

FAN FICTION SET IN THE WORLD OF ASHES: RISE OF THE PHOENIXBORN

BURNING A·S·H·E·S



SCOTT KING

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Burning Ashes takes place more than forty years prior to the events of *Ashes: Rise of the Phoenixborn*.

ONE

NOW.

Claire Davenport dipped into the shadows of the stone archway, trying to lose her stalker. The figure had been following her since she had finished her shift at the Apple Dower Tavern. She hoped getting to a more active part of the city would allow her to ditch him, but at this time of night the streets were quiet, all except for the Tumbles, where not even the city guard ventured. The horseshoe loop of buildings, squished between the harbor and the towering outer walls of Midquarren, were a haven for nefarious activities. She didn't like being there during the

day, let alone four hours before daybreak.

The sour scent of bile filled the air and she saw a bald man lying on his back, gagging. Holes and filth covered his clothing and a layer of dirt made it impossible to see his skin. For a brief flash she considered turning away, but she knew if she did the guilt of it would eat at her. She stopped and rolled him onto his side, then pounded on the center of his back. A creamy liquid with curds spewed from his mouth and he breathed again. Confident he wouldn't choke to death, she moved to step away but felt a hand grasp her ankle.

"Where ya going, girly?" the drunkard said. "It's early and the fun is only starting."

With her free leg she kicked him in the face, making sure the hard stud of her boot crashed into the bridge of his nose. He swore, burying his face in the palms of both hands. "You bloody swinchel! I'll kill ya for that."

She ignored him. The drunk could barely stand. It was her stalker that she feared. Rounding the corner of the nearest building, she entered the heart of the Tumbles. Dead during the heat of the

day, the quarter sprang alive at night when cool summer breezes floated in off the bay. Clusters of men ogling scantily clad women stood in front of the closest three buildings. Hiding in any of them would be a waste; her short-cut brown hair was not in vogue and she would stand out like a pig in a chicken coop. Plus, the idea of ditching her blouse and having grubby grime-covered hands pinching and squeezing her was not appealing.

Farther up the block, past several shops, the street opened onto a sort of town square. Nestled into a pit at its center roared a massive bonfire, which functioned as the main source of light for the Tumbles. Scattered around the fire were benches and carts serving both food and drinks. If she slipped into the crowd, she might be able to blend in and lose her pursuer. Half the people were singing, drinking, and seemingly oblivious to the world around them.

The hair on her arms rose and she felt a tickling on her wrists, like the whiskers of a cat. Biting her lip, she spun to see a man dressed all in black. He was old, much older than she would've guessed, with heavy wrinkles around

his eyes and thick folds near his mouth. A red scar crossed his right eyebrow and age spots dotted his dark, leathery skin. He wore a black blazer with golden buttons and sleek, tight-fitting pants. Strapped to his back was a monstrous two-handed sword.

“Stop,” he said in a graveled voice.

Claire broke into a sprint. She had to lose the man and her only advantage now was her youth. She didn’t know who he was: maybe a mercenary for one of the guilds or an assassin hoping to use her to get to his target. All she knew was that she needed to get away.

“Your life is in danger!” the man yelled.

She ignored him, running past a hut selling smoked mutton and into a section along the bonfire filled with stone tables. At the center of the area, a troubadour with a lute was performing “The Ballad of Dimona.” The audience sang along, not missing a single word.

Claire jumped onto a stone table, knocking over a metal mug. Warm ale splashed onto a brute of a man sitting at the table’s head. He stood, rising to well over six feet tall, and reached

out with bearish arms to grab her. She dodged him, jumping to the nearest table, and continued hopscotching her way across the area, spilling more and more drinks and food as she did.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw the man in black attempt to skirt past the brute but fail. The brute pinned the man to the table with a single hand. “You will buy me another drink and another one after that! If not, I’ll snap off your manhood and stuff it down your gullet.”

“I don’t have time for this,” said the man in black. His eyes flared and a grey-silver light burst from them. The pulse struck the brute’s chest, slinging him backward over the crowd.

“Phoenixborn!” someone yelled.

The dozens of men and women panicked, running in all directions.

Claire jumped, attempting to reach another stone table, but a hysterical woman clipped the back of her knee, tripping her. Claire hit the cobbled ground, scraping her right forearm. To avoid being trampled, she rolled under the nearest table.

Her heart pounded. She knew of the

Phoenixborn. Everyone did. If this man in black truly was one, she had no chance of escaping him. They were too powerful, demi-gods, almost on par with the chimera. Why would one of the Phoenixborn want her, out of all the people in Argaia?

