

## Chapter 1: Lennon



Today will decide my fate. The Convergence is supposed to be a privilege—or at least that’s how we’re expected to look at it. From the time we are old enough to wonder why our parents always have an *Auryth* by their side, and why they have abilities we don’t, they shove that nonsense down our throats to feed our ever-curious minds. But it’s not a privilege; it’s a gamble, and only the worthy survive.

I walk through the center of the Burrows toward the city’s main greenhouse, doing my best to ignore the signs now plastered on nearly every building and light pole in preparation for the ceremony. One phrase written in bright white catches my eye, standing out against the faded brown of an old building. Despite already knowing what it will say, I can’t stop myself from reading it: “*The worthy will rise.*” More like the *unworthy* will rise ... on a platform ... to their deaths.

I roll my shoulders, releasing the tension from a poor night’s sleep, and use the ladder to climb onto the greenhouse roof. Nausea seeps through my bones as I stare at the three rings of houses coiled around the Burrows like the strangling roots of a tree, each layer feeding off the one below.

The homes on the First Ring are identical copies of one another, with charcoal-grey siding and dust-covered windows; they’re poor in comparison to the homes on the Third Ring, with their enclosed walkways dripping in purified air and bright red exteriors. In between the two sits the Second Ring, a buffer between the low and high-born members of society. The houses are a touch nicer than those on the First, with a second story and a pale blue exterior, but they’re still nowhere near as luxurious as the Third’s.

Walkways of iron and rust—added during the Second Ring expansion thirty years ago—cross overhead underneath Third Ring’s enclosed ones, offering easy transportation from one side of the Burrows to the other. I watch them pass, undisturbed by the sheer drop or the low-born beneath them. Ironically, the expansion left us with an abundance of homes, making them the one thing we don’t have to ration or struggle for.

So many empty houses, yet we send those who could fill them to their deaths.

I’ll never understand how a belief can be held so strongly by so many to the point of *craving* the death of others, but then again, no one here has ever known any different. We only know what we’re taught. The *Auryths* were worshipped long before humanity moved underground, and their decision is law. If they judge you as unfit for a bond, there’s nothing anyone can do to sway the Regime’s mind.

It’s inhumane, disgusting, and utterly mad.

“I thought I’d find you up here,” a voice calls from behind me, and I don’t need to look to know who it is.

The humidity has Wilder’s blond curls sticking to his forehead, framing his pale blue eyes that sparkle against the dull, mechanical light hung high above us. Supposedly, they represent the stars—something we’ll never get to see. They’re meant to make us feel less trapped, but it’s hard not to feel that way when you live in an underground cave with no end in sight besides your own death.

He scoots closer to me, and I lean a weary head on his shoulder. “You’re not nervous about today, are you? An *Auryth* would be crazy not to bond with you.”

I sigh. “Personally, I don’t think there’s any rhyme or reason for who they deem worthy or unworthy of bonding. So yes, I’m nervous. About me ... about you. If something were to happen to you—”

He cuts me off. “Nothing is going to happen.” His lips brush the top of my head tenderly, then he pulls me closer to his chest. “Not to me, and not to you.” Tears prick my eyes, but they don’t fall. I’ve cried so much in the last few days that I hardly have anything left. Wilder’s scent wraps around me, a mixture of sweat and fresh mint. I began pocketing a few leaves from the greenhouse for him years ago to mix into his soap, and he always uses them, knowing how much I adore the smell.

I've always loved Wilder, not that I'd ever tell him. He's my safe space, my home, and I dread the idea of him not bonding far more than myself. We met when we were ten; he found me sitting alone in the courtyard, sobbing my heart out. I'd lost my mother that week.

He didn't ask why I was crying; he simply sat down next to me and asked if I was going to eat my rations, earning a quivering smile from me as I handed him my untouched pouch.

We've been inseparable ever since.

"At least if we don't bond, we'll get to see the sun," I say softly, watching the little lights flicker in and out of view.

"Yeah, right before we choke to death on the chemicals," he replies bluntly, and I pull away to scowl at him. "What? It's the truth."

"I'm trying to be positive."

"Right, because 'we're going to die,' instead of 'we're both going to bond' is way more positive." He raises an eyebrow at me and smiles enough for his dimples to shine through.

I've always loved his dimples, too.

"Fine. We're both going to bond. And after we bond, we'll find someone to marry, and if we dare to ever have children, we'll get to watch them go through this entire process in eighteen years. I. Can't. Wait." My words ring true, but they carry no heat. I don't have the energy for anger today. "Maybe we'll at least get a house with a prettier view out of it all if we bond to an elite."

He forces me back into the crook of his arm, placing a hand on my head to squeeze me in tighter. "That's my girl," he says sweetly, sending a rush of heat through my body.

You'd think now would be a good time to tell him how I feel, in case one of us doesn't make it, but I can't find the words. I cling to him, trying desperately to hold onto this moment for just a minute longer.

"We've got to get going soon. We still have to finish our shifts and pick up our ration packs before it starts," he says. I pull away to look at him, to memorize the lines of his jaw, the way his hair slightly curls around the tips of his ears. Just one more minute.

He stands and extends a hand to me. "We'll either go home after this, or I'll meet you in the sun. You know nothing could keep us separated for too long, Len."

His words steal the air from my lungs, and I take his hand and fold myself into his open arms, just in case this is the last time I'll ever get to.

I nearly squeeze the life out of him, and he does the same to me.

*Just in case.*

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Once I reach the ground, I head into the greenhouse, waving goodbye to Wilder as he leaves for his work detail at the mechanical building. My mother was bonded to a red-tailed hawk before she died, and although it'd be a nice sentiment to follow in her footsteps and develop foresight, my heart has always been with the stags. Those bonded to stags have the gift of chloromancy—the ability to create plants and vegetation from nothing. Being surrounded by fresh greenery always relaxes me. With every bond having a unique form of magic, jobs are generally assigned based on which species you bond to. At least if I did bond with a stag, my greenhouse position would be secured.

I open the door and am instantly met with sticky air and the smell of fresh plants of all varieties. Leaning down, I gently lift an orange blossom to my nose and breathe deeply, savoring the scent. This is the one place that truly makes me feel like I'm on the ground, even if everything in it is either genetically or magically made.

As I step away and start toward the front of the facility to begin my rotation, a hand jumps out from a wall of greenery and grabs my arm. I scream, then instantly cover my mouth in embarrassment as Quor doubles over laughing at me. His smile is bright against his green skin, and I watch as he transitions back to his normal, human color.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I say exasperatedly, placing a hand to my forehead, the other still hovering over my heart.

“Don't be such a killjoy, Benfield. I figured you could use something to get your mind off of today,” he says, still grinning. Quor is *technically* my boss, given he's a few years older than I am and is already bonded, but most days, you'd think it was the other way around.

I ignore his comment as I scan the room for his *Auryth*. “Where's Miko?” A head pops out of his pants pocket right on cue, revealing the small chameleon who has turned himself a dark shade of green to match Quor's work uniform. I hold out my hand, and he passes Miko over. My laugh rings out as he climbs up my shoulder and slowly begins changing to a deep black, matching my shirt. If there's one thing I'll never get tired of seeing, it's the magic of *Auryths*.

My mind reels for the next two hours as I carry buckets of water in from the central pond and mix supplements into the soil, the fear in my belly coiling tighter with every passing minute.

“How many do you think will be exiled this year?” Ruby, one of the other workers usually on my rotation, asks Quor.

I keep my eyes trained on the soil, pretending that I’m not listening in on their conversation, but I can’t stop my ears from pricking up. Quor straightens, wiping his damp hands on his pants, and the earlier playfulness in his expression vanishes. “It’s hard to say. Seems like there are more every year.”

Ruby shrugs and digs her hands into the soil, her lips curling into a smile. “I guess worthy people are more difficult to come by these days. I say good riddance.” Her *Auryth*, a small raccoon named Poe, lets out a low growl as if in agreement.

The silence is deafening, and I can’t bear to look toward Quor to see his reaction; the idea of him agreeing with her makes my insides twist. It’s difficult to swallow the realization that most people in the Burrows see things the way Ruby does: that if I don’t bond, my life isn’t worth saving.

“I’m only saying what everyone else is thinking,” she presses, attempting to fill the void with her misguided justification. “The *Auryths* are our moral compass; they decide who is good and who is ... well ... *evil*. If someone isn’t chosen for a bond, there’s a reason.”

The soil pot slips from my hands before I realize what’s happening and clatters to the ground. Both of their heads snap toward me, as if they’ve somehow forgotten I’m here.

It isn’t uncommon for people to say things like that; hell, most of our everyday citizens were the ones who put up the signs around the Burrows. Still, it’s not an easy thing to hear. “You shouldn’t say things like that,” Quor scolds her, then gives me a sympathetic look. “And our beliefs don’t make today any less difficult for those going through the Convergence. Death is never something to be celebrated.”

My hair falls into my face as I crouch down to scoop the soil back into the pot, and I yank the long strands into a tight bun. Despite my trembling, I force my attention on the ground, desperate to quiet the rising panic.

Quor sits on his knees and slowly takes the pot from me, offering a soft smile. “You need to go get ready; it’s getting close to time. You don’t want to be late today.” I find I can’t smile back. I stand, wipe my dirty hands on my pants, and walk out the door without another word.

Marching through the busy streets of the Burrows, I can't help but tune into the buzz of the crowd that grows louder as people and *Auryths* shuffle toward the Bowl to secure their seats. You can't miss the massive structure; it takes up nearly half of the city's center with its round shape and pure white walls that always seem clean despite the film of filth covering everything else down here.

Someone in the crowd takes bets on how many will try to fight the guards after being deemed unfit for a bond; another complains about how long the ceremony has taken in recent years and insists that sitting on the stone benches for hours hurts their back.

It's a funny thing to hear people gamble and grumble about such trivial things when it's your life on the line.

My eyes catch on a few of the larger *Auryths*—bears, panthers, stags—following closely behind their polished humans who march through the square with their heads held high. Their fresh suits and gowns are neatly pressed, and many of the women wear hues of gold and silver smeared around their eyes and lips like warpaint. We can hardly *survive* on the rations the Regime provides, but at least the elites look good.

Some of the smaller *Auryths* cower to the side as they pass, clinging to their humans for protection. Even within the *Auryths*' world, there's a hierarchy, and the humans who bond either benefit from it or find themselves stuck on the bottom.

My boots slip against the cobblestone at my feet, its worn surface marred with faint cracks and grooves from generations of use. The Second and Third Rings of homes loom over us, and I admire the finely painted houses. If Wilder or I bond one of the elite *Auryths*, we'll be moved to one of those rings, torn from our families, and hoisted out of poverty by the 'generous' hand of the Regime.

I let the fantasy play out in my mind, imagining the soft silk fabrics and plush beds. No more early morning work duties. No more growling stomachs at the end of the day. But if I don't bond to a stag, that would also mean leaving the greenhouse, my *sanctuary*, behind, because most elites don't dirty their hands in the mud; they're *far* too sophisticated for that. Not to mention having to leave my family down below. At least the Regime is 'kind' enough to let them visit and admire my newfound luxury every once in a while.

The ration building comes into view, a square, blocky structure built out of rusted steel with a line already spilling out into the streets. People are arguing and attempting to push their way to the front. Guards interject where they see fit, mostly giving stern looks and flashing the guns secured at their hips. Not much more is needed to make people quiet down than that. With the threat of having your chip activated—a bonded's instant kill switch—no one dares to fight. Not about food, not about orders, not about anything, really. That's one thing I'm certainly not excited to receive, *if* I bond.

Strings of lights loop lazily overhead, swaying slightly in the artificial currents from the ventilation fans. Their warm glow bathes the line of people in soft rays of light, reflecting off the steel. When my turn finally comes, I step up to the counter and slide my identification card into the slot. The attendant barely looks at me as he hands over three silver ration packs: one for each person in my household. As the Regime likes to say, "*It's everything your body needs in one easy meal.*" They don't like to talk about the fact that everyone on First is comparable to a sack of bones these days, though.

We produce the synthetic protein paste in the greenhouses, derived from a variety of mutated plants that smell about as good as they taste. There's no sweet scent of fruit trees or blooming flowers; they're just *bland* in every sense of the word. But somehow that blandness led to these tiny little packs that are supposed to be so incredibly rich in nutrients, we only need *one* a day. What a joke. I slip them into my pocket without looking.

The crowd thins as I turn down a quieter path toward home, and the noise settles into a gentle hum as I retreat from the center. The ground beneath my boots is damp and slick from the humidity, and the faint smell of moss poking through the cracks where the stone meets the edges of the buildings fills my nostrils. It's calmer here; almost peaceful.

I round the final corner and spot my house, its crooked, crumbling roof barely visible in the poor lighting. My fingers brush over the ration packets in my pocket before I shift the creaky door open.

My little brother, Shiloh, looks up from his book to greet me. He doesn't say it, but I can tell he's nervous for what's to come today. His broad smile is clearly forced as I pull out the packets and set them on the counter.

Peeking around the corner to the living room, I note my father sprawled across his disgusting recliner, either sleeping or pretending to be. An empty glass sits on the table beside him, no doubt reeking of illegal moonshine—the only thing he tends to leave his chair for these days. I have half a mind to pick it up and throw it against the wall just to get his attention, but there's a brokenness in him that always makes me hesitate. He hasn't been the same since Mom died.

To be fair, none of us has.

"I'm gonna change, and then we'll head out, okay? We'll swing by Wilder's house on the way. You'll sit with his family, and I'll find you once it's all over," I tell Shiloh, forcing myself to keep it together with what little energy I have left.

He stares at his hands, meticulously cracking each finger. "I don't need a babysitter."

"I know you don't," I answer softly. "I just thought it'd be nice for you to have someone to sit with."

His glare wavers for a heartbeat before he turns away. "Stop treating me like I'm still twelve." He disappears down the hall, his door shutting with a thud.

I press a hand into the counter, its rough surface digging into my skin. I'm not sure what bothers me more: the idea of dying, or the idea of him no longer needing me if I survive.