprised curiosity.

Ember’s cheeks flush at Royce’s blunt question. Vertus growls at my friend, but Royce waves him off.

“Oh, piss off. It’s a valid question. I’ve never heard or read of a bonding that didn’t involve the horizontal mambo.” There’s a beat of stunned silence following Royce’s statement before I groan and Klaus laughs. Ember looks mortified while Vertus continues staring daggers at the grumpy scholar.

“No, there was no *horizontal mambo*,” Klaus says. “Not that I’m opposed to it.” He winks at Ember.

“You bonded with zero sexual contact?” Royce asks, standing up straight. His gaze bounces between Klaus and Ember with curiosity.

“We didn’t say that. You asked about sex, not sexual contact,” Vertus answers, and Ember turns to look at him.

“How long were you awake?” she asks quietly.

“I was never asleep.” He shrugs, and Ember’s mouth drops open.

“Fucking hell,” Klaus mutters while I choose to tune them out, focusing on Royce.

“What books do you have for the early bondings? The ones right after The Change happened,” I ask. The Conclave attempted to restrict knowledge of those early years. They claim it’s to protect us from humans who would want to exploit us, like EvoGen. I’ve never been fully convinced, and Royce has always been vocal about thinking the excuse is a pile of horseshit. If I know my friend well, and I do, he’ll have a stash of the prohibited books here. Hidden in plain sight. Hopefully, one of them will give us some clarity on tonight’s events. I want to know why the caves have become such an

integral part of the bonds being acknowledged and cemented if they're unnecessary. Do they enhance the connection? There wasn't a burst of power like when a Changed comes of age, meaning the crystals aren't needed to stem the flow of magic. So what purpose do they hold? Royce pulls me from the questions multiplying in my mind.

"Before the Conclave formed and brought in all their rules, laws, and red tape?" I nod in answer to his questions. "I have a few... I'll set up one of the reading rooms. We'll need gloves since the pages are delicate, and no bringing your coffee near them," he says before stomping out to fetch the books.

"He's a delightful ray of sunshine, isn't he?" Klaus smirks, eyes bright with amusement. "You sure that you two are friends, Atticus?"

"Yes. That's almost the nicest he's ever been. I think it's Ember. Last time we were here, he was practically a delight. Maybe he has a little crush."

"What?" Ember squeaks, jumping in her seat to look at me. "Royce doesn't have a crush."

"Probably not, but he is decidedly nicer when you're around." I down the last of my coffee and stand, holding my hand out to Ember. "Ready to research?"

"Yeah, yeah. Come on, bookworms, we have dusty old tomes to pour over," Vertus says, pushing back his chair. "Was he serious about the gloves thing?"

"Of course he was, V. The pages will be incredibly delicate. We're lucky Royce is letting us see them." Ember shakes her head, red curls bouncing as Vertus opens his mouth to say more. "No, V. Don't compare these books to the ones Atticus and I have been reading. These will be rare, especially if they say anything that contradicts the Conclave's mandate."

"She's a smart one, your Anchor, Abacus," Royce says as he reappears in the kitchen doorway. "Room's all set up." He turns without waiting and heads into the labyrinth of books. I grab Ember's hand, relishing the zing of the call through our

joint skin. Quickening my pace to keep Royce in sight, I lead the way to the reading room.

Two large desks have been pushed together with four lamps in the centre. Each chair has a set of white cotton gloves and notepaper in front of it.

“What, no pens?” Klaus asks, taking in the space. Royce looks at the younger Changed with eyebrows raised.

“I’m sorry, I was under the illusion you were Changed and, therefore, have magic. Why would you require a pen when you can transfer a copy of the text instantly?”

“Gentlemen, please,” I groan. “Play nice.”

Klaus rolls his eyes while Royce grunts, glancing at Ember. “No promises. Now here—” He points to the small stack of books on a side table. “—these are the oldest books I have relating to the Changed. I don’t have anything that specifically looks at bondings, but some of these are journals. They document the mundane as well as the types of stuff you’ll be interested in.” He picks up a small book bound in green leather. “This is probably your best bet. Yuval’s writing is minuscule, though, and it looks like chicken scratch. But he was a stickler for detail. He wrote about everything.” He looks up, meeting all of our eyes, one after the other. “I mean *everything*. You’ll know how often he took a shit or jacked off and what he fantasised about while doing it. He was in the first bond-group, though, so...” Royce shrugs, not needing to say more.

“How did you get it? Something like that should be in a museum or fancy archives or something.” Ember’s eyes light up with intrigue, and I can see her fingers twitching, itching to reach out and take the book from Royce.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to,” Royce mutters and abruptly leaves the room. “Make sure you wear the fucking gloves. Break anything and you’re paying through the arse for the next century to cover the cost.”

We each pull on a set of the cotton gloves, pick a book—I take the green journal—and settle in for a long night of

reading.

*July 10th*

*The incessant itching continues this morning. I woke to Alice curled beside me. Since her twenty-fifth birthday two days ago, our motley group has been suffering. Not that it's her fault. No. It's likely a coincidence. The humans attacked, and we were all injured. We'll need to get moving soon before they find us. Since the flare occurred, there have been fewer and fewer sightings of females. We have to keep Alice safe. I owe her brother that much.*

*July 23rd*

*They found us.*

*We managed to get away, but we lost Jared. May his soul find peace.*

*I pulled Alice with me into these caves. They weren't here before the sun took its vengeance on our planet. Or, at least, I don't recall seeing them. The world has changed drastically since then. The sight of the British Isles sinking beneath the waves will be forever etched in my mind... I swear we could hear them scream as the waters rose.*

Morbid thoughts. Best to leave them be until we know we're safe.

These caves, though, they're full of crystals that pulsed almost with life when we entered. After getting Alice settled in one of the offshoots, I went back to wipe our blood from the entrance. It would have been a beacon to the humans, alerting them to our location.

Some days it hurts my heart that we've turned on each other, and then I remember that the world has always been like this. Neighbour against neighbour, since the dawn of time. The fact I didn't experience its cruel barbs until now just shows my privilege.

I digress.

What I wanted to note was the lack of our blood. We were all bleeding. My hands have been split raw for days, so I know I left a trail. At the very least, a handprint. But there was nothing. As though the crystals absorbed it.

July 30th

Whatever infection we have from the original attack is intensifying. If I'm away from Alice for any length of time, my skin crackles. I feel

as though I'll burn from the inside out in much the same way as when the flare struck and I received my powers. When mentioning this to the others, it's clear we're all suffering from the same affliction.

In contrast, being around her all the time, spending all this time with her, has made it clear we all have some feelings for her. If they would have developed before the flare will never be known, but I do know that, for me at least, they are real. She's spectacular. Kind, generous, but with a determination to survive that builds my own. Without Alice, I would have given up weeks, possibly months ago.

Even with our growing feelings, there is still some conflict in our group. I think we need to explore the caves further. Alice wants to flee. I think the combination of the crystals' pulses and our symptoms of infection are scaring her.

August 17th

Something happened.

Something... I hope, extraordinary.

Alice tripped as we were leaving. As one does, she threw out her hands. Instead of stopping

her fall, she cut herself.

When her blood hit the crystal, the whole cave pulsed with white light. There was a tug in my chest around my heart, and then the itching grew into a crescendo before settling, waiting. I had no idea for what until the crystal pulsed again.

With each pulse, one of the other men in our group would grunt and look at Alice with awe and desire, as though she's the anchor of their very existence on this world.

She called out to us, saying each of our names in turn. Two of the others gave in to their attraction to Alice, and she took them into her body right there. I thought I'd feel jealous, but no, the sight of them pleasing her aroused me.

God, she was glorious in her ecstasy. My dead best friend's little sister. Lying with her feels like a betrayal to him. He's dead. He won't care either way. Can't care. Yet the thought held me back, even while watching Alice with her new lovers.

She sashayed her hips as she approached me. Her mask of confidence almost had me fooled. I've known her for a long time, though. I felt

the shake in her limbs as she cupped my cheek, stroking my beard growth.

I'm sorry, my friend. My control, my restraint, snapped.

I kissed her, pulling her bottom lip between my teeth. Her hand splayed across my bare chest, right over my heart. The crystals pulsed, and I swear they sang as she branded me.

She was far more intimate with the others, but their skin remains unblemished.

They don't feel her emotions inside them.

I do.

Her joy. Her fear. Her desire and lust for me. They all swirl around my own feelings and emotions.

October 21st

The others wear her brand now.

After watching them all and listening to Alice's changing emotions, I think I understand what makes the bond. Shared trust, desire, loyalty, and a drive to make something happen are the core foundations



needed. But a physical act of attraction, sexual compatibility, is the catalyst.

Each time the crystals flare and Alice's hand heats, it's after I feel her drop her guard with each man. She opens the door to her heart, and they accept with a kiss or sometimes more. It's a beautiful thing to witness.

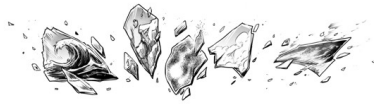
The cementing of a mate bond.

Only one of our original group remains unbound to Alice.

Iacob craves power. He always has, but he never felt the itch, the call, to Alice. Now he's insistent that she bond with him. I think it's less about her and more about how the rest of our powers have increased since she branded us.

I am not a naïve man. Eventually, those of us changed by the flare will congregate together. We'll have our own lands and government. My only prayer, if there is a deity listening, or perhaps reading would be more accurate, is that those who take the ultimate positions of power are not like Iacob.

If they are... there will be no safety for our women.



## EMBER

The journal entries Atticus found repeat in my mind as I climb into bed. Especially the man's fear that the Conclave would end up run by people like Iacob.

Selfish. Entitled. Power hungry.

I think his fears have come to fruition. Every interaction I've had with a Representative has been self-serving for them. And while that's concerning, I at least don't need to worry about them forcing me to bond with someone against my will.

Despite the reassurance Sam has given me that the bonds can't be manipulated, I am worried. Who wouldn't be after the welcome the Conclave gave me? I hold the power. My Sept has to earn their place in my heart.

It's not like some of the books I've read where anyone can claim a female. There's no assaulting me to bind me. No coercion. In this, I have the power.

Me. The girl who once was lost and captive.

It's all on me now if I'm claimed and bound to anyone. I smile at the thought, finally drifting off to sleep. The control is mine.

## CHAPTER 18

# ZANE



“You’re back!” Skylar greets Aaron and me with an enthusiastic hug as soon as we walk through the back door. “How was it? How do you feel? Did you cause any mayhem or destruction?”

“No, doofus. We’ll leave those to you,” Aaron chuckles. “I feel good. Hungry, the food was not up to Anya’s standards.” He makes a beeline for the fridge as soon as Skylar steps aside.

“Okay, I guess that’s fair. You can’t really blame Ember or me, though. I had no idea we weren’t born in November.” He jumps up onto the island counter, swinging his legs back and forth. “Shouldn’t be surprised, though. Not like Steph was a doting mother.”

“No one got hurt.” I shrug, leaning next to my step-cousin, waiting to see what Aaron pulls from the fridge to reheat. I raise a questioning brow as he pulls the ingredients out. “No leftovers?”

“Not that I feel like eating. I want fajitas.” My brother glances up at Skylar and me. “You two want some? Then help prep,” he orders with a nod to the cutting boards. “Is Ember home? I can make some for her too.”

“Yeah, I think she is,” Skylar says sheepishly as he actively avoids my gaze.

“You still not apologised for being a raging control freak? That scene in the gym was two weeks ago. What the hell, Sky?” I glare at my step-cousin. Why is he being so pigheaded

about this? He's acting as if Ember not living here means he'll never see her again. The only reason she'll have to cut off contact is if he keeps being a toxic dick. Sure there's been a tentative truce since they came of age, but there's still that underlying air in the house of walking on eggshells. And I hate it.

"Fuck off, Zane. It's not been that long, and I'm not that bad." He pauses, eventually looking at Aaron, then me. "Am I?"

"If you have to ask, you have your answer," Aaron replies in his sage-like way. As if this is a teaching moment.

My response is a simple grunt of "yes," earning a reproachful look from my twin.

"What? He was."

"You don't have to always be so blunt about it, Zane," Aaron sighs, pulling a pan from the cupboard.

"Has it really been two weeks?" Skylar asks as we cut up the peppers, onions, steak, and chicken.

Once again I grunt a "yes." Skylar falls quiet for a moment, and we continue prepping the ingredients for Aaron.

"I didn't realise so much time had passed. There's just been other... stuff going on. I... How bad did I mess up?"

"On a scale of one to ten?" Aaron looks from Skylar to me.

"Twenty," I answer. Skylar splutters, about to protest, when I shake my head. "She got in your face and raised her voice. You've hurt her. If you don't fix it soon, you'll lose her all over again. This time, it'll be no one's fault but yours."

"So do I buy her flowers or something? What do you buy girls to say sorry?"

"Well, for one, I wouldn't buy her anything yet. That's essentially saying you think her forgiveness has a price tag. You gotta do something else. Actions speak louder than words, right?" Aaron says, and Skylar looks more defeated and dejected with each word.

“Help Vertus with the house hunt.” Both Aaron and Skylar stare at me.

“I already tried that! He’s shortlisting properties on the other side of town, if not farther away. And I don’t want her to leave! Why the fuck would I help find them a new house?”

“Because, dipshit, you can suggest places nearby,” I explain slowly. “Or you can suggest somewhere that has a neighbouring house for sale too. If you’re involved and helpful, maybe they won’t move to the other side of the continent. Stop acting like you’re going to live here forever. We all know once we’re in our bond-groups we’re going to move out. But moving out doesn’t mean cutting contact.” Aaron catches my eye and raises a brow. I shrug in response. We can pretend we don’t know that the ‘stuff’ Skylar has been busy with is Sketch and the Hounds of Charon, but that’s not doing anyone any favours. I’m tired of acting ignorant to the fact my step-cousin probably has a boyfriend or is considering joining a motorcycle club, or both.

“Right. Right, yeah. Okay, I can do that.” He nods repeatedly as we finish cutting up the fajita ingredients and hand them over to Aaron.

My brother adds the meat to the pan, and the room fills with the sizzling sound of cooking.

“I actually saw a house Ember would love,” Skylar comments, rummaging in the fridge for a drink. “It reminded me of a drawing she did when we were kids. I’ll send the listing to Vertus. It’s less than half an hour from here on a bike.”

“On a bike, huh?” I smirk as his cheeks flush pink.

“You got something you finally want to tell us, Sky?” Aaron asks, looking over at Skylar while adding more spices to the pan.

“Wait, you know about Sketch? How do you know?” His eyes are almost comically wide as he gapes at us. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Skylar, even I figured out there was something going on with you two,” Ember’s voice joins our conversation. My skin prickles as she draws closer. Goosebumps break out across her arms as she leans on the counter next to me, but not touching. I want to lean into her, wrap my arms around her, and just hold her. While we were in the caves, I had a lot of time to think. But the main thing my brain kept showing me was Ember. Her smile, the light blush that covers her cheeks when we tease her or one of her Sept makes an innuendo. The days away have made me realise how much I want to be part of her Sept. I want to be a support to her, help her feel safe and eventually loved.

“Hey, Sprite, you hungry? I made steak and chicken fajitas.” Aaron grabs another pan to warm the tortillas in. “There’s more than enough for all of us.”

“Um, sure. Thanks.” She seems hesitant to join us, maybe a little tense. As Aaron flashes one of his signature grins at her, she softens, visibly relaxing. I like that she doesn’t push back on Aaron’s need to feed. It’s one of the ways my brother shows he cares. Could we both be in her Sept? I’m itching to reach out and touch her. To test whether the call sparks to life at the contact, but now probably isn’t the right time, with Skylar having a mini meltdown.

“You all knew... Does Dad know? Pa? Pops?” Skylar covers his face with a groan. “Pops will flip out—”

“Do you think you’re called to him?” Aaron asks, cutting Skylar off.

“Yeah, I think so. I wasn’t sure before manifesting, but now?” He looks out the back wall windows, eyes gazing wistfully. “Now, there’s this humming under my skin when we’re near each other. A spark of electricity when we touch.”

“Will he be at the ceremony?” I ask as Aaron finishes dishing up fajitas for all of us.

“I’ve asked.” Skylar shrugs. “He’s a Chum, so they might refuse him entry. Rui’s walking with us, though.”

“What? Shouldn’t he have had his like two years ago, or whenever it was he turned twenty-five?” Ember asks, voicing the same question I was thinking.

“Yeah, but he couldn’t. He had to keep cover, didn’t he? If he had his discernment ceremony, he wouldn’t have been allowed at the Institute,” Skylar says as though it was obvious. I suppose it was.

“Grab some drinks, Em.” I nod towards the fridge as I take the dishes to the table. While Skylar grabs the salsa, sour cream, and guacamole, Aaron carries the tortillas and plates.

We settle everything on the dining table but wait for Ember before tucking in. Her fingers brush mine as she hands me my drink. Sparks shoot across my skin, and I swear I hear her inhale sharply. When I raise my eyes to meet hers, though, she’s not looking at me. She slides Aaron’s drink to him, not getting close enough to touch. Skylar starts talking about a new video game Sketch has introduced him to. Neither my brother nor Skylar seem to notice how quiet Ember is as they discuss the game. Nor how she avoids brushing hands with Aaron and me when we reach for the same condiments.

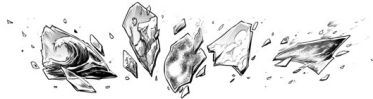
If she didn’t cast worried glances at her brother each time she nearly touches Aaron or me, I’d be more concerned she might reject me. Us. I think Ember fears that us being called to her will drive an even bigger wedge between Skylar and her. I’m okay waiting for the crystals to confirm our match. Everything Skylar describes feeling around Sketch is what I feel with Ember. And judging by her reactions, she feels it with my brother too. I can understand her hesitancy with letting Skylar know, especially as their relationship is so fragile at the moment. He needs to make amends, though.

The ceremony is in less than four days, and I won’t hold back afterwards. Atticus, Klaus, and Vertus have all had time with her; I want my own date nights. So will Aaron for that matter. I can imagine him planning a midnight picnic down by the lake. But me? I want to take her to an old world arcade. Play silly games and attempt to win prizes. Make a bit of a goof of myself until Ember’s head is thrown back as she laughs so hard she clutches her stomach and has joyous tears.



Glancing at the oven clock, I quickly work out the maths. Seventy-five hours until the discernment ceremony starts, and they'll probably have Ember go first. I'll have a definitive answer in less than eighty hours.

Why does that feel like an eternity?



## EMBER

“Want to hang out for a bit? We can watch a movie? Play a game? Or, I know, I could give you a swimming lesson in the lake?” Skylar asks as we finish clearing up the fajitas.

I’ve missed my brother. Things have been strained and awkward between us since I called him out on trying to control me. I wish I could stay and take the olive branch, but Aaron and Zane are of age now. They’ll feel the call to me if I’m too close. Eating together was a risk. There’s no way Skylar won’t be upset if they’re called to my Sept. I know he’s always thought the three of them would be in the same bond-group.

“Um, I would, but I-I have a date,” I say quietly, pointing to Klaus as he walks through the back door. His excitement thrums through our bond, easing my anxiety over Skylar’s reaction and the tattoo I’m about to get.

“Hey,” Klaus greets the four of us, a huge grin on his face as he wraps me in a one-armed hug. “You ready to get going?”

“Where are you crazy kids off to tonight, then?” Skylar’s smile is tight around the edges. He didn’t have the best reaction to my septum piercing, so I doubt he’ll be thrilled with Klaus tattooing me.

“We don’t ask about your dates, Sky. Leave your sister alone,” Sam says, strolling in from the main hall. He walks over to me, dropping a quick kiss on top of my head. “Have a nice evening, sweetheart.”

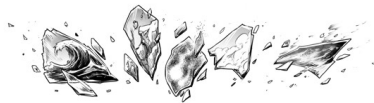
“Thanks, Sam,” I smile, giving a little wave as Klaus steers me out the back door. He’s quiet as we walk around the house towards his car. Once I’m settled in the plush leather seat, he closes my door and slides across the bonnet like an actor in an action movie. Instantly, my heart lightens as laughter at his antics bubbles up inside me.

“Always wanted to do that. And the fact it made you smile and laugh is a bonus,” he grins, starting the engine with a brief pulse of his magic.

“You’re a bit of a goof, you know?” I laugh.

“Eh, maybe. It’s a side you draw out of me. I love your laugh and smile. If I have to make a fool of myself to hear and see them, then so be it.” He reaches across with his right hand to grasp my left. Raising it, he kisses the back of my hand.

Warm contentment flows through the bond. If it made a sound, I imagine it’d be like a cat purring.



Klaus pulls open the door to the small tattoo shop. My eyes scan every inch of the black walls, bouncing from image to image. Golden calligraphy spells out each artist’s name above the various framed sketches and tattoo samples.

“Hi there, welcome to Inkubi’s Pact. How can—Oh, hey, Klaus,” the raven-haired receptionist says, switching from a bored customer service voice after Klaus enters behind me.

“Hey, Pippa.”

“Uh huh, so, is this the elusive girlfriend we’ve been hearing about?” she asks, pushing her chair back and slipping around the desk to greet me. “Ember, right?”

“Right. Hi.” I shake her proffered hand, glancing at Klaus. His embarrassment mixes with another emotion I can’t decipher as he beams a wide grin at me.

“Yeah, Ember’s my girl.” The words leave his mouth with a wistful note that brings a blush to my cheeks.

“Okay, well, your station is all prepped for you. Enjoy your tattoo, Ember. I can’t wait to see the final piece. The work your man has put into the design, ugh, it almost has my fanny fluttering. But I’m gay, so that reaction to a human with a peen is freaky weird.” Pippa takes her seat back behind the desk, clicking away at the computer. “Holler if ya need anything.”

“Fucking hell, Pippa. Neither of us wants to hear about your fanny.” Klaus grimaces, shaking his head as he guides me to the back of the shop. I stifle a laugh as Pippa flips him off. He humphs, but I can feel his amusement mingling with mine through the bond.

“I’d apologise, but I can tell you found her as amusing as I do. So, yeah.” Klaus shrugs, opening a side door to a small room. An adjustable table is in the centre of the room, wrapped in cling film. “Okay, we’ll place the stencil, and then you can check it in the mirror. Once you’re happy, hop up on the table, and we’ll get started.”

“W-what should I do with my top?” I ask, nerves creeping in.

“Hey.” Klaus scoots over on the little wheeled stool, taking my hands in his. “Freckles, if you don’t want to do this, that’s fine. No pressure, no expectations. With the bond in play now, I don’t know if I’ll even be able to tattoo you. I’ll feel everything you do, and, well, I’m a wuss with pain.”

I laugh, looking pointedly at his tattoos.

“Nope, don’t let my ink fool you. Brick totally knocked me out to get these done. He’ll never let me in his chair unless I’m unconscious. I’m a fidget, and I squeal.”

“He’s not kidding, probably downplaying it a bit, honestly,” a deep voice chuckles from the doorway. A broad barrel of a man leans against the doorframe, a thick beard covering his smile, but the deep lines around his eyes show

he's someone who laughs often. "I'm Brick. You must be the illustrious Ember we've all been hearing about."

"Seriously, man? Don't scare her away," Klaus groans. His delight at the banter and camaraderie he has with the staff sets me at ease. Klaus feels more content here than anywhere else we've been together this week.

"You've met his old man, right?" Brick asks.

I nod, my lips thinning with distaste at having Representative Becer brought up on our date. "I have, yes."

"Yep." Brick nods. "If you're still around after experiencing that delight, well, nothing I do or say will run you off."

"Brick. Not helping," Klaus says with a glare at the other man.

"Okay, okay. If you need me to step in, just shout. It was nice meeting you, Ember." Brick leaves, whistling a chirpy tune that has Pippa yelling at him to 'cut that annoying shit out.'

"Sorry about that. He's a great guy, just doesn't always know when to speak and when not to." Klaus washes his hands, pulls on a pair of black gloves, and picks up the stencil. "Okay, tuck the bottom of your top under your bra, and we'll get this beauty placed just right."

My hands grow clammy as I move to do as instructed. Klaus hasn't seen my scars in person, and now, he'll be up close and personal with the worst of them under bright lighting. There's nowhere to hide.

He doesn't rush me or watch me. Instead, while I wrestle with my anxiety, he double-checks his equipment and pushes his affection for me down the bond. With a deep breath, I pull the hem of my top up, tucking it into the band of my bra.

I don't have to say anything; he knows I'm ready and brings the stencil over. Outwardly, there's no reaction to my scarred skin. He's the epitome of a professional. Through the bond, I feel his anger spike and roar to life, only for it to be pushed aside by his pride in me.

He wipes antiseptic across my bare stomach before carefully lining up the stencil and smoothing it across my skin. He rubs small soothing circles, focusing on getting all the ink to transfer, then slowly peels it back.

“Wanna take a look?” He indicates the mirror next to the door, but I shake my head. “No? Have you changed your mind?”

“No. I-I trust you, as long as the scars are covered—”

“They are,” he answers, even though I didn’t really ask.

“Then I want to wait to see it. I’ll look when it’s full of detail and shading,” I tell him.

“Okay, if you’re sure?” At my nod, he waves to the table. “Up you hop, then. Let’s get you inked.”

His grin is infectious, and I can’t help mirroring it as I get comfortable. Klaus turns on an instrumental playlist, the buzzing of the tattoo gun blending seamlessly with the music.

I close my eyes, humming along as the needle meets my skin.

## CHAPTER 19

# EMBER



“Hey, sleepyhead. Wakey wakey, we’re all done.”

A finger strokes from my temple to my jaw then traces over my bottom lip.

“I’ve healed it and everything, Em. Come on, wake up.” The disturber of slumber’s chuckle sends a breath that tickles the wispy hairs on my nape. I stir with a grumble, not feeling ready to open my eyes.

Where am I, anyway? Amusement thrums through me, but it’s not my own. That realisation works as a catalyst, and I open my eyes, blinking up at a smiling Klaus. He leans over me, brushing a few loose strands of hair from my face.

“Hey, pretty girl.”

“Hi.” I blink, looking around the room before returning my gaze to Klaus. “I fell asleep?”

“You did. Gotta say that’s a first for me,” he says before leaning back and helping me off the table. “Ready to have a look?” he asks, nodding towards the mirror.

“I think so, yeah.” I smile up at him.

“Okay, I’m gonna cover your eyes to get you in position. I mean, if that’s okay?” Klaus asks.

“Mhmm,” I hum as I nod. His nervous excitement is infectious, even without feeling it through our connection. We spent a long time discussing the design and flipping through portfolios. Klaus’ final drawing was so delicate and perfect for me.

He places his hands over my eyes and shuffles me into place. “Okay, when you’re ready, let me know, and I’ll take my hands away.” His breath against my ear sends a shiver coursing down my spine.

This is it. It’s already happened; the tattoo is done, but when Klaus moves his hands, I’ll see it. My scars won’t just be a horrific reminder of my past. Now, intermixed with the trauma will be the beauty of my new life. Visual proof of all that I’ve gained. How far I’ve come in a few short months.

There’s still a lot of work to do. Helios would say I have many mental boxes to unpack, but this is a small start. One I can use to ground myself when I inevitably spiral. I wonder if he’ll see it as progress in the way I do? Would it be inappropriate to show it to him at our next session? Maybe, though the last two sessions since I came of age have been cancelled. Oh well, if he’s at the discernment ceremony on Saturday, he’ll see it then.

Klaus waits patiently as all these thoughts, conclusions, and emotions roll over me. Eventually, I take a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “I’m ready.”

He drops his hands, kisses the top of my head, and steps back. I blink, letting my eyes adjust, and focus on my reflection. A soft gasp leaves my lips as I take in my new ink, completely healed thanks to magic.

Delicate fine line roses cover the two main scars, curving up from my pelvis and around my belly button. Blackberry brambles intertwine the roses’ leaves, combining the story of pain, beauty, and strength. My fingers trail across the black and grey petals, each shaded to perfection.

“I kept them light. Your scars peek through, but they’ll be an afterthought now. I can add more shading if you want. Just say,” Klaus murmurs.

“It’s perfect. Thank you,” I whisper, turning, intending to give him a quick kiss of thanks. Klaus has other ideas. As my lips connect with his, he cups my cheek, deepening the kiss. His tongue runs along my lips, seeking entrance, which I give instantly. I melt in his embrace.



A fist pounding on the door breaks us apart. Klaus groans before dropping a chaste peck on my lips and moving to open the door.

“Where’s the fire?” he asks, glaring at Brick.

“No fire, but I want to get home. It’s late, and you have classes in the morning, correct?”

“Yeah, yeah, we do. And there’s no way Atticus will buy us both being sick or something,” Klaus grumps, causing Brick to laugh.

“A Changed getting sick. Good one.” He claps a meaty hand on Klaus’ shoulder. “Clear down your station, then get your girl home.” He waves a hand as he turns to leave. “See ya around, Ember.”

“Bye, Brick,” I say, but I don’t know if he hears.

Klaus cleans down his station with the help of magic and takes me home. The whole drive back to the house, he holds my hand, thumb stroking soothing circles on my skin the whole way.

“Thank you for tonight,” I say as he pulls up to the gate. With a flick of my right hand, I send my magical signature to unlock it.

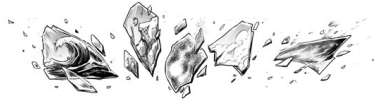
“My pleasure. And if the ink bug bites, I will be happy to add more art to you.” The car inches up the driveway, prolonging our time alone together. Too soon, though, we reach the house, and it’s time to say goodnight.

“Don’t ask me in, Freckles.” Klaus grins, but I can feel how much he wants to spend more time with me. “It’s almost midnight, and we have Atticus’ class first thing. I get to pummel Felix’s pompous arse into the dirt, and I’ll need my beauty sleep to do it.” He bats his eyelashes dramatically.

“Oh, yes, of course,” I laugh. “You couldn’t possibly fight Crannick without looking your best.”

“Hmm, sarcasm is strong with you tonight.” He gets out of the car, rounds the front, and opens my door for me. “I’ll see

you in the morning. Sweet dreams,” he murmurs before kissing me.



Dean Calvert is waiting with Atticus when we arrive at the training pit for class. I stand off to one side with the other four females in our year while the male Changed congregate opposite us.

Tension is thick in the air. Atticus doesn't make eye contact with anyone as we wait for the stragglers to arrive.

“Anyone else feel like their fight or flight is leaning heavily towards flight?” Myra asks in a low voice. Willow and I nod.

“Holy shite,” Willow gasps. I turn, following her gaze, to see Representatives Becer, Chadwick, and Dixon approaching with a woman I recognise from my initial meeting at the Conclave.

“Why are they here?” Myra hisses. “This can't be good.”

“Do you think this is because we've started using offensive magic?” one of the other girls, Molly, whispers.

A spark of annoyance flares through my bond with Klaus. I tear my gaze from the approaching Representatives to seek him out. It takes a moment. He's not standing with Aaron or Zane, whose height makes them easy to spot. Klaus is nearer the far edge of the pit, flanked by Felix and Mason. Both are wearing smug expressions, while my bond-mate looks like he's struggling not to punch someone.

Dean Calvert strides forward. “Representatives, welcome to our humble training grounds. Instructor James and I are thrilled to have you observe our graduating class.”

“Does someone want to tell Instructor James that?” Myra mutters. “Thrilled is not the vibe he's exuding.”

A quick glance at Atticus is all I need to spot the stiffness in his posture. His jaw is clenched tight, a muscle pulsing at the side. I can't see his hands since they're behind his back, but I wouldn't be surprised if they're fists.

"Thank you, Dean. We've heard wonderful things about this group, and the Shadow-Stalkers are looking for new members. We thought we'd get a jump start on the recruitment process," Representative Chadwick smiles. Her eyes are cold as she scans the group of male students. When she spots Mason, warmth seeps into her gaze, transforming her from the cold-hearted woman I've come to expect. She almost looks like a proud, loving mother.

"It would be an honour for any of our students to be selected for the chance to join such an elite and prestigious team of the Conclave's military," Dean Calvert gushes. Myra gags beside me, earning a sharp elbow jab from Willow.

"I've heard some disturbing rumours, though, Dean." Representative Chadwick looks back at the man. Her tone sharpens. "Rumours that this fine institute is putting our girls in danger, teaching them *offensive* magic. You wouldn't allow the hope for the continuation of our race to be put in harm's way like that, though, would you?"

Dean Calvert turns pale; his hands are behind his back, keeping them out of sight of the Representatives as he twists and pulls at them. He sputters a few incoherent words before Atticus strides forwards, drawing attention to himself.

"Representatives." He bows his head briefly in greeting before continuing. "The magic I have instructed the female students in has many defensive qualities. While traditionally, we have used it purely for offensive purposes, there are other applications. My goal here is to not only prepare my students for careers in the military but to also ensure all of them can protect themselves or their children, should the worst happen. I'm sure you can agree that there are many factions who would stop at nothing to attain our children. The Wards are evidence of this." He pauses, waving a hand in my direction. "EvoGen planted a surrogate to steal two of ours. Other factions might

not go as far, but our women should have the knowledge to defend their children.”

“You think the men of the bond group couldn’t do that?” Representative Dixon sneers.

“Not at all, sir. However, if I were in charge of a retrieval mission like that, I would remove the greater threats first. It’s common knowledge that we don’t train females to fight. I would create a diversion to pull the men from the home. Then go in hot, overwhelm the woman, and take the children.”

“All I’m hearing here, Instructor, is that you have no faith in the shields your female students can erect,” the other female Representative remarks.

“Not at all, Representative Crannick,” Atticus replies, exuding calm indifference, though I’m sure he’s anything but. “Would you care for a demonstration?”

“Yes. We’ll pick the match-up to ensure you don’t select one of the weaker males.” She turns, walking over towards me, scanning each of us before stopping in front of Willow. “You, to the centre, I want to see your shield capabilities against my son.”

“Yes, Representative.” Willow nods, clenching her hands into fists at her side.

“Felix! To the centre. I know your abilities, so there will be no faking to make the Instructor look good,” Representative Crannick says, a smug smile toying across her lips.

Atticus, Dean Calvert, and the other Representatives move to the pit’s edge as Willow and Felix take their positions.

“Shield only, Miss Benson,” Dean Calvert calls out.

“Dick,” Myra grumbles under her breath. “They’re setting her up to fail.”

“They’ve always set us up to fail. It’s almost like they want the humans to get their hands on us,” Molly says. Her words grab my attention, and something about it niggles at a memory.

Since escaping EvoGen, everything I've heard from the Conclave has been about future generations. How important it is that our race continues. The laws are designed to give us the best chance. Mandatory egg donation is part of the illusion that they're keeping women safe by restricting what magic they—we—learn.

But EvoGen wants to unlock the genome. They want to turn humans into Changed. Doesn't that align with what the Conclave wants?

The question takes root in my mind. I turn it over and over as I watch Willow hold her shield against Felix's attacks. He hurls fireball after fireball at her. Where each one lands, Willow's shield shifts from light to water, extinguishing the blaze. Felix changes tactics, moving from fire to earth attacks. Willow deflects them with air, redirecting the boulders away from her. They cycle through each element, sweat beading across their foreheads. Felix glances towards his mother and the other Representatives after Willow deflects his attack again.

"Have you seen enough, Representatives? Or do you wish them to continue?" Atticus asks.

"Perhaps your son isn't as strong as you deem, Katarina," Representative Chadwick remarks, causing the other woman to flush.

"Well, perhaps Mason should go next?"

"*Or* we could use someone we know is powerful," Representative Becer drawls. "Miss Ward, to the centre."

"Why are you calling her forward? She's infertile. She'll never be in a position to defend children," Representative Chadwick scoffs, and my heart drops. My cheeks heat as I feel all eyes on me, judging my movements, my reaction to her words as I walk to the centre. I latch onto Klaus' anger, choosing to drown in that rather than my insecurities and questions of self-worth.

"Isn't that why you take our eggs? So those who *want* crotch goblins can have them? If an all male bond-group can

have kids, why wouldn't Ember's? Your prejudice is showing, Representative," Myra calls out.

"Yeah, not all of us with a uterus even want kids! Way to make an assumption," Willow shouts. "We're not brood mares. The Conclave should stop treating us like we are."

"Enough!" Dean Calvert yells, looking horrified at the outburst.

"They're not wrong, are they, though?" Aaron says, stepping out from the group of males.

"I said enough! This talk is unacceptable." The Dean rounds on Atticus. "Where have they gained these treasonous notions? You've always pushed the line, James, but this is too far!"

"Oh, I wouldn't blame the instructor. I think we can lay the blame at the source very easily. What do you think, Miss Ward?" Representative Becer calls out. "We can't blame her for her ignorance, though. She was raised as a lab rat. Someone dispensable. It's probably a good thing she won't be a mother." His sharp gaze cuts through me. "She has no understanding of our culture, our community, nor a nurturing bone in her body. I wouldn't be shocked if every male called to her rejects her. Why tie yourself to someone so *lacking*?"

My magic swirls and builds with each cutting blow. His words slice deep, causing more damage to me than any physical or magical hit could. Tears prick at my eyes as my vision blurs. I swallow, attempting to wade through Klaus' and my own emotions as they suffocate me. It's all too much.

All I want is to be safe. That's all I've wanted, to be safe and accepted. Love always felt too far out of reach, but I'd begun to hope it was on the cards.

I shake my head, turning to face them.

"No. I am not lacking. Not everyone has the same priorities as you. If those called to my Sept on Saturday wish to reject me? That's their prerogative, the same as it would be mine to accept or reject them. This is one thing *you* do not get to decide for me—for any of us. You have no power over the

bonds. You never have, and you never will.” I shift my gaze to Atticus and Dean Calvert. “I think I’ll take the rest of the day off.”

I don’t wait for any response. Not from the Dean, the Representatives, or Atticus before pulling on my magic, wrapping it around me, and teleporting to the kitchen at home for ice cream.

## CHAPTER 20



# VERTUS



Meeting with estate agents is slowly becoming one of my least favourite things to do. When my phone rings, I don't pause to look at who's calling before excusing myself and answering as I leave their offices.

"Irfan."

"Vertus, you need to find Ember. Now," Klaus says hurriedly.

"Isn't she at the Institute with you?" I ask, my steps faltering at his grunt.

"She was, but then my fucking father showed up to class with Chadwick, Dixon, and Crannick in tow." I quicken my pace towards my car as Klaus continues. "I guess someone told them the girls have been fighting and winning. Probably Felix and Mason. They were both bested by Myra Lhuthal last week. It pissed them off."

"Lhuthal? That's the tiny one, looks a bit like the old drawings of pixies?"

"Yeah, her." Klaus tries to hide his amusement, but it bleeds through. With his next breath, it's replaced with simmering rage as he describes the class.

"They said that? In front of everyone?" It's not their words that surprise me, but that they said them with so many witnesses. Are we, as a people, so indoctrinated that the Representatives feel they have nothing to fear?

“Yeah, Em shot them down but then teleported away, and it’s fucking bedlam here because of it. Atticus is attempting damage control. Skylar’s updating Sam, and I’ve lost Aaron and Zane—”

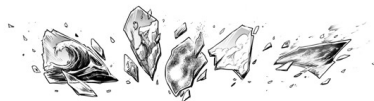
“How do you lose them?” I cut Klaus off. “They’re six-foot-four giants. They’re hard to miss!”

“I don’t know! I was busy calling you since someone needs to find our Anchor, and Atticus and I can’t leave the Institute,” Klaus snaps at me. “Look, V, her emotions... there was nothing but self-loathing coming through the bond. *Find her.*”

“I will. I may be in the metaphorical doghouse still, but I know Ember,” I reassure Klaus and, to some degree, myself. The car beeps as it unlocks, and I slide into the driver’s seat. “As soon as I have her, I’ll let you know,” I say before hanging up.

One illegal U-turn later and I’m heading towards the Ward house. Music is Ember’s solace. The music room in the basement that she’s claimed as her own is the first place I’ll check.

*Please be safe, Little Phoenix.*



After a few failed attempts to get through the gates, someone at the house—or remotely—finds me worthy of entry. As soon as there’s a gap big enough, I drive through. A feeling of déjà vu settles over me. Aside from it being the middle of the day, I have a similar sense of urgency to reach Ember as I did the night she came of age.

Walking through the front door, I have every intention of heading straight down to the music room. But noise from the kitchen draws my attention, a soft humming mixed with the sounds of drawers opening and closing.

Ember appears in the doorway, a gallon tub of ice cream in one hand and a spoon dangling from her mouth. Her eyes widen when she sees me, and she stumbles to a stop.

“Whajodowinbeer?” I take a second to decipher her muffled words.

“What am I doing here?” I ask. At her nod, I tilt my head to the side, raising both brows. “Why wouldn’t I be here? You’re here, and you’re hurting.”

She pulls the spoon from her mouth with a *pop*. “I’m not hurt.”

“Why aren’t you in class, then?”

She shrugs, dropping eye contact. “No reason.”

“Ember, I know things between us aren’t as good as they are with Atticus and Klaus. But I can’t make things better if you shut me out. If you don’t want me in your Sept, just tell me. Don’t give me false hope,” I say, pleased my voice doesn’t give away the tumultuous emotions battling within. Will she ever forgive me? Will I be able to move on if she doesn’t? Probably not. I’ll become as psychotic as Helios, stalking her and attempting to protect her from afar. Except I’ll do a damn better job of it. EvoGen will never touch another hair on her head.

“You said there were new houses you wanted to show me?”

I swallow my grief and disappointment. If I allow my feelings to the surface, they’ll devastate me, and I won’t allow that. Not now.

“Of course.” Pulling my phone from my pocket, I unlock it and open up the saved listings.

“Do you have a favourite? Or do you think we should send them to a group chat? If we’re all living there, it should probably be a vote, right?” Ember fires question after question at me in the most un-Ember-like way. “We probably should wait until after my ceremony, shouldn’t we?” she says, trying to pass the phone back to me. Cupping her hand, I close her fingers around the device.

“This isn’t like you. What’s going on, Ember? I don’t think you’re acting differently just because of what happened in class today.”

“I-I’m f-fine,” she stutters, and I raise a brow to let her know I’m not fooled. Ember glances over her shoulder before taking my hand and leading me downstairs to the music room. Her sanctuary.

“Little Phoenix, why are we down here?”

“No one comes in unannounced?” she hedges.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” I ask, not having the heart to point out that Anya and Keryn are the only other people in the house.

“Um... both?”

I hum as I take a seat on the small sofa. She can say no one comes in here unannounced, but I know that’s not strictly true. We’re more likely to hold a conversation without being overheard in here, though.

“Tell me what’s going on... please,” I say, looking up at her from my seat.

She falls into the cushions next to me, pulling her feet up and tucking them under her. “I-I think I know who another two of my called are.”

My breath catches in my throat, and as much as I want to know, I also don’t. Still, she’s turning to *me*, confiding in *me*.

“Ember, even if I’m not in your Sept—” Before I can finish, she cuts me off.

“Why wouldn’t you be?” she asks, a frown tugging her brows as she looks at me with confusion swirling in her blue eyes.

“I—You still want me?” Even with the occasional flirty banter, I didn’t think she would forgive my past actions so easily. I handled our original reunion so wrong, and the subsequent one at the Institute. Looking back, I was such an epic dickhead. I’m not sure I’d forgive me if I were her.

“We have things to work through.” She looks down at her hands, still holding my phone. “You betrayed my trust, but you had loyalties to the Conclave then. You don’t now, so that wouldn’t be an issue again.” Exhaling a heavy breath, Ember looks back up at me. “And, V, you faced court-martial for me. You *punched* a Representative—”

“He deserved it, and I’d wanted to do it more times than I can count.”

“Hmm, I can see why. None of them are easy people to deal with,” she muses, chewing her lip absentmindedly.

“You don’t think you’ll reject me, then?” I ask, feeling like a needy, clingy schoolboy with his first crush. I’m a thirty-year-old man. I was the Commander of the elite Shadow-Stalkers, and yet this woman’s opinion means everything to me.

“I’ve been talking to Myra more. She has a different insight into growing up Changed. If the discernment crystal matches us, fate calling us together, there’s a reason. With my past... EvoGen, Dom, and Steph... I have to believe things happen for a reason.” She shifts in her seat, tucking a wayward curl behind her ear. “Vertus, you were my light in that place. You made me feel something other than pain and despair. Yes, you hurt me too, but Tavon making a deal with the Hounds of Charon without talking to Sam and Nik hurt them.”

“Not the same,” I point out with a grunt.

“No, but you’re clearly sorry. Now I’m less angry, I can see that.” We fall into a somewhat comfortable silence for a moment. “I-I’ve made the decision that I’ll accept the men called to my Sept. If they want me, I’ll bond with them. So... if you want me—”

I lean forward, closing the distance between us and sealing my lips to hers in a soft kiss.

“I will always want you, Little Phoenix. Forever and a day, until the end of time,” I utter against her mouth before kissing her again quickly and settling back in my seat. “Now, who is it

you think will be called to you?” I ask, bringing us back to the previous topic.

Ember blinks at me for a moment, and as her mind processes my question, that adorable pink blush takes over her cheeks.

“Oh, um, I’m probably wrong, anyway. We can just look at the houses.” She averts her gaze from mine, fiddling with the phone. “Could you unlock it again, please?”

I take the device, sending a small burst of my magical signature into it before placing it back in her outstretched palm.

“I won’t push you to tell me, but if you’re worried, even with all you just said, you don’t *have* to accept them.”

“I think they’d be good for me. To me. It’s just...” She pauses, fidgeting in her seat while scrolling through the listings on my phone before she speaks again. “I don’t think I’m who they’re expecting to be called to. I-I think they expect to be in a bond-group with... with someone else who wouldn’t be in mine.”

“Uh huh, and why would this other person not be in your Sept?” I ask, though I’m pretty sure I know who the individuals she’s talking about are. How do I feel about sharing her with them?

“Because... because blood relations *can’t* be called to each other. Can they?” Concern laces her question.

“No, you’re right. Skylar wouldn’t be called to you.”

“I didn’t say Skylar.” Her indignation is adorable, but I fight the smile from taking over my face.

“Which other blood relation do you have that it could be?” I ask, still maintaining my composure.

“Oh, okay. Yeah. I didn’t make that as cryptic as I thought I did,” she mutters.

“No, you didn’t. But I’ve suspected at least one of the Greene twins will be called to you. I’d bet both, though.”

“I don’t know. I won’t know until the ceremony on Saturday.”

“Ember, Atticus and I both knew we were called to you before you turned of age. The pull is so much stronger now, and it will only intensify after the crystal confirms the match. If you think either Aaron or Zane, *or both* will be in your Sept, I’d bet money that they are.”

“I’ve been avoiding them,” she whispers. “The night, my birthday, when—”

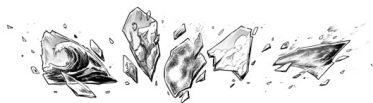
“When your magic manifested completely and you impersonated a phoenix again?” I ask in a teasing tone.

“Yeah, then.” She looks over her shoulder at the door before turning back to me. “Aaron touched me, and he didn’t get burnt.”

“Well,” I nod slowly. “At least we know you’ll have one bond-mate who can cook.” I laugh as she throws a pillow cushion at me.

“I could learn to cook.”

“You could, but we’ll need a house for you to experiment in, so...” I tap the phone screen, sending another small burst of magic to unlock it again. “Which ones shall I schedule viewings for?”



## AARON

Tonight’s the night.

I run my hand over the front of my sherwani. The gold embroidered green coat hits just past my knees, complimenting the cream chudi pant bottoms. I’ve spent far longer getting ready than I ever expected to, meticulously shaving to ensure I don’t nick myself, even though I could heal it.

The discernment ceremony never felt like a big deal before Ember. Now, my hands are clammy, and nerves flutter in my stomach.

Which seems ridiculous. I know Ember. She's kind and compassionate with a burning fire inside her that showcases her strength and resolve. The moment I first saw her in the music room, I was drawn to her. Maybe that was my subconscious recognising I'm hers. It would partially explain the need to take care of her that took over me. She's come so far in such a short amount of time, and after tonight the whole Changed world will know I'm hers.

Any lingering doubts I had after she didn't burn me have ceased to exist since I came of age. Every time I've been around Ember for the last four days, my skin itches and hums. My magic feels like it's reaching out to caress her own, but she's been keeping a distance.

A knock on my door has me glancing at the clock as I call out for whoever's there to come in.

"Ready to go?" Uncle Tavon asks, poking his head into my room. "Check you out, kid. Green is your colour."

I grin at the compliment. "Thanks, I was a little worried the classic style would suit Zane's build more than mine—"

"Nah," he cuts me off with a dismissive wave as he steps into the room. "Classic suits every shape. It's why it's classic." He steps closer, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "You look good, Aaron. Whoever you're called to tonight will be lucky to have you in their bond-group. And not just because you scrub up well. Let's grab your brother and Skylar. Sam should be almost finished helping Ember do her hair, and then we can head out."

I nod and give myself a final once over in the mirror before following my uncle out onto the landing. Zane steps out of his room, his sherwani the mirror image of mine, except with a green embroidered cream sherwani and green chudi pants. Tavon tuts and points at my twin's head.



“Lose the hat, Zane. You can go one night without it glued to your head.”

My twin has the grace to look sheepish as he pulls off the baseball cap. He ducks back into his room to smooth out his hair and, by the time he returns, Skylar has joined us.

“The blue’s not too dark, right? Should I change?” he asks, fussing with the navy blue velvet sherwani. Unlike Zane and me, Skylar’s coat has minimal embroidery over the left breast. It suits him perfectly and will likely stand out amongst the rest of us in more traditional silk and jacquard fabrics.

“The blue looks amazing, La-La.” I turn to the second floor stairs at the sound of Ember’s voice.

My breath catches in my chest as I take her in. Sam has tamed her curls into an elegant up-do with stray pieces framing her face, softening the overall look. The delicate embroidery of her pale, almost mint green, lehenga sits low on her hips, showcasing her stomach and the beautiful black and grey tattoo gracing it.

“When did you get a tattoo?” Skylar blurts, as tactful as ever.

“Klaus did it a couple of days ago. It’s what we did on our date.” She worries her lip after answering her brother’s question. Before I can move to pull her lip free of her teeth, Sam steps around her and taps her nose.

“Leave your lip alone. You’ll have to reapply your lipstick if you’re not careful.” He turns to the four of us, but his gaze lands on Tavon. “It’s a beautiful tattoo, don’t you think?”

“It really is,” Uncle T says with a nod. “It suits you, Ember.”

She smiles at his words, her whole face lighting up, and I wish it had been me to pull that reaction from her.

“Sorry, Pipes. It just took me by surprise,” Skylar says, stepping closer to her and leaning down to get a closer look. “Are those brambles? The detail’s insane.” He glance back up at her. “Klaus Becer did this? Seriously?”

Ember nods enthusiastically. “Yeah, we worked together on the design. I love it, and it disguises the scars. I don’t feel like I need to hide anymore.”

“That’s awesome, Em. I’m really happy Klaus was able to help with that.” Skylar stands back up and offers his arm to her. “Let’s go get your Sept confirmed.”

Tavon laughs lightly. “If you think the four of you are getting in the limo before Nik takes a million photos, you’re all delusional.”

“I want photos too, and I think I spotted Anya and Keryn with their camera as well,” Sam announces, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

I wonder if I’ll be able to manage a photo of just Ember and me? Maybe I’ll aim to stand next to her, and then I can crop it later? Though my uncles will probably take even more pictures after the crystal confirms our pairings. By the end of the night, I’ll be sick of the sight of cameras, but I’ll also be officially called to Ember’s Sept.

The butterflies erupt to life once more in my stomach, from excitement rather than nerves this time.

## CHAPTER 21

# EMBER



“Welcome to this month’s discernment ceremony.” Representative Chadwick’s smile has an eerie quality that makes my skin crawl as she looks out at the packed hall. “Tonight we have the joyous privilege of witnessing the discernment of the first female Anchor in over fifty years. I’m sure the rarity of such an event is why so many of you are here this evening. I hope those of you who feel the enhanced call have a fortuitous bonding.”

“Fortuitous bonding?” Skylar snorts next to me. “What does that even mean?”

“I guess she doesn’t care if people are happy as long as the bondings provide future generations of the esteemed Changed race,” Rui mutters under his breath, pitching his voice up and adding a nasal quality in a caricature rendition of Chadwick’s voice.

“We’ll start the night with our Anchor.” Representative Chadwick turns to look at us—at me—and she holds a hand out from her body as though welcoming me in for a one-armed side hug. *No*, thank you. “Miss Ward? Please come take your place.”

“Good luck, Pipes,” Skylar murmurs, giving me a quick hug before I walk up the steps to the dais, coming to a stop an arm’s length from the Representative and discernment crystal.

“We, the Representatives of the Conclave of the Changed, ask that those of you who feel the call tonight for our newest Anchor please stand. If you are also here for discernment, you

will be called forward next to ensure you do not have another outside of the Anchor destined for you.”

Voices in the crowd below grow from barely audible whispers and murmurs to hushed discussions. My eyes scan the space, landing on a table to the far left where Atticus, Vertus, and Klaus sit with Sam, Nik, and Tavon. Sam’s jaw clenches tight, but his gaze locks with mine. He gives me a quick nod of reassurance before downing the rest of his drink. Something about tonight has him on edge, but I trust him enough that if I need to know about it, he’ll tell me. It’s probably a symptom of the prospect of an empty nest.

“Ember.” My name, spoken in a low hiss, snaps my attention back to the Representative beside me. “Your hand. Place it on the crystal. Don’t cause a scene, dear. You won’t like how that ends for you. I’m sure there are more hidden and forgotten laws we can find pertaining to female Anchors.”

Swallowing my disgust and burning hatred for the Conclave as a whole, but also specifically for Lydia Chadwick, I force a smile to my lips. Without a word, I step closer to the crystal, hovering my hand above the sharp tip. Looking back at the table, I focus on Atticus, Vertus, and Klaus. This is when we’ll know for sure if they are mine, though it’s too late for Klaus. I wouldn’t give up my bond with him, but the thought of taking him from someone else makes me queasy.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and on the exhale, push my palm down onto the crystal. If I thought it would help, I’d cross my fingers. Instead, I just hope for each pulse to be white, signalling my Sept are all of age and are all present tonight.

*Please, pulse white. Please.*

Silence descends among the Changed, watching and waiting to see who will answer my call. The sharp pain of it cutting into my flesh barely registers, and I open my eyes as the first light pulses.

White.

A chair pushing back and scraping on the floor sounds abnormally loud as it echoes in the hall. The crystal pulses white for a second time, quickly followed by a third. Soft, satisfied grunts and a gasp of disbelief sound behind me from the line of Changed waiting for their discernment.

Twice more the crystal flashes white, and chairs scraping fill the unnatural quiet again. My gaze flicks up to the table where Atticus, Vertus, and Klaus are now all standing, each smiling at me in their own way. Vertus nods his head to the line behind me. Swallowing, I turn to see who stepped forward.

Aaron and Zane lock eyes with me. My elation is short-lived when I look past them to see the hurt and betrayal etched on my brother's face. Rui elbows Skylar, and he composes his expression, but I saw it. And so did the hall full of Changed behind me.

The watching audience's voices rise with their mutterings and whispers, some quieter than others. Though, not all sound disgruntled, which is honestly what I'd been expecting. Especially if they've heard the gossip of how I'm defective and under treatment to cure my infertility. A snort slips free at the thought before I can cover it, and then the crystal pulses for the sixth and final time.

Green.

*What the hell does green mean?*

Another chair scrapes across the floor as the once silent room erupts into mayhem, with people shouting questions and demanding answers. The last man to stand consumes my focus, forcing everything else to a chaotic hum in the background. His golden eyes are full of heat and determination as he strides towards me.

Doctor Helios reaches the base of the dais, raising one hand up to me. The embroidery on his sherwani matches the exact shade of my lehenga choli. Like he knew, but how could he?

The conversations, the little comments. Sam's insistence that I no longer needed to attend therapy after my birthday. All the pieces fall into place.

They knew.

And no one told me.

"Would you like to go to a private room with your called Sept, my Anchor?" Helios asks.

My anger flares. The rational part of me shouts that this is no different from me not telling Aaron and Zane. Yet it *feels* different.

"You aren't going anywhere with our Anchor, *Chum*," Representative Chadwick sneers through her perfectly fake smile. Raising her voice for the entire hall to hear, she congratulates us before summoning Aaron and Zane to press their palms to the crystal.

They each receive a single pulse of white, and an answering tug forms in my chest, confirming they're mine.

"How blessed our Anchor is to have such powerful Changed called to her Sept," Representative Chadwick declares for all to hear. "If you wish to witness any of the remaining discernments, you may do so. Otherwise, you are free to adjourn to the side parlour." She sweeps her hand to the side, indicating we should step down.

"Thank you, Representative Chadwick. I would very much like to witness my twin's discernment," I say before turning, ready to make my way to my family's table. Helios' hand is still out, waiting for me to take it. It's the last thing I want to do, but I also don't want to cause a scene. Gritting my teeth, I place my hand in his, allowing him to guide my steps. "Don't," I say under my breath when he opens his mouth to speak. "Not now."

"Very well," he mutters as his posture stiffens. Helios can be unhappy with me, and we can be unhappy with each other because he is far from my favourite person right now. I take a seat between Atticus and Nik, keeping my focus on the dais, the crystal, and, unfortunately, Representative Chadwick.

She calls Rui next, and my heart sinks that Chadwick might be petty enough to make my brother wait until last.

The crystal gives a single blue pulse for Rui. My heart pangs with sympathy; his match isn't here. I school my expression as he steps off the dais and joins us at our table, standing next to Helios.

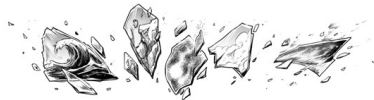
"She's going to make Skylar go last, isn't she?" I ask, and he nods.

"Yeah, I think he would've been next up if Helios here hadn't made a comment about taking you to a private room." Rui casts a quick glare at the doctor.

"Most newly identified groups go to the parlour, though," Tavon says. "It allows for introductions away from prying eyes."

"I think that's their issue. Ember would be away from their sight," Vertus muses.

"They're up to something. I don't know what, but I know I don't like it," Helios murmurs. His eyes never waver from where they've been locked onto Representative Chadwick.



## SKYLAR

Aaron and Zane are in my sister's Sept.

My boyfriend's twin is in my sister's Sept.

*Fuck.* Could things get any weirder?

Why didn't she tell me she felt the call to them? She must've known... Unless I've damaged our relationship far more than I realised. I have been an epic asshole recently.

Every interaction I've witnessed between Aaron, Zane, and my sister flies through my mind as I wait for Representative Chadwick to call my name. There were touches, along with the occasional hugs. Maybe the odd look of something like



longing from the guys. Nothing that screams the fates had matched them together.

But, then again, Ember's been distant since we came of age. There have been fewer hugs, and not just for the twins. Ember's pulled away from me too. Actually, if I'm honest, I pushed her away. Everyone warned me, told me to stop, apologise, and I thought I was doing better—my reaction to seeing Aaron and Zane step forward when the crystal pulsed white tells a different story.

I wasn't happy for my sister or my cousins. I was hurt. Why? Because I don't want to lose my friendship with them? Because I just assumed we'd be in a group together?

Lost in my thoughts, I almost miss Rui being summoned by Chadwick. He reaches up, clasping my shoulder as he walks past.

“Don't overthink it. They'll be good for her, to her, and deep down, you know they'd never have been in a group with Sketch.”

*Sketch.*

At least Ember and I are consistent. We're both called to members of a motorcycle club. Dad, Pops, and Pa are going to be *thrilled*.

Rui places his hand on the crystal, and it pulses blue. Chadwick makes some comment about wishing him luck in finding his match. I tune her out. Each word from her mouth is as disingenuous as the last. There's an agenda here that we can't see. Why else am I still standing here?

There's no rhyme or reason to the order she's bringing people to the crystal. I was next to Ember in the line. Our surnames are the same, and if she were calling by first names, Rui would've been much later. Clearly, I'll be last. For whatever reason, the Representative wants Ember, her Sept, my dads, and me in this hall.

Or am I being too paranoid?

She did *not* look pleased when the crystal flashed green. What does green even mean? Helios is of age, and he's here,

so it should've been white. Why wasn't it?

*“Skylar. Ward.”*

I jerk my head up at hearing my name. Representative Chadwick's smile is more of a grimace now, her eyes glaring at me as if she's wishing she could lash me. Being lost in my thoughts again, I must have missed the first time she called me.

“Would you step forward, or do you not wish to complete your discernment?” she asks.

“Apologies, Representative.” I climb the short steps to the dais and stop in front of the crystal.

Hovering my hand over it, I scan the room, seeking out Ember. She watches me intently, not blinking. There's a small worry line between her brows, and even from this distance, I can see her chewing on her bottom lip. I flash her a huge grin, pushing all of my happiness for her and my friends into it. Her posture relaxes, and a small smile lights up her face before I slam my palm onto the crystal's sharp point.

Blue.

*He didn't come. He's not here.*

I close my eyes as my heart sinks. With a deep breath to compose myself, I open my eyes, ready to remove my hand from the crystal, when it pulses for a second time.

Green.

Heavy footsteps sound, and I look up into the crowd of Changed to see Sketch approaching in much the same way his brother did for Ember.

“This is—this is outrageous!” Chadwick explodes beside me, all of her control apparently eroded by the night's events. “This ceremony is for the Changed—”

“Indeed, Representative. Anyone of Changed bloodline may attend in hopes of finding their magical match.” Sketch smiles up at her, but it doesn't reach his eyes. “The problem you have here is that you never specified *pure* bloodline.”

“So, because you’re Chum, it pulsed green? It’s different because you’re here and of age, right? If you weren’t here, then the crystal would, what? Still pulse blue or red, depending on age?” I ask, feeling incredibly slow on the uptake as Sketch grins at me.

“Exactly, Sherlock.” He holds out his hand. “Shall we join your family at their table?”

“Yes.” I look up, spotting Pa standing between Dad and Pops with a hand on their shoulders as he speaks to them. “Maybe we should suggest heading home?” I murmur after descending from the dais.

“Good idea. I get the impression that even if we moved to the parlour, we wouldn’t get any privacy. The Representatives seemed determined to keep your sister in sight,” Sketch muses, rubbing a tattooed hand over his jaw. He cants his head to the side, then steers me towards the main exit. “Helios will round them all up and meet us outside. Want to ride with me, bond-mate?” He wiggles his eyebrows, drawing a laugh from me.

“Sure, I’ll ride bitch this once. I want my own bike, though.”

“Gotta finish earning your patch first, Prospect.” He winks.

“It’s on the list, but first, I have to make things right with my twin. Think we can make a quick detour on the way?”

## CHAPTER 22

# EMBER



Sketch places his hand on Skylar's lower back, guiding him away from our table and towards the main door.

“What’s going on? Why are they leaving?” I ask. I don’t know who I expect to answer me or how anyone at our table could have an answer. Helios’ palm gently grips the back of my neck, his thumb moving in soothing strokes. The tension leeches from my muscles at his touch, leaving me somewhat confused and conflicted.

“Skylar suggested for us all to return to your house. And I agree. We’ll be able to speak much more freely without so many prying eyes and ears,” he says, addressing everyone.

“And how are you aware of this?” Sam asks, eyes narrowed.

Helios taps his temple. “We’re Chum, but that doesn’t mean we can’t use some magic to communicate silently with each other. My theory is being identical twins allows us more leeway than the average Chum.”

“Did the Conclave know?” Klaus questions as we all stand and make our way to the exit.

“Know what? That I’m a Chum?” Helios clarifies, and several of our group nod. Klaus isn’t the only one who’s curious about the answer. “No. Well, I thought they might have suspected, but given Chadwick’s reaction tonight, if any of the Representatives knew, she was not informed.”

“Will you lose your job?” I look up into his amber eyes.

“I don’t think so. I backed the majority of my research up in multiple locations. Though, losing my test subject would be a blow,” he murmurs, glancing to the corridor that leads to the elevator. “It can wait a few hours. Tonight is about celebrating you finding your Sept.”

“I didn’t really find anything, though, did I? I already knew you all. Just not that we would be matched.”

“You didn’t know?” Sam asks, turning to look back at me.

“No. I had no idea my doctor was in my Sept. Apparently, I’m the last, or at least one of the last, to find out.”

“Shit. Ember, I’m sorry. I honestly thought you knew. Helios didn’t exactly hide it from us,” Aaron apologises.

“I thought it was like with us. You didn’t want to acknowledge it in case the crystal said otherwise,” Zane adds in his low, rumbling timbre.

Words fail me. They knew. Of course they knew. If I felt my reactions to them, they would have experienced something similar. Aaron especially. He touched me and didn’t burn. If I pieced it together from my fractured memories of my birthday, then he definitely made the connection.

I’ve been avoiding them for nothing—minus Skylar’s feelings.

Hindsight being what it is, I realise not saying anything has probably hurt my strained relationship with my twin more than being honest would have.

Atticus opens the limo door for me, sliding in behind me and claiming the seat on my right.

“How many of you knew about Helios?” I ask once everyone is inside and the driver has pulled away from the Conclave building. The subdued chatter stops abruptly as nine pairs of eyes focus on me.

“I told Vertus first while he was in his little cell,” Helios responds. “Then Sam, Tavon, and Aaron were together at the house. I had to tell them, so I could get in and help you heal after coming of age. I helped Skylar too.”

“Oh, you *helped Skylar too*. What do you want? A cookie? A pat on the back? Should we get you a sticker that says *well done*?” Klaus snarks. “Did it ever occur to you to tell Ember?”

“I assumed she knew. Or that one of the four men she trusts more than me had informed her. Apparently, I was wrong. How novel.” Helios tilts his head to the side, his gaze landing on Sam. “I thought you would have attempted to warn her away from me. Isn’t that why you cancelled all the therapy sessions?”

“You have a conflict of interest. If Ember wishes to resume therapy at any point, I won’t stand in her way, but I don’t feel it would be appropriate for you to be her therapist,” Sam says, his tone flat.

Atticus clears his throat, drawing my attention. “I’m sorry, Pol. Vertus told me, so I knew. I didn’t think it was my place to say anything, and well, quite frankly, I thought the obsessive doctor was reading into things that might not have existed.”

I nod slowly, taking in his words while Helios scoffs and grumbles under his breath.

“Klaus? Zane? Nik? Did you know?” I ask the remaining three.

“No,” Zane grunts, shaking his head and throwing a scathing look at Aaron, who ducks his chin to avoid it.

“Didn’t have a clue. I never would’ve kept shit like that from you, Em,” Klaus says. “We have enough obstacles with my father being who he is to throw another spanner in by lying to you.”

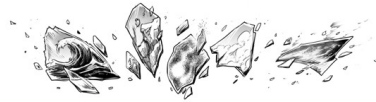
“We didn’t lie,” Vertus says with a sigh.

“You omitted to tell her. That’s a lie by omission and still counts.” Klaus leans across the small aisle and pokes Vertus in the chest. “You’ve known for *weeks*. Almost an entire month and told her nothing.”

They bicker back and forth, but I ignore them. Instead, I choose to focus on Nik, the only one who hasn’t said anything.

He doesn't need to. I can see the pain and regret in his eyes from across the limo.

"I'm sorry. I thought if we didn't say anything, then it wouldn't be true," he whispers as we pull up to the house.



This is not how I pictured tonight would go.

I didn't expect a fairytale happy ending, but I didn't think I'd be discovering that so many lied to me.

*You lied to Aaron and Zane, though. How is that different?*

"It just is," I answer aloud, bashing my hand against the piano keys.

"Oh, sweetie, don't take it out on that poor instrument," Keryn says, making me jump. "Sorry, Ember. I know you probably want to be alone to process, and it's not my place..."

"But?" I prompt her to continue.

"But." She smiles. "My wife has eleven men in her kitchen, all laying blame on each other. It seems to me, though, that the only person who should be telling them off is you."

"I-I don't know."

"I'm a housekeeper, not a therapist. So I would never claim to know what's best for another person. I do, however, have my own experiences from my sixty-odd years of life. Would you like to hear my two cents?"

I nod.

"Bottling up your emotions can only get you so far. It's like a bottle of fizzy. Each thing someone does to upset or anger you shakes the bottle. Big things are a more vigorous shake, but eventually, all that gas that's stirred up will become too much. The silliest, most minute thing can trigger the lid to pop off."



“So... I should open the bottle... and release some of the gas before it’s too late?”

“Mhmm, I should say so, but again, it’s just my two cents. You can stay down here in your music room, channel all that’s happened into songs and pour out your heart with that beautiful voice of yours. Or you can go up there and show those men that a female Anchor is not to be underestimated.” She smiles and shrugs one shoulder. “Just a thought,” she says as she leaves.

I sit and listen to her footsteps as she climbs the stairs. Raised voices drift down when she opens the door, but I can’t decipher the specific words.

Her words repeat as I sit and stare at the keys. The girl I used to be wouldn’t push back. She’d stay out of the way, let the decisions be made without her input—because it was never wanted or required—but I’m not that girl anymore.

Pushing to my feet, I straighten the skirt of my lehenga, close the fall board on the piano and make my way back upstairs.

“You expect us to believe you’re happy to be in Ember’s Sept? Really?” Sam’s shout cuts through the other raised voices I can hear coming from the kitchen and living area. Closing the basement door softly behind me, I pad across the hall in my bare feet.

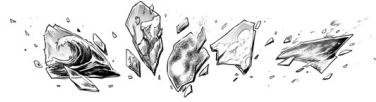
“If you’re asking whether I would prefer to be her only bonded, to be the only male she is intimate with, vulnerable with, then yes. Obviously, I’d prefer that. That doesn’t mean I don’t accept she has a Sept. I will share Ember until my dying breath, if that’s what she wants,” Helios states *to my father*. I may not have the same parental relationship with Sam, Nik, and Tavon as my brother does, but that doesn’t mean I want my sex life discussed with them.

“What she wants?” Klaus laughs. “You’re delusional if you think she’ll ever pick you over the group.”

“The second she grows tired of your antics, I’ll remove you from the equation. No questions asked.”

“Helios!” I squeak in shock, alerting them all to my presence. “Did you just threaten to kill them?”

“Of course not, pet.” I let loose a sigh of relief at his reply. “It wasn’t a threat, just a promise.”



## HELIOS

Ember stares at me, her mouth opening and closing, but no sounds come out. I move closer to her, sending tendrils of my magic out to assess her. It’s been too long since I was close enough to check her well-being.

“Bloody hell,” my brother sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Helios, try to rein in your psycho tendencies for tonight.”

“No point trying to keep a lid on it anymore. Cat’s out the bag on his lack of sanity,” Vertus snorts.

“I’ve never particularly tried to hide it. I am who I am. It’s how I’ve ensured justice and vengeance have been served for all Ember suffered.” Stunned silence greets my words, but I ignore the other men at my back. My entire focus is on the flame-haired beauty before me.

“Wh-what do you mean by that, Helios?” Ember whispers. Her gorgeous blue eyes widen as she takes in my smile. Perhaps it’s a little on the crazed side, but thinking about Dom reliving every twisted thing he inflicted on her has that effect on me.

I twirl one of her loose curls around my finger as I debate what to tell her. Tonight has already shown me that Ember isn’t a fan of secrets, so I opt for the truth. “Dominic Carmichael is one of my current patients.”

“Patient? B-because of his injuries from the crash? Why wouldn’t he be in a human hospital?”

“No,” I chuckle. “Not because of the crash. He’s serving his penance.”

“How does that make him your patient?” Skylar asks. Sketch places a hand on his bond-mate’s shoulder, keeping him from approaching Ember and me.

“I suppose patient is the wrong word,” I muse. “Dominic is a *guest* in my lab at the Conclave. We’ve been taking a trip down memory lane. Reliving the last fourteen years of EvoGen experiments. Except he’s on the table instead of standing over it.” I grin.

“Are. You. Insane?” Ember erupts, jerking back from me, causing my brows to furrow with a frown. “You had him there while I was! What if he got out? Do you have any idea what he’ll do to me now?”

“Ember, pet, he can’t hurt you. He’s far too broken.”

“You are not the only Changed with healing powers, Helios!” she screeches. “Do you think he won’t find someone to heal him for the right price if he ever gets free?” I open my mouth to explain how that will never happen, but she cuts me off. “No! You don’t get to stand there and pretend these aren’t valid questions. It’s not you he’ll go after. It’s me!”

“Ember, love. You’re making extremely valid points. All of which I’m sure Helios will sit and listen to. But right now, I need you to take a breath. Your fire magic is agitated because you’re upset,” Atticus murmurs, walking slowly towards her with his hand outstretched.

“I’m not a wounded, frightened animal. Don’t treat me as one. You’re better than that, Atticus James!” Fire flickers up Ember’s forearms, her rage and power turning her into a goddess.

“Okay, I think that’s enough,” Nikolai shouts, raising his hands. “Atticus, Klaus, Vertus, Sketch, and Helios, I think it’s best you all leave for the night. It’s been a long day. An *overwhelming* day. A lot of metaphorical bombs have been dropped, and I think Ember, as well as the rest of us, could all use a good night’s sleep.”

I tune the Lieutenant-General out as my phone buzzes in my pocket. A cursory glance shows a couple of missed calls from Greta, or Gretchen, whatever her name is. As I'm about to return it to my pocket, the phone lights up with a text message.

"I think it would be best if all of Ember's Sept remained with her for the foreseeable future," I state. Even to my own ears, my voice sounds eerily calm.

"And why is that?" Sam asks, something akin to exasperation and resignation in his words.

I look up, making eye contact with each male before glancing apologetically at Ember.

"It would appear that Dominic Carmichael escaped tonight."

Harsh curses colour the air, but I can't look away from Ember. All the colour in her cheeks drains away. Her eyes roll back in her head, and I'm already moving to catch her before the others realise what's happening.

Stroking her hair, I cradle her to my chest.

"He will never hurt you again, pet. I vow it. Never again."

## CHAPTER 23

# EMBER



My hands and legs won't move. Pressure increases across my chest, and I fight to open my eyes.

“Wakey wakey, pet. It's no fun when you're asleep.” That voice, it shouldn't be here. I'm at home with my family. My Sept, my brother, Sam, Nik, and Tavon.

“Come along, Ember. We don't have all day.” Ice fills my veins as I blink, clearing the fog from my vision.

Stark white walls greet me, along with the antiseptic smell of an overly sterile room. Each detail my senses take in has my heart rate increasing, but it's the cold eyes and cruel smug smile of the man hovering above me that threatens to send me into a panic.

“Dom? H-how?” I whimper.

“Oh, pet. You didn't forget about me, did you?” he asks, watching me closely as he pulls on a pair of gloves. “We have so much to catch up on. So much lost time,” Dom murmurs as he steps away from me.

I twist and turn, trying to keep him in my line of sight, but the restraints holding me down prevent it.

How am I back here? Where is my Sept? I have the bond with Klaus; surely he can find me?

*They'll come and rescue me. They have to.*

Dom reappears above me. His eyes move across my face, cataloguing the changes since he last had me at his mercy.

“Tsk tsk, Ember. You’re looking a little plump, and that won’t do. Pets shouldn’t be overfed, but we’ll soon get those pounds off you again. But first—” He turns to select something from the tray beside him. A sharp silver scalpel comes into view, and I freeze at the sight. Dom looks down at me as I stiffen with fear, his malicious grin giving a manic gleam to his eyes. “So much to do and so little time.” He traces the blade across my cheek, drawing a mewling whimper from me. It’s been so long since I felt the cut of a blade; I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep from screaming. “I’d tell you this won’t hurt a bit, but that would be a lie. Now, hold still.”

The blade pushes into my flesh. The wetness of the blood trickles down my cheek, mixing with the tears I can’t hold back.

*Please, let someone find me soon. Please.* I chant the words like a prayer, over and over.

A blast of kinetic energy sends the door flying off its hinges. I can’t make out more than the vague shape of whoever enters. Relief floods through me as Dom’s hand is ripped away. The scalpel clatters as it falls to the floor. Sounds of fists hitting flesh fills my ears, and I hope it’s Dom suffering damage from each blow.

Grunts and curses sound out, and then there’s nothing but my heavy breathing.

“P-please,” I call out, or try to, but my voice is weak and pitiful. I doubt anyone could hear me, even if they were in the room.

“Pol, you’re okay. This is just a dream. I’ve got you. You’re okay,” Atticus repeats as he releases the bindings on my chest, wrists, and ankles. As soon as I’m free, he scoops me up into his arms, cradling me against his chest. “I’ve got you, love. Shh, Ember. This isn’t real. I’m here. You’re safe, and this isn’t real.”

“Wh-what? H-how?” I stutter like a broken record, unable to say or ask anything else.

“Look around us, love. It’s okay. Go on. Look,” Atticus encourages, and after only a moment’s hesitation, I lift my head from his chest.

The white walls over the testing lab are gone. Instead, a white and grey fog lingers all around us. There’s no sign of Dom, and when I lift my hand to my cheek, there’s no sting of pain. No blood mars my fingers when I pull them back.

“I-I don’t understand,” I say, tilting my head back to look into his kind hazel eyes.

“You had a shock, passed out, and ended up here in a dream. Or maybe nightmare is a better descriptor.” Atticus adjusts his hold on me, freeing one hand to cup my face. His thumb strokes across the cheek Dom had cut. “Helios caught you, but, well, let’s say your fathers are going to take a bit to warm up to him. We all are,” he adds the last sentence so quietly I almost missed it.

“People aren’t happy that the psycho stalker who is part of a motorcycle club and works with the Conclave—Oh, and admitted to torturing another person—is in my Sept. Gee, who’d have thunk it.”

Atticus stares down at me for a beat. His mouth opens and closes a few times, and laughter bubbles up in my chest. When I can no longer contain it, he shakes his head, his own chuckles mixing with mine.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better. And I’m glad you called me in here to help.”

“Did I? Is that how this works? Could the others join us here too?” I ask, consumed by questions and in no hurry to wake up and face reality again.

“Possibly. I think it depends on the strength of your bond,” he muses, still stroking my cheek.

“Ours isn’t complete, though?”

“Not yet, but when you’re ready, I doubt it would take much.” He leans down, placing a soft kiss on my forehead. “I trust you, Ember. You accept all parts of me. The stern asshole drill sergeant with a stick up his butt.” A giggle escapes me at



his description, and he smiles widely at the sound. “The nerd who wants to read every book ever written. Especially if you’re my reading buddy.”

“I’d like that,” I whisper, and he kisses the tip of my nose.

“You accept when I need a moment to myself or when I need to hold you and feel you in my arms.”

“Like now?”

“Yes, Ember. Like now. I know I can’t keep you safe alone, but your Sept are all fiercely protective of you. There’s something about you that brings that desire to the surface. Not just in us. The Shadow-Stalkers and your fathers, your brother. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Hounds of Charon take you under their protection officially too,” Atticus says with a smile. “You’re not alone anymore, love. You’ll never be alone again.”

I close my eyes, and a single tear slips past.

“Ember? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I blink and look up at him. “Happy tears. I never thought I would get to experience love like this.”

“Love?” He swallows heavily, eyes flicking back and forth across my face from behind his glasses. “Is that your way of saying you love me, Ember?”

*Is it? Do I?*

My breath catches in my throat, and my cheeks heat. I lick my lips, and Atticus inhales sharply, tracking the motion.

“Yes,” I confess. “Yes, Atticus James, I love you.”

His mouth connects with mine as the last syllable leaves me. This kiss is raw passion and desire wrapped with a storm of positive emotions. Finally, he pulls back, resting his head against mine. We’re both breathing heavily, and my fists are curled into the fabric of his shirt.

“I love you too, Ember Ward. My Pol, my light,” he utters before kissing me again.

His tongue strokes mine as his fingers twirl into my hair, pulling me closer. I shift my weight, adjusting my position until I'm straddling him. Atticus' other hand runs down my side, across the bare flesh of my stomach, as my own explores the dips and valleys of his muscled torso.

"Where did our clothes go, Ember?" he mutters against my lips.

"We're in a dream, and they were in the way... so *poof*." I shrug as he chuckles.

"And what were they in the way of? What do you need?" he whispers between kisses. My head tilts back, exposing my neck to him. Atticus holds me tight against him as he sucks and nips my skin. "Gods, you're beautiful."

The surrounding fog coalesces, forming a new room. One I've never seen before but somehow feels intimately mine. Exposed rafters frame the ceiling, giving the space a rustic vibe. For a dream, the colours are muted, but it's bright and airy with enormous windows overlooking the forests, mountain, and lake. The view is so similar to the one from my bedroom, but the angle is off. I don't get to analyse the differences; my attention is drawn to the bed large enough it could comfortably sleep my entire Sept.

"Is this the room you dream for us, my Anchor?" Atticus asks, taking my hand in his and pressing a kiss to the pulse point of my wrist.

"One day, maybe," I sigh as he works his way up my arm and across my shoulder, peppering my skin with kisses. I lean back, resting my palms on his cheeks. "Atticus, I know this is a dream, but..."

"But what? Ask me anything, and I will always do my best to deliver."

"Love me. I-I mean physically. Will you—" Before I can finish my question, he lifts me into his arms as he stands. Atticus presses a hard, firm kiss against my lips, then drops me onto the giant cloud-like mattress.

“I will always be here to love you, physically, mentally, magically, emotionally. If you want me, Ember, I’m yours.” His hands encircle my ankles, pulling me flat against the bed. My eyelids drift shut as his fingers trail up my legs, pushing my thighs apart.

His deep inhale has me wanting to close the gap, but his grip tightens right before his tongue licks me. As Atticus sucks on my clit, my hands fist the covers on either side, and my back arches off the bed.

“Fucking delicious,” he practically purrs before diving back in to feast on me again.

Atticus licks and sucks me into a needy, panting mess before working a finger, then two, inside me. The sounds of how wet he’s making me would normally be embarrassing, but this is a dream. If all nightmares turned into this, I’d never be scared to sleep again.

My toes curl as I edge closer and closer to my climax. My breaths come in gasps as I thrash and whimper for release under his touch. Atticus presses his fingers deep inside, crooking them to massage the inner wall as he creates a vacuum with his mouth to suck on my clit. Stars erupt behind my eyes, and an involuntary squeak escapes as my orgasm rockets through me.

My limbs shake as he moves over me, pausing to kiss my tattoo and every exposed scar. I can taste myself on him when he finally reaches my lips.

“More? Or are you needing some rest?” he asks.

Oh, silly man.

“Definitely more.” I wrap my legs around his waist and reach down to line him up with my entrance. “We can rest later, right?”

A half smile ticks up one side of his mouth. “Sure, I don’t see why not.”

His hips surge forward, and I relish the feeling of fullness. It’s been so long; I have a brief moment of worry that I won’t know what to do, but then he moves. Atticus rolls his hips

before pulling back and thrusting into me. Each movement brings heightened pleasure, and yet it's such a unique experience to being with Vertus.

Atticus is slow and sensual. He's making love to me, not just having sex.

My hand heats against his chest as I inch towards another blissful orgasm. He bends his head to kiss me, his thrusts becoming more erratic as he approaches his release.

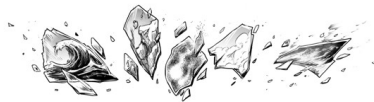
"Fuck," he grunts as he gives one last thrust, grinding his pelvis against my clit and sending us both over the edge.

"Holy shit!" I blink, trying to figure out how I can hear Klaus when I can't see him.

"How the fuck did that happen?" Vertus demands. How am I hearing them in my dream? They're not here.

"Did she... did they... Em claimed him? In her sleep?" Aaron stutters.

Atticus sighs and drops a kiss on my forehead. "Time to wake up, love."



## ATTICUS

Ember's hand is still warm against my chest when I wake. I don't remember falling asleep after extracting her from Helios and bringing her up to her room.

"What the hell happened, Atticus?" Vertus demands. "You were asleep. How the fuck did that—" He swirls a finger over Ember's hand on my chest. "—happen while you're both asleep?"

"She was having a nightmare and pulled me into it somehow," I answer.

"And then what? You slipped and fell into her vagina?"

“Don’t be crude, V,” Ember groans, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

“If you want me to be crude—”

“No!” She holds a hand up, silencing Vertus before he can finish his sentence. “That’s all right. You don’t need to demonstrate.” Ember looks at her hand, then at my slightly singed shirt. “Um, so the dream was enough to, er, trigger the bond, huh?”

“It would appear so.” I watch her closely. Does she regret what happened? Did she not want to claim me? “Are you okay with that? With what happened, I mean.”

“Yes. I just... it’s a little unexpected, but I think it’s a good thing,” she says. Ember sits up and straightens the crop top of her lehenga choli. “I should get changed, and then I’d like to start arranging the bonding ceremony.”

“Really?” Aaron asks, looking slightly dumbfounded but also as though all his Christmases have come early.

“Dom is out there somewhere. I-I think completing the bonds will help keep me, all of us, safe. You’ll be able to feel if something happens, right?”

“Well, yeah. But, Em, you have a bond—”

“Two. She has one with me as well,” Klaus interrupts Aaron, who takes the news in stride.

“Right. You have two bonds. We can wait for you to get to know us better, or I don’t know.” Aaron rubs his hands over his face. “I’m doing a shit job here.”

“You’re making it sound like you don’t want her,” Zane says, causing Aaron’s umber skin to take on an ashen shade.

“Shit. No. That’s definitely not what I meant. Fuck.”

“It’s okay, Aaron. Honestly, it is rushed. But we have extenuating circumstances, and it’s not as though we’re complete strangers.”

“No, but you do need to convince Sam, Nikolai, and Tavon that Helios is a good match for you,” Vertus says into the quiet

room. Ember groans again and flumps back onto her mattress as a knock sounds on the door.

Zane opens it, and Skylar steps into the room.

“Man, this room is definitely not big enough for all of you,” he mutters in lieu of a greeting.

“Hey, La-La.” Ember waves into the air, not sitting up.

“Hey, Pipes. Um, so, I think I found a house you might like. I was gonna tell you last night, but well, yeah...”

“The Dom bomb was dropped, and I passed out like a delicate flower?” Ember’s self-deprecating words are met with a chorus of rebuke, which she waves off. “It’s fine.” She pulls herself back up and looks at her brother. “You found me a house?”

“Maybe? I actually booked a viewing, if you want to get out and see it?” He scratches the back of his head, ruffling his hair. “It’s not too far from here or the Hounds’ compound, and there’s tons of room and views of the forest and lake. I know how much you like your balcony here, and, well, I’ve been a giant shit-headed butt muncher, and I’m sorry.”

I look from Vertus to Klaus to the Greene twins at Skylar’s apology. At least, I think it’s an apology.

“Shit-headed butt muncher, huh?” Ember asks, her lip twitching with a smile.

“A giant one. Like monstrosly horrific. I was being a selfish twat, and I should’ve made it up to you way before now, and I know this won’t make up for it.” Skylar pauses for a breath, fidgeting nonstop. “But, well, I’m hoping this is a start?”

“Okay, Vertus had viewings booked for today anyway, so as long as it doesn’t clash with those.” She shrugs. “Then let’s go see the house. I need a shower first, though.”

“You heard the lady. Everyone clear out.” Vertus waves his arms in the air, herding the other men from the room.

“Um, so, Atticus?” Ember asks as she climbs out of bed, and I follow suit. “Want to help me wash my back?”

“I would love to,” I say, pulling her into my arms for a kiss.

## CHAPTER 24



# EMBER



I opt to travel in Skylar's car with Vertus, Helios, and Sketch. There are too many of us to all fit into one vehicle, anyway. It's not as though I can go to look at a house for my Sept and me without all six men. Then Sketch invited himself along, supposedly to keep his brother in line. Sam and Nik don't trust the biker twins, and Tavon didn't want to stay at the house and 'miss out on all the fun.'

The estate agent is going to get a shock when our convoy rolls up.

"The turn-in is just up here on the right," Skylar says as he flicks his indicator on. "You'll be further back from the lake, but it's the same lake. You might be able to see our house from the upper levels. I haven't been inside, so I'm not a hundred percent sure."

"Skylar, breathe." I pat his arm, trying to reassure him as the house comes into view. "Oh. Oh, wow."

The split-level property wraps around the trees, more like an elaborate treehouse than a home. I count five levels linked together with stairs and balcony terraces.

"I thought you'd like the natural finish and how it kinda blends with the surroundings," Skylar babbles as he follows the winding driveway. "The ground floor space could be converted to offices for your company, Vertus. If you do in-person meetings and stuff."

"It looks promising," V says, leaning forward between the front seats. "Nice find, Skylar."

“Thanks, but if it’s not the right fit, I can help find somewhere else. Start making amends for being a total dick.”

“Let’s actually view this place before you start planning more searches,” Sketch chuckles from the back.

As soon as the car comes to a stop, I throw my door open and climb out. The woman I assume is the estate agent descends the first set of stairs with a poised smile. I tune her out after the initial greeting and pleasantries, too busy basking in the property’s beauty.

Amusement from Klaus and Atticus through the bond draws my attention back to the group. All eyes are on me, and everyone is either smiling or chuckling. My cheeks flush with the realisation that they’ve been trying to get my attention for a minute or two.

“Sorry,” I say as Atticus wraps an arm around me, pulling me into his side.

“You’re fine. Shall we head in and look around?”

“I think Ember should walk around with Skylar or us,” Sam says, waving a hand between himself, Tavon, and Nik. “If you get this place, it will be the home for all seven of you. Each of you needs to make your decision without being influenced by Ember’s reactions.”

It takes a moment for everyone to splinter off into their groupings. Helios lingers until Sketch physically pulls him away, leaving me alone with Skylar.

“So there’s five levels, but six building pod things?” I ask, tilting my head back to look up. “The view from the top is going to be amazing, but that’s *a lot* of stairs.”

“Yeah...” Skylar agrees, then nudges my side with his elbow. “Good thing you have magic and can teleport yourself, huh?”

I laugh before tucking my arm through his. “Come on, the ground floor will likely be V’s domain, so let’s start on the first floor.” Not waiting for a response, I pull my magic to the surface and transport us to the terrace above.

The first-floor pod comprises a suite of guest rooms. We don't linger long, but I like that there's somewhere for Vertus' teams to stay if they're ever here working late. Taking the stairs up to the second floor, we find a cosy sitting room with two large windows at the far wall providing stunning views of the area.

A fire crackles inside the iron wood burner, giving the dressed space a homey feel, despite the lack of furniture. The kitchen diner has white granite counters, stainless steel appliances, and an island bar which could easily seat all seven of us.

"Think there's enough space for Aaron?" I ask Skylar as I run my hand over the work surface, enjoying the coolness of the granite against my skin.

"Yeah, and there's a built-in coffee machine thing, which will please Zane."

I nod, my cheeks sore from smiling, and lead the way up to the third floor, the only level with two pods. Each contains three bedrooms and an enormous bathroom. The fact there's space for each of my men to have their own space settles a worry I hadn't noticed hanging over me.

"This is a really beautiful property, Skylar. There's space for everyone," I murmur, stepping out onto one of the bedroom balconies. He joins me, resting his forearms on the railing. We watch the others move about in silence for a while before Skylar releases a long breath.

"I don't want to lose you," he whispers before clearing his throat and resuming at his usual volume. "It's why I was being such an arse about you moving. In my head, if we weren't living together, then we wouldn't see each other. It's not a valid excuse," he hurries to add. I wait him out, knowing there's more to come when he rubs the back of his neck. "Uh, I actually talked to Helios a bit last night after the dads finished their inquisition on him. I saw a therapist before, but I'm gonna start going again."

"Yeah? What did Helios say that made you decide that?"

“He pointed out that I spent fourteen years missing you, knowing you weren’t in a good place but not realising the true horrors you were going through. It’s not abandonment issues because you didn’t abandon me. If anything, *I* abandoned you, but part of me isn’t ready to let you go.” Skylar tilts his head to the side, looking over at me with a sad smile. “I love seeing you happy, though. Not that I’ve given you much cause to be happy recently, but your Sept? They have. You light up around them—even Helios.”

I laugh, and he grins at me. “Thanks, La-La.” I nudge his shoulder with my own, leaning my head against him. “You’re not losing me. You never have. Twins share something. Even on my darkest days, I’d remember little things we did. It made life more bearable. You never gave up on finding me, and I never gave up the hope we’d see each other again. We’re okay. As long as you’re not mad about Aaron and Zane being called to me?”

“Nah, I’m not mad. I had a moment of being sad that they weren’t in the same group as me, but I was never mad.”

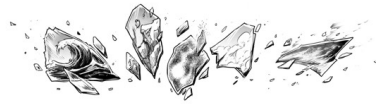
“Ember!” Atticus’ voice rings out from above us. “Ember, you need to see the top floor!”

“Let’s not keep them waiting. Care to do the honours?” Skylar asks, holding his hand out to me. As soon as our skin connects, I use my magic to teleport us up to the fourth and final floor.

The terrace is much smaller; I suppose they expect less foot traffic up here.

“I’m here, Atticus. What did you want—” My question dies on my lips as I walk through the pod door and into the bedroom from this morning’s dream.

“It’s the same, right?” Atticus asks, wrapping his arms around me from behind. I’m lost for words and simply nod in response. “That settles it, then. We’re buying this place.”



## KLAUS

After letting the agent know we definitely want the property, we all gather back at the Wards' house. Ember explains to Sam, Nik, and Tavon about wanting to have the bonding ceremony as soon as possible. Which means we have a day of planning and more paperwork to complete.

Their cook, Anya, has a huge spread of food waiting for us. "I thought you might need food you can pick at while you plan Ember's bonding ceremony," she says on her way out, with no explanation as to how she knew that's what we came back to do.

"Are we sure she's human? Does she have some kind of clairvoyant prediction thing?" I ask while everyone else grabs plates and drinks.

"Not that I'm aware of." Sam shrugs. "It's plausible but unlikely. I can't recall her anticipating anything like this previously, and she's been with us for twenty years or so."

"As good as all this looks, we're not needed for the planning stuff," Skylar says, waving a hand to include Sketch in his statement. "Just tell me what you need me to do and where to be, and I'll be there."

"And where are you going off to now?" Nik asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

"To busy congregated areas and hope I stumble across my other mate?" Skylar shrugs. "There's someone of age out there who was called to me when the crystal pulsed blue. I'm not going to sit around and hope our paths cross."

After Skylar and Sketch leave, Tavon grabs his laptop and sits at the dining table, patting the seat next to him as he calls Ember over.

“Let’s start with a date,” he says, clicking on the screen. “How soon did you want to do this? There’s no rush, but the longer you wait, the more likely it is someone will notice your magical signature in Atticus and Klaus.”

“What?” Nik drops the pastry he was about to bite back onto his plate. The Lieutenant-General narrows his eyes as he scrutinises Atticus and me.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to, loves,” Tavon says, shaking his head at Nik and Sam.

“All right, well, if you have a bond with two of them already, there’s very little point in delaying,” Sam sighs, removing his glasses and cleaning them on the corner of his shirt. “Unless you want to, sweetheart? Do you need time? We can think of a way to explain your signature in theirs.”

“I think sooner is better,” Ember says with conviction. “The Representatives make me feel like a commodity. I think... I think if I’m bonded to my full Sept, then I’ll lose value in their eyes.”

“Only while they still deem you ‘broken,’” Helios says, taking the chair across from her at the table. “They won’t find a healer other than me who can repair what EvoGen did to you, though.”

“Toot your own horn much?” I snark, leaning against the kitchen island.

“Ever hear the phrase ‘jack of all trades?’” Helios asks, and I nod along with the others.

“Yes, ‘jack of all trades, master of none.’ What of it?” Atticus raises an eyebrow as he takes a seat next to the doctor.

“Changed are like that. You can use all forms of magic. You might have a preference, an affinity to one element over another, but you can wield it all. Chum aren’t like that. You’re jacks, I’m a master,” Helios explains.

“And because the Representatives look down on Chum, they won’t go to another one with healing magic to make me fertile,” Ember muses.

“Exactly, pet. No one is going to force you into something you don’t want. If you ever change your mind in the future?” He wiggles his fingers in the air. “I’ll restore anything you want me to.”

“We’ll see. It’s not something I’m interested in any time soon. We can discuss it as a family. But first, we need to legally become a family.” Ember leans over to look at Tavon’s screen. A frown pulls her brows down as her eyes flick across the page. “I don’t understand?”

“It would appear that the Representatives have blocked you from registering for the bonding caves,” Tavon grits the words out. His nostrils flare, and I round the table to read over his shoulder.

“I’ll call my dad. This is bullshit,” I grunt, pulling my phone from my pocket and walking into the hall.

“What is it, Klaus? I’m busy,” my father answers, skipping a civil greeting entirely.

“I was wondering if you knew why my Anchor can’t book time at the bonding caves?”

My father snorts. “Of course, I do. It’s because I blocked your names. I’m not going to allow you to bond with that poor excuse for an Anchor until we have a plan in place.”

“A plan for what?” I grit the words out through my clenched jaw, failing miserably at keeping my cool.

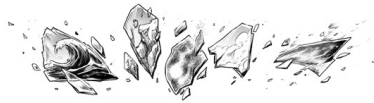
“For your future, Klaus,” he snaps. “You will take my seat on the Conclave, and you need an heir to secure our bloodline’s legacy.”

“It’s an *elected* position, father. You can’t secure a seat for me, and *again*, I don’t want to be a Conclave Representative.” I sigh, pinching my nose. A dull ache throbs in my temples.

“Then I’ll never give you access to the caves, and you won’t ever complete your bond.” He hangs up, cutting my retort off.

I stare at my phone for a minute before turning back to the kitchen. If my father won’t speak to me over the phone, then

I'll round up my Sept and Anchor and go to his office. My life is not his to dictate.



I lead the way to the Representatives' chamber. The guards on either side of the entrance don't question me when I pass them, pushing the double doors open and striding in.

"What is the meaning of this?" Representative Dixon blusters from his seat on the mezzanine.

"Klaus? What are you doing?" my father seethes, looking down at me, us, with disdain. The feeling is mutual, Father. So very much mutual.

"Our phone call got cut off, so I thought I would save time and come down to discuss the official bonding with my Anchor and Sept in person." I spread my arms in a wide shrug.

"We can discuss this later—"

"Now, now, Jermaine," Representative Chadwick simpers, patting my father's arm. "Don't be so dismissive. Obviously, it's something important to your son for him to interrupt us with his entire bond-group."

"It is, Representative," Atticus says, stepping up to stand next to me. "We wish to formalise our acceptance of fate's call. However, when we attempted to register for time in the bonding caves, we were rejected at the first step."

"There are matters that need to be resolved before you can cement the sacred bonds." Father stands, stepping up to the mezzanine's railing. "The discernment crystal only confirmed your match yesterday. Take time to evaluate if being tied to a female who cannot provide you with heirs is worth it." His stony gaze sweeps across us, settling finally on Ember. "Unless you've already discussed the alternative arrangements I mentioned while you were a guest in the basement labs?"



“We’re not bonding with Ember to knock up other females to appease your fucked up ego!” Helios snarls.

“Now, now.” Representative Chadwick stands, waving her hands in a placating gesture. “I’m sure it won’t come to that.” She pats my father’s arm again, smiling up at him before turning her insipid smile down on us. “Gentlemen, do you all truly wish to be bound to Miss Ward?”

Five voices join mine in agreeing.

“And Miss Ward? Do you wish to bond all six of these men to you?” Chadwick asks.

Ember tilts her head to the side, and I can sense her confusion through our bond. “Yes, Representative, I do,” she answers.

“Then, really, I see no reason for us to interfere. You wouldn’t be as invested as you are, Jermaine, if Klaus wasn’t involved,” Chadwick says. I share a glance with Atticus next to me, who nods. This is a very different attitude from the one Chadwick presented last night. What could have changed in less than twenty-four hours?

“And you would be invested if it were Mason down there,” my father seethes.

“She’s right, though, Jermaine. We don’t have grounds to stop them from entering the caves and completing their bond. None of them are criminals.”

I almost snort at Representative Dixon’s words. Pretty sure being a patched member of the Hounds of Charon qualifies Helios as a criminal.

My father’s face turns a mottled purple, but he finally relents. “Fine. You may have the bonding caves on Saturday. Now, leave us. We have important business we were discussing before you intruded.”

“Of course, thank you, Father.” I tilt my head forward, giving the illusion of a respectful bow. Reaching out for Ember, I pull her into my side as we leave the chamber.

“Anyone else find that change of heart suspicious?” Zane rumbles, and we all nod.

“We’ll stay alert, but the caves are sacred. I doubt they’d do anything to us there,” Atticus murmurs.

I wish I had his faith.

## CHAPTER 25

# EMBER



Representative Chadwick's attitude shift is still playing on my mind three days later. It doesn't help that every time her son has passed me at the Institute, he's been exuding smugness.

Mason hasn't said anything, which should set me at ease, but it's having the opposite effect. My mind keeps firing various scenarios of how things could go wrong. From the possibility of the Representatives rescinding the approval for us to access the caves, to the extreme of a convoluted plan where they have doppelgängers to replace the guys.

I don't know if that would even work. Would the trust I have transfer if I only thought it was one of my Sept?

"We're going shopping. Tonight, right after classes finish," Myra declares loudly, pulling me from my increasingly spiralling thoughts. She takes the seat across from me at our lunch table, glaring at me.

"We are? Why?" I ask, perplexed by her sudden desire.

"Why? *Why?* Are you kidding me, Ember Ward? You know damn well why!"

My eyes widen as she leans across the table. A quick glance at the guys shows some with confused frowns and others holding back laughter. At least the frowns are on my side and completely lost as to what's happening.

"Um, Myra?"

"Did you think you could keep your *bonding ceremony* from me? I'm, like, your best friend, and you were going to

get hitched without getting a new lehenga? *That*, my friend, is unacceptable.” She pokes a finger at me, not quite able to reach my body.

“So we’re going shopping?” I say, secretly thrilled to have a female best friend.

“Damn straight, we are. Willow and her sister are gonna come too. Are you doing the vows before or after the caves?” Myra drops back into her seat, mollified when I don’t fight her on the shopping excursion.

“Um...” I look at Aaron and Zane. “Was that decided?”

“After,” Zane grunts.

“Vertus suggested it, so no one would be, er, distracted with what was to come,” Aaron smiles before casting an apologetic look at Skylar as my twin groans, pushing away his plate.

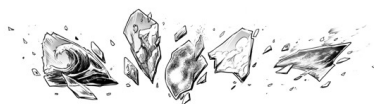
“Really, Skylar? How old are you?” Myra teases, stealing his plate and eating his fries.

“It’s my sister and the guys I’ve grown up with. I’m allowed to not want to hear the details,” my twin gripes, wrinkling his nose.

“Yeah, but those,” she waves a fry in the air before biting it in half, “weren’t details. I’ll be getting *all* the deets from Em, *after* she can walk straight again.” Myra cackles as I bury my red-hot face in my hands.

“Please, can the bell ring now?” I beg, and someone, somewhere, takes pity on me. The bell chimes, and I jump up from my seat, ready to beeline to my next class and away from Myra.

“I’ll meet you out front! Don’t try and get out of it! And I already invited your dads!” she yells after me. I wave a hand in the air, acknowledging her.



## ZANE

“What do you *mean* we’re not allowed to come with you?” I hear Klaus ask Myra in an incredulous tone as Aaron, Rui, Skylar, and I approach the car park.

“Exactly what I said, Becer.” Myra jabs a finger against my soon-to-be bond-brother’s chest. “None of her Sept can come. It’s against tradition.”

“Yes, but Ember is in danger. The human—”

“Yeah, you’ve said. Several times.” Myra cuts Klaus off with a harsh glare and exasperated sigh. “I’d be insulted, but there is still a lot of offensive magic Willow and I need to catch up on. *But,*” she raises her voice when Klaus goes to interrupt, “it’s not just us. Mr Ward and Mr Greene-Ward are both meeting us there. Instructor James has informed me that two freaking Shadow-Stalkers will be there too.”

Rui’s phone chimes in his pocket, and he huffs a laugh after reading the message. “It appears I’m tagging along too, plus my twin.” He looks up, ignoring everyone else, and makes eye contact with Ember. “Helios’ orders, but he’s not my boss. If you want girls’ time—or as much as it can be with Sam, Tavon, and two elite soldiers—just say, and I’ll tell him to fuck off.”

I blink at my friend and cast a glance around our group. Ember looks amused, while Myra appears confused, but the rest of us? Skylar, Aaron, and Klaus are staring at Rui with the same stunned shock I feel.

“*You’re* going to tell *Helios* to fuck off?” Aaron asks. “You? The guy who’s spent the last few years being Crannick’s victim of choice?”

Rui grins, the expression is almost savage. “Yeah, Crannick is small fry compared to being a prospect for the Hounds. Besides, if he was hassling me, he wasn’t hassling someone else who couldn’t handle it.”

Klaus barks a laugh, and I shake my head.

“So you’re saying we never had to defend you or rush to your aid like we have been for the last four years?” I ask,

crossing my arms over my chest. Rui shrugs, not even looking remotely sorry. “Unbelievable.”

The roar of a motorbike draws our attention and that of the other Changed loitering in the car park before heading home. Sketch pulls up next to us and throws Skylar the spare helmet that was behind him.

“That’s my cue,” Skylar says, strapping the helmet to his head before looking at his sister. “Unless you want me to come? I can resched—”

“No, you can’t,” Sketch says at the same time Ember waves Skylar’s comment off.

“You’re fine, La-La. Go, have fun. I can fill you in tonight.”

I’m not the only one glaring at Sketch as Skylar gives Ember a quick hug before climbing onto the back of the bike.

“Cloud said you can ride bitch with him, Ghost. Helios already gave him the address,” Sketch shouts to Rui as he revs the engine. He doesn’t wait for a response before peeling out of the car park.

“Where are they going in such a rush?” Myra questions. Her voice is quiet enough that I’m taking it as rhetorical. I’m not sure any of us want the details, but I hope they’re being safe, no matter what they’re doing.

“Got space for me in your car, Myra?” Rui asks, redirecting everyone’s attention.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure.” She looks at her phone for the time and curses softly under her breath. “We gotta go, or we’ll be late. Come on,” she says, waving a hand and walking to her car. Rui follows close behind, and Ember joins them after giving Klaus, Aaron, and me hugs.

I love how comfortable she’s become around us. When she first came home, I didn’t think we’d be hugging two months down the line. Though, to be fair, when she first came home, I never anticipated bonding with her either. It’s a silver lining to everything she’s been through. I’d have preferred if we’d got to this point, planning our bonding ceremony, without her

having spent any time with EvoGen, but the past can't be altered. So there's no point dwelling on it.

A sharp whistle pulls me from my thoughts, and I turn my head to see Atticus striding purposefully towards us. As he gets closer and his features are clearer, it's obvious something's happened to piss him off.

"Vertus got the keys to the house. He wants to start remodelling the ground floor for his company," he says by way of greeting.

I frown, unable to link his expression with that statement.

"Okay? Why do you look so pissed about it?" Klaus asks, clearly thinking similarly to me.

"That's not what I'm pissed about."

"Wanna tell us what has you glaring like that, then?" I push.

Atticus huffs, running a hand through his hair, and I notice how dishevelled it is. Clearly, he's been doing that a lot recently.

"The Conclave has denied our request for single access to the bonding cave," Atticus explains through gritted teeth. "Which means—"

"Ember has to enter from the opposite side with a Representative escort," Klaus finishes, fists clenching at his sides. Atticus nods tersely.

"Yes. They're saying as an Anchor, Ember should uphold all traditions to ensure a smooth bonding process." His lips twist with distaste, but I'm confused. They're already bonded to Ember.

"We know the caves don't do anything, though, at least not for the bonding." I wave a hand between Klaus and Atticus. "You two have proven that."

"They're up to something. The separate entrances haven't been enforced for years," Klaus mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose.



“She has to have a Representative escort, but can she have, I don’t know, bridesmaids?” Aaron asks, plucking the human term out of thin air.

Atticus and Klaus look at him with confusion, but I think I’m following my brother’s logic.

“Like in the movies, friends of Ember who are there to help her get ready and see her down the aisle. Except in this case, they’d see her into the cave,” I say aloud and smile when Aaron nods.

“Let’s discuss it with Vertus and Helios at the house. Then we can get the master bedroom decorated. I don’t know about you three, but I plan to have a decent bed to take Ember to after the ceremony is concluded,” Atticus says. He doesn’t wait for a response before heading towards his car in the faculty section of the car park.

I crack my neck as Aaron unlocks our car.

“Hey, Aaron?” I ask after climbing into the passenger seat.

“Yeah?” he answers, not looking at me as he backs out of the space.

“Think Em will want a giant version of the blanket I made her for the main bedroom?”

He snorts. “Really? That’s what you’re thinking about? Not what Atticus just said about the Conclave playing games with our ceremony?”

“I can’t do anything yet about the ceremony. We’ll get to the house and brainstorm a plan altogether. Until then,” I lift my phone and wave it in his peripheral vision. “I’m shopping for wool.”

Aaron doesn’t say anything, and I busy myself scrolling through different websites as he drives. Eventually, as we’re approaching the turn towards the new house, he breaks the comfortable quiet between us.

“I didn’t think you’d be so quick to let others take charge on Ember’s safety.”

“I’m not,” I say, putting my phone away. “But Vertus and Atticus are Shadow-Stalkers or were anyway. They have that skillset, and Atticus is the current commander, so we have backup there. From what I’ve overheard the last few weeks, the four guys on his team are loyal to Vertus and him.”

“Okay, yeah, I’ve heard mutterings about them wanting to join Vertus’ company once he’s set up. What about the doctor?”

The doctor. What do I think about Helios? I take a moment to think through an answer to that one. Aaron pulls onto the driveway, giving me time to collect my thoughts. He’ll park and wait me out if I haven’t answered him yet, which could draw attention.

“Dude kinda scares me,” I admit. “Those notes were creepy as fuck, but Ember seems to trust him. He didn’t hurt her, and I get the feeling he was only working within the Conclave in hopes of getting more information on her?” A sigh leaves my lips, and I scratch absentmindedly at my beard. “I don’t know. Jury’s still out. Part of me wants to blame him for Dom getting out, but there’s this niggle in the back of my mind that there’s nothing he could’ve done to stop it.”

I finish speaking as Aaron puts the car into park next to Vertus’ vehicle. Atticus pulls up next to us, and Klaus arrives a few minutes later.

“How did the purchase of this place complete so fast?” Aaron asks once we’re out of the car and heading into the ground floor building, which will become Vertus’ offices.

“Magic, obviously,” Helios answers from beside the door. He’s lounging back in a chair while Vertus stands over a table covered in blueprints.

“Magic, incentive, additional funds.” The silver-haired ex-commander waves a hand. “All of the above. It doesn’t matter. The place is ours, and we’re going to come up with a plan to keep our Anchor safe while shifting a few of these walls.”

After Vertus explains the jobs to each of us, we get to work. Atticus, Helios, and Klaus add more to the conversation

with Vertus on how to keep Ember safe than Aaron or I do. I have a brief moment of feeling inadequate; I don't know the Conclave and Representatives like they do. But my time will come, and so will Aaron's. We each have a part to play. I have to believe that. The fates put us together for Ember, knowing she would need something from each of us.

Aaron is a caretaker by nature. He'll feed her, make sure she drinks enough water, that kind of stuff. Helios' doctor side will probably be similar, but more forceful. My brother will be the softer approach.

I can see his place. The void he'll fill.

Vertus and Atticus are her main protectors. Vertus shares her love of music and Atticus her love of books.

Klaus surprisingly seems to be the one who makes her laugh.

They each have a niche. I just can't see mine.

That doesn't mean I'll give up looking. Whatever void is left, I'll fill. Ember deserves nothing less than my all. And I'll be damned if I fail her.

## CHAPTER 26

# EMBER



Sam and Tavon meet us at the specialist store Myra got us an appointment at. Along with Rui, Cloud, and two of the Shadow-Stalkers, Corporals Nox and Ellis. Part of me feels like the additional security and protection might be overkill. Dom is only human, but the fact my Sept is taking his escape so seriously eases my worries. If one or more of my six guys can't be with me, then Atticus orders two of his team to play bodyguard. I'm not sure if Rui and Cloud being here is Helios' doing or Rui's, but I'll accept all the precautions they want to take. I never want to be at the mercy of Dom or EvoGen again.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Sam greets, giving me a brief hug. “This is an exclusive shop. I'm amazed they had an available appointment.”

“Oh, that was Willow. Her mum owns the place,” Myra says, a bright smile on her lips as she bounces on the spot. “Ready to go in?”

“Sure, lead the way,” I laugh. Corporals Nox and Ellis opt to wait outside while Rui and Cloud follow us in.

“I still can't believe you didn't tell us. Who doesn't tell their best friends they're having a bonding ceremony? Sheesh, Em,” Myra babbles, shaking her head as she leads the way up the stairs to the loft studio space.

Tavon covers a laugh with a cough as he follows behind me with Sam. “Have you given much thought to colour, Ember?”

“Um, no. Honestly, I thought I’d just wear one of the lehenga cholis I already have.” I shrug, then wince at Myra’s affronted gasp.

“You can’t do that! This is your *bonding*. You can’t wear something you already own. Ember, Ember, Ember.” She lets out a heavy sigh. “What am I going to do with you?”

The stairs end on a small landing with an ornate archway separating the entrance to the main studio floor. Stepping through is like stepping into an explosion of colour. Racks upon racks of lehengas and matching cholis fill the space, all organised by colour.

“It’s like we’ve walked into a rainbow,” I mutter.

“Hey, Ember.” Willow waves, passing the hanger in her hand to the refined woman next to her. “Sawyer’s around here somewhere too. She had a work call, but I’m sure she won’t be long. This is my mum, Nadya. Mum, this is Ember, two of her dads, and you know Myra.” Willow makes introductions, pausing when she spots Rui and his twin. “Um, and Rui and friend, apparently.” She casts a quizzical look at me but doesn’t ask for an explanation.

“Hey, Willow. This is my twin, Cloud. Just ignore us, we’re just nosey.” Rui grins, looking around the shop. Cloud takes up a sentry post by the entrance, arms crossed over his chest.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” Nadya says, a professional smile in place. “Please, feel free to browse. Anything you want to try, mark with one of these tags, and we’ll pull the lehenga to the dressing area.” Nadya hands each of us a small pile of hooks with gold stars on one end. “Did you want to go for a traditional red, or would you like to try some other colours?”

I look at Sam and Tavon, no idea what to say. As fun as this is going to be, it’s also incredibly overwhelming.

“Why not try a red gradient? It keeps with tradition but won’t clash with your hair. You could also look at something with red embroidery and beading?” Sam suggests while Tavon disappears amongst the racks with his tags.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, Sam. Let Ember tag anything that strikes her fancy. If it calls to you, tag it. Then we’re having ourselves a one-model runway show.” Tavon’s voice drifts back to us. “You’ll know which one is your bonding lehenga as soon as you try it on.”

“All right, then I guess we divide and conquer?” I suggest. Sam smiles affectionately at me, while Myra grins and rubs her hands together.

“Ah, so much fun!”

I head towards the red section. The idea of sticking to tradition appeals to me; plus, the colour resonates with the fire magic in me. Taking my time, I examine the detailing and graduating shades, moving from one section to the next. Eventually, Myra joins me, having placed all her tags, then Willow joins us, and Sam and Tavon follow soon after.

“Have you placed any tags yet?” At the sound of her voice, I turn to greet Sawyer, Willow’s half-sister.

“Some. I’m not sure what I’m waiting for. They’re all stunning, but...” I shrug, not sure what’s holding me back.

“Okay, well, Nadya has some in the back corner you probably haven’t looked at yet. They’re a bit more... non-traditional than these. How does that sound?” Sawyer asks, cocking her hip to the side and pointing over her shoulder.

“Can’t hurt to look,” I say with a shrug and follow her to the rack.

Instantly, something feels different. My fingers move over the hangers with a life of their own, finally stopping on a garment bag.

“Oh, yes,” Nadya says from behind me, making me jump. “Yes, I didn’t think about this one, but... yes. I’ll add it to the dressing area. Come, come, the fashion show awaits.”

Nadya leads me into a curtained bay full of a vast selection of lehenga in every colour and shade. “Which one would you like to start with?” she asks, a glint in her eye as she smiles at me.

“The one in the garment bag, please,” I say, pointing to it in her hands.

“Close your eyes. I think you’ll want to see this on for the full effect.” She pauses after hanging the bag up, fingers poised on the zipper. Nadya looks at me seriously. “Do you mind if I dress you with magic? I should have asked first, rather than assume—”

“It’s okay. Thank you,” I hurry to reassure her before closing my eyes as she requested.

Air ripples around me, ruffling my hair. The weight of my jeans and jumper disappear, replaced by the heavy floor-length skirt and short-sleeved crop top.

“Oh, yes. Perfection,” Nadya sighs. Her fingers run through my curls, twisting a few of the strands around my face. “Yes. Let’s go show the girls and your dads. You’ll be able to see yourself too. Come, come.”

She pulls back the curtain, and I follow her to the little podium.

“Oh, Ember. That’s stunning,” Myra coos, and Willow nods in agreement.

Tavon clears his throat, and Sam pulls him into a hug. “You look sensational, sweetheart.”

Stepping onto the raised podium, I turn to face the wall of covered mirrors. Nadya counts down from three before the glass clears and my reflection comes into focus.

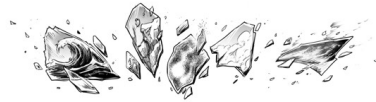
The choli’s sleeves stop just above my elbows. The teal silk complements my hair and skin tone in the most flattering way. Silver and gold embroidery decorate the top and the lehenga skirt in elaborate detail. Each of the six rows on the skirt depicts a different magical element. The six my men have affinities with.

“I can bring the hem of the choli up just a smidge, and your beautiful tattoo will be on display. What do you think?” Nadya asks.



“I-I think I don’t need to try on anything else. This is it.” My reflection beams back at me, a huge smile transforming the woman I’m used to seeing staring back at me.

Now to contain my excitement and nerves until Saturday.



The cave entrance shimmers before me. Once I walk through, the final steps of the bonding await. We’ll be vulnerable, distracted; it would be the perfect time for someone to ambush us. I can’t help but worry, even with Rui, Cloud, and two of the Shadow-Stalkers escorting me and standing guard at the entrance. Why I have to use a different opening to the cave still doesn’t make sense. The only response I’ve received when I question it is that it’s tradition. Well, it’s a stupid tradition.

“I can see the wheels in that head of yours spinning away,” Representative Chadwick says. “You know, there’s still time to change your mind. We can put a stop to this; just say the word, and I’ll send a missive to the men. You don’t *have* to bond any of them right now or ever. There’s really no need to rush.”

“I know it seems rushed, but I want to be bound to them. All six of them,” I say. Maybe this is all she’s going to do? A last ditch effort to make me change my mind?

No, that doesn’t feel right.

“Your hesitation would indicate otherwise, Miss Ward,” she sniffs.

“The hesitation isn’t about my Sept, Representative.”

The older woman huffs. “As the Anchor, the centre of this bond, you’ll be able to control who can enter the cave once you’re inside. Go in, and I’ll prove to you that I cannot follow.”

Without acknowledging her, I step forward into the shimmering light. Warmth tingles across my skin as I pass through the barrier, leaving behind a comforting warm glow.

The soft tranquil sound of trickling water meets my ears, and the air has an icy freshness to it that wasn't present on the other side.

Looking back, I watch as Representative Chadwick pushes her palm against the surface of the barrier. As her skin connects, the transparent shield turns opaque, completely blocking her from me.

"You see?" she mouths after removing her hand. No sound reaches me from her side, and I realise I hadn't been able to hear the ambient noises of the cave while I waited.

A soundproof barrier.

I guess that makes sense; something of a blessing, considering what happens in these caves.

The bottom of my long skirt trails along behind me as I descend deeper into the cave. Soft moss cushions my steps, and the crystals glow a stunning azure blue as I pass.

I thought I'd be more nervous. How many women can say they're about to have sex with six different men? Though, technically, I already have the bond with two, so I only *need* to be intimate with four of them, and it doesn't *have* to be full sex. The books Myra loaned me have been eye-opening to the possibilities being bonded to so many could bring.

I know how Vertus and Atticus are as lovers, but the other remaining four? Will they be dominant? Gentle? Primal? Will they share me? Will the others watch? Do I want to be watched? I just don't know if I'm ready to explore that side fully yet. We'll have time later, the rest of our lives, once the bonds are in place.

Still, so many questions, possibilities, and scenarios scatter across my thoughts. The main chamber has an open ceiling, allowing the light of the full moon to refract off the crystals. Water cascades down from the hole, creating multiple small waterfalls.

And in the centre of the mossy floor is a single male figure. One I never expected to see again outside of my

nightmares. He turns slowly to face me at the sound of my faltering steps.

Blood pounds in my ears, drowning out everything else around us. The slow cruel smile spreads across his lips as he steps towards me. My nostrils flare as I try to summon my magic, but it doesn't answer.

"*Tsk, tsk*, Ember. Did you forget about the fail-safe?" Dom taps his nose, reminding me of the pheromone conditioning they subjected me to for hours on end. "That doctor of yours did me a kindness, fixing that nerve. If I'd had to wait for it to heal naturally, we'd have ended up so very behind schedule."

He tosses the small bag in his hand at my feet.

"Be a good pet, Ember. Put them on. Don't make me have to force your compliance," Dom says, but the gleam in his eyes is begging me to fight him. To give him any excuse to punish me.

With shaking legs, I crouch down, opening the bag. Two steel magical suppression cuffs stare back at me. I knew that's what it would be, but the sight still turns my stomach.

"Why?" I ask. My voice seems ten times louder in the quiet cave.

"Why?" he laughs, "Why, what?" The maniacal grin twists his features before Dom composes himself, regarding me with a neutral, clinical expression instead. "Why am I here? Why do I want you to wear the cuffs? I think you know the answers to those. Now, hurry up!"

My magic won't respond to me, whether that's because of the cavern we're in or the pheromonal conditioning EvoGen subjected me to, I don't know. But I can't go back to that life. Not now that I know what my other options are.

Helios healed me. Surely that should've healed the conditioning too? Atticus and Vertus have trained me in hand-to-hand. If I can just get Dom to move closer. If I can hit him hard enough to daze him, then I can run. I can get back to the entrance and raise an alarm.

Electric shocks course through my body, ripping a scream from my throat.

“What are you doing? Stop it! Don’t damage the subject!” Dom bellows, storming past me.

“She was planning to run. This way, you can cuff her, and we can leave before the others get here,” a cold, harsh, familiar voice declares as the dull *thwomp, thwomp, thwomp* of a helicopter drifts overhead.

Dark silhouettes lean out of the chopper to lower a box through the opening in the ceiling. My muscles spasm and lock, preventing me from fighting them off. Dom secures the suppressor cuffs on my wrists, then the Changed and human man-handle me into the crate. The lid snaps shut, descending me into darkness.

TO BE CONTINUED

Ignite Ember Astound  
(Coming Autumn/Winter 2023)

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much for reading. I know it's another cliffhanger and like with The Lost Therian Omega series there isn't a preorder yet. I've had a few health issues crop up and rather than push dates back I'm waiting until I have the first draft finished before announcing a release date.

I have editing dates booked, and I am determined to meet them. Unfortunately, life likes to throw spanners in the works, so I'm being cautious.

I want to thank every reader for their patience. I'm not the fastest writer, and I can't change the past. However, my plan is to write ahead of release for future books so you, my readers, won't have as long to wait between books.

I am so grateful to every single one of you who reads my books, I don't think I'll ever find the words to truly express how much it means to me.

Okay, back to the writing cave I go...

# 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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