TWO

THEN.

“I will only be gone two nights.” Claire’s mother tucked the down blanket under her daughter’s side.

“I want to come!”

“It’s not safe.”

“I’m eleven,” Claire insisted. “If I’m old enough to stay home alone, I’m old enough to travel with you to Midquarren.”

“You know what happened to your father.”

Claire knew. Her mother wouldn’t let her forget. Two years ago he had gone to market for a week to sell off their recent harvest. On the way,

he crossed paths with a chimera. The demonic creature had ravished a nearby town, slaughtering everyone and fouling the land so that not a single thing would grow. They found her father a week later on the road and were only able to identify the puddle of his remains by a star-shaped locket, the same one that Claire now wore every day to remember him.

“What does it matter?” Claire asked. “A chimera could come through the valley while you’re gone. Being with you might be safer.”

“The valley is safe.”

The Davenport homestead lay nestled in a tiny valley, no more than two miles wide, surrounded on all sides by craggy, unscalable mountains. The only way in or out of the valley was through a narrow pass just two carts wide. For generations the valley had been a refuge for the family, sheltering them from the horrors of the outside world, and Claire’s mother insisted it would continue to do so. It was their family heritage.

Thunder sizzled through the air. Both Claire and her mother turned to the shutters. Through

the cracks they could see what looked like orange lightning dancing across the sky.

“Mom?”

“It’s just a storm.”

“Lightning isn’t that color.”

Claire stood, dropping her bare feet to the cold wooden floor, and walked to the window. Her mother didn’t move to stop her.

A constant surge of lightning arced through the sky, casting a golden light on everything in the valley. Along a high peak she could see two figures fighting. They appeared to be human, but they were so far away it was hard to tell for sure.

“Mom,” Claire whispered. “Someone—no, something—is here.”

“A chimera?”

“No, they are too small and too human looking.”

Claire’s mother opened the shutters, staring at the two beings zipping across the mountainside. “They might be Phoenixborn, but I’ve never heard of two of their kind fighting each other before.”

Below the raging battle, in the heart of the

valley, Claire spotted two other figures running across the Davenports' largest sorghum field. The first was small, maybe a human on a horse, but the second was the size of a barn and its body seemed jagged, with bits of flat surfaces reflecting the dazzling light show in the sky.

A knight riding an armored wolf burst from the field. The rider kicked its flanks and the mount pivoted to face their pursuer. The knight lowered a lance and its tip glowed orange like smelted iron. A bolt of energy shot from it.

The orange light struck the larger monster, outlining its body so that Claire could see for the first time that it was a bear, only, instead of having fur and flesh, it appeared to be made entirely of square crystals. Thousands of translucent blocks made up the beast so that it had no curves, though it somehow still had a roundness to its gut and face. Razor-sharp crystal shards formed its teeth and claws. The bear's eyes glowed a soft azure color, as if leaking magic.

"We need to go," Claire's mother said.

"Where?"

“The larder.”

The larder, where they stored the food to keep it from spoiling, was carved into the base of a mountain. It had a narrow door covered with a cloth mesh to keep flies and other insects out. The walls and ceiling were made of pure rock. It was the most secure place in the valley.

Claire took one last glance at the wolf knight and crystal bear. The bear was clearly a conjuration, a magical creature brought into the world by one of the Phoenixborn. And the knight must be an ally, a person linked to a Phoenixborn in such a way that he could draw upon the Phoenixborn’s strength and power. If she had to guess, she would have said the bear and knight each served one of the Phoenixborn fighting in the mountains. The only thing she didn’t know was why.

“Move!” Claire’s mother gave her a shove and together they fled her bedroom. They passed the main room of their house and out the back door. Not more than ten steps later, Claire heard a crashing sound and turned.

The crystal bear, rolling backward after

behind hit with another of the knight's bolts of energy, had flattened their home. The whole structure, even the stone walls and foundation, crumbled under the weight. The bear stood up, shaking like a wet dog shedding water. Wood splinters and other shrapnel soared through the air.

"Look out!" Claire's mother yelled.

Claire ducked as a chunk of their chimney passed inches from her skull.

That was close. Too close, Claire thought. She stood back up and felt all breath leave her chest. On the ground lay her mother, crushed under stone and wood beams.

"Mom!" Claire cleared the smaller rocks away from her mother's face, but it was no use. Her mother lay limp with open eyes and blood trickling from her lips. Her mother was dead, and the Phoenixborn were responsible.

She knew she should hide in the larder like her mother had wanted, but she refused and stood immobile, watching the battle between bear and knight. It lasted mere minutes, with the conjured crystal bear the victor. The duel between the two

Phoenixborn up on the peak lasted well past dawn and seemed to end with both warriors retreating.

The idea of revenge never crossed her mind. That would be idiotic. A mere human could do nothing to harm a Phoenixborn. She thought of her father and how the chimera had taken him away. Now her mother was gone too, thanks to the Phoenixborn.

THREE

NOW.

The man in black sat on the table with his legs dangling off, while Claire sat beneath. The eating area and the entire square surrounding the bonfire were deserted. Since she'd arrived in the city almost eight years ago, never had she seen the Tumbles so empty.

"I'm not here to harm you."

"Who are you?" Claire asked.

"Tristan Stonegate." He extended his hand under the table, offering to help her stand. She pushed it aside and rose to her feet of her own accord.

“The Phoenixborn only help themselves.”

He laughed.

That annoyed her. No, more than annoyed her. It ticked her off.

“Is that what folk think of us?” He scratched his chin, peering into the distance, seeing things beyond the firelight that Claire couldn’t. “If so, that’s a new one to me.”

“It’s what I know. The Phoenixborn serve no one but themselves and don’t care who gets hurt in the process.”

“That’s true, mostly, but there are a few of us who care.”

“And that’s why you scared me half to death tracking me through the city, because you care? Or because you want something?”

“You’re pretty smart for kid.”

“I’m not a kid,” Claire said.

“You *are* a kid. And I hate to break it to you, but your childhood is over.”

“My childhood ended a long time ago.” She turned her back to him. “Tell me what you want or leave me alone, but stop speaking of things you do not know.”

The sound of metal scraping on metal filled the air. Claire turned to see Tristan drawing his double-edged sword. The light of the flames danced across the six-foot blade, highlighting jagged teeth along its back. Mesh, intricately crafted to resemble a flame, formed the guard, protecting a two-handed grip, and yet Tristan held it with a single hand. “Claire—”

“Don’t try to intimidate me.”

“I’m not, but if you want to live you need to get behind me.” He wasn’t looking at her. He was looking past her, once more to where the light of the bonfire faded into darkness. She squinted, trying to see what he could see.

Above the city wall, past the ramparts and in the darkness, she saw a tiny spark of azure light that quickly grew. She knew that light. She’d had nightmares about that particular shade of blue. It was the eyes of a crystal bear.

“No!” Absently, she put her hands to her chest. Through her blouse she could feel her father’s star-shaped pendant. The memories of her mother’s death flashed through her mind.

“Behind me. Now!” Tristan yelled.

The bear approached the twenty-foot stone wall and pushed it over with a single claw, demolishing some of the oldest buildings in the Tumbles. Claire had no idea if the buildings had been evacuated in the panic caused by Tristan's arrival, but she prayed to the gods that they were.

"You can't do this," Claire said.

"We don't have a choice. It's fight or die."

"No, I mean you can't do this here. You need to do this out of the city, where normal people won't get hurt."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

Claire didn't know what Tristan wanted with her, or what the crystal bear's master wanted, but she was the one thing they both had in common. She had unknowingly led them both to the Tumbles; maybe she could lead them both away. She would never forget the day her mother died and the day she left home for good. She had replayed it over and over again in her head and one thing seemed clear: although big and deadly, the crystal bear was slow in tight spaces. There was a chance, a slim one, that she might be able to get past it before it could react.

She charged the bear.

“What are you doing?” Tristan yelled in exasperation.

She didn’t answer. She was too busy watching the bear as its shoulders passed through the wall into the city and its blocky gut scraped against the rubble on the ground. The bear tilted its head, following her movement as she ran closer. It was all the confirmation she needed. The bear wanted her, not Tristan.

Instead of running away or running around, Claire did the most unexpected thing. She ran under it. Even the crystal bear seemed confused by the tactic. It clawed at her but was unable to see past its own mass and only managed to strike fallen timbers and rocks. The crystal bear swiveled, trying to find her, and, as it did, its butt slammed into another section of the wall. The falling debris caused the bear to lose balance and it slipped, slamming its glistening head face first into the ground.

The timing was flawless. Just as the bear tripped, Claire jumped, clearing the broken wall. Before her were a few shacks and huts, used by

vendors during the day, most of which were flattened and already destroyed. Past them was an expansive field that bled into a green rolling hill with a dark forest growing on its far side. This would do, she figured. Here they could face the bear without putting anyone at risk.

Behind her, the bear had managed to stand and was now making its way out of the city. Once it got into the open it would be able to maneuver with ease. There would be only a few seconds before it had her.

She stopped at the top of the hill and turned to watch the crystal bear. In a way, it was beautiful. Its geometric skin reflected the blue moonlight and behind it she could see the twinkling fires of the city. She never imagined that this would be how she would die, that she would be crushed by the same kind of conjuration that took her mother.

When she had first arrived to the city, she'd had a number of jobs. One of her favorites was as clerk at the great library, before it burned to the ground. It was there that she had learned the history of the Phoenixborn, how one day they

simply began to appear. All she really wanted to know was which of the demi-gods commanded the crystal bears, but, to her disappointment, she learned that any Phoenixborn with enough strength could summon them, leaving her with no clue who was ultimately responsible for ruining her life. Now she would be trampled by the same creature. Maybe in the afterlife she would see her family again.

Time stopped, or at least it seemed to.

One second she stood about to be flattened under the bear's paw and in the next a blurry figure grabbed her. The figure moved so fast it was like a shooting star, just a streak of light with no details.

The figure whipped her away, circling the bear and placing her in the center of the green field. When the figure finally stopped moving, she realized it was Tristan.

"How?" she mouthed.

"Enhanced speed, but I can only keep it up for a few seconds." He once more drew his sword. "Now this time stay behind me."

"The bear is invincible. I once saw one

blasted with massive bolts of energy and it wasn't fazed."

"Magic guard. It's immune to magic." He spun his wrist, leveling the sword. "This isn't magic. It's cold iron and conjurations hate iron."

The bear charged. As it did, Tristan jumped: an inhuman jump, clearing forty feet. He somersaulted, gripped his sword with both hands, and used gravity to jam the humongous blade into the back of the crystal bear's neck. A chinking sound rang through the air and a crack formed along the bear's spine. It bucked from side to side, trying to shake out the sword, but it only quickened its own demise. Crystalline blocks flew in all directions and, bit by bit, the bear wasted away until there was nothing left. As the last block broke apart, the shards of the bear's remains flared with a blue azure light, then burned away so that nothing remained but ashes.

Tristan wiped his sword on the grass, cleaning off the soot, before sheathing it. When he looked up, Claire slapped him. Not a weak, playful slap but a hard one that caught him so off guard he stumbled for a step. "What is going

on?" she demanded.

"I didn't expect a kiss for saving your life." He rubbed his reddening cheek. "I'm not that kind of guy, but at the very least I thought you'd have the manners for a thank you."

"I'm not joking. Why was it after me?"

"You are a Phoenixborn."

"I'm no such thing!"

"You are," he insisted. "It often manifests later in life and is amplified as a person reaches adulthood. From what I can sense, your powers are only just now developing."

"No. You're lying."

"It's night and overcast." He pointed to the glow of the moon behind the clouds. "And yet I can see everything as if it were as bright as day. What do you see?"

She blinked and glanced around her. In the heat of the chase, when her heart had been pounding and she had been moving on pure instinct, she had known it was moonlight that lit her way, but had thought there was a full moon, not a half moon only barely visible behind clouds. Could it be true? Could she be a

Phoenixborn? No, she decided. It had to be a trick. Some trick of the mind. He was toying with her for some unknown reason. For all she knew, he was the one who had conjured the crystal bear. She couldn't believe a word he said.

"I get it," he said. "You think I'm lying. But we don't have time; we need to move. I'm not the only one who sensed your awakening and, until you have more control of your abilities, you are easy prey."

"Prey for what?"

"Me," a cold female voice said. Floating on a disc of red light stood a woman in a tight silk gown that did nothing to hide her curves. Not a single blemish dotted her pale face and every strand of her silver hair seemed perfectly in place. "Tristan, be a dear and step away from my dinner. If you do I shall let you live. You know, for old times' sake."

FOUR

“No games, Elyssa,” Tristan yelled. “If you want to fight then let’s fight, but know that I will not hold back.”

“My pet, we both know you’d never harm me.” Elyssa twirled, causing her dress to spin outward, revealing long, smooth legs covered in tattoos. Wrapped from thigh to ankle were red scaly creatures, some sort of lizard. As she spun the tattoos moved too, like water separating from oil.

In the split second that Elyssa had her back turned, Tristan used his accelerated speed to draw his sword and throw it at her.

The tattoos sprang to life, leaping off Elyssa’s

legs and becoming two horse-sized salamanders. The first blocked the flying blade, which pierced its chest. The second opened its mouth and unleashed a fireball that struck its fallen comrade, melting both it and the sword. “I’m so excited. This is going to be so much fun!” Elyssa clapped her hands and giggled a grainy giggle that gave Claire chills.

Tristan’s skin cracked, searing with light, and liquid metal protruded from the splits in his flesh. The metal flowed around his body, making him appear twice his size. As the metal hardened, spiraled quills formed along his back and arms. He lunged for the salamander. The creature fought back, coiling its body around Tristan, seeming to not care as the sharp metal spikes ripped holes in its skin and limbs. Together they rolled backward down the grassy hill.

“That should keep him occupied,” Elyssa said. The hair on Claire’s arms stood on end. A moment later, a blast of molten energy shot from Elyssa’s floating disc, creating a dome of fire around them both. “But girl time is important, so let’s make sure no one can get in here.”

“What do you want with me?” Claire asked.

“You are a Phoenixborn. Inside you is something special. Something I want.”

“Then take it and be gone.”

“The only way to remove it is to kill you. Are you offering your life?”

Claire did not want to die, but she saw no way to stop Elyssa. The dome gave her maybe twenty feet to maneuver and, with Elyssa floating a few feet above her, there really weren't many options. She felt another tickling sensation, this time in her chest, and instinctively rolled to her right. As she did, a bolt of fire struck the ground where she had just stood. “You are a Phoenixborn!” she shouted. “Get down here and fight me like one!”

“I would, really, but I don't like to get dirty.” Elyssa stretched her arms, displaying a dangling golden bracelet encrusted with diamonds. “I much prefer the hands-off approach.”

“I grew up on a farm. Dirt doesn't bother me.” Claire ripped up a clump of grass and slung it at Elyssa. The tangle of roots struck the Phoenixborn in the face and bits of dirt dribbled

down the front of her gown. “If you want to kill me you’re going to have to get dirty.”

“So be it.” The energy disc faded away and Elyssa dropped to the ground. “I was going to make this quick, but now I think I will extend your suffering so I can truly enjoy it.”

Claire pulled up another tuft of grass, this time getting a few wild onions. She knew she stood no chance. Fighting a Phoenixborn was like facing a god. Their powers varied, but each had a pocket full of tricks learned in decades, sometimes centuries, of living. Claire could do nothing to save her own life, but she would be damned if she didn’t do her best to make this as difficult as possible for her adversary. If that meant slinging onions until Elyssa smelled like waterberry soup, then so be it. She would bury Elyssa in the green leaves and the smell would take weeks to wash away.

The more she envisioned ways to strike at Elyssa, the more a humming sensation shook her temples. Then, suddenly, it exploded. The feeling rippled through her body and focused into the dirt she held in her hand. The dirt shifted and moved.

Tiny mushrooms with flat caps sprung from it. A cloud of yellow spores drifted from under their hoods and the air turned foul with a sulphur stench.

“What is that?” Elyssa gagged and wiped tears from her eyes. “It reeks and burns!”

Weakened, Claire dropped the dirt and fell to her knees. A moment ago she had been full of energy, but now she was exhausted. She felt as though she had just spent the whole day working in the fields.

The spores grew thicker, making the air heavy. Elyssa tried to speak but couldn’t find the words. In anger, her eyes flared red and the fire dome faded away. Cool, clean air surrounded them, washing away the spores.

“Nice parlor trick.” Elyssa waved a hand and her eyes glowed red once more. “But it won’t save you.”

Claire wasn’t thinking of being saved. Her mind was bouncing between fighting to stay awake and trying to accept the fact that she had summoned the mushrooms. Tristan hadn’t been lying. She actually was one of the Phoenixborn.

Now that she accepted that fact, she was too weak to make use of it. She watched a fresh blast of energy soar toward her. She wanted to move, wanted to fight back, but couldn't find the strength.

At the last possible second, she saw a blur come between her and the blast. It was Tristan. He had tried to shove her out of the way but hadn't been fast enough and had taken the full brunt of the attack.

On the inside, Claire screamed. Visions of her mother dying flooded her mind. Not again, she thought. Not again.

Tristan's metal armor melted away, revealing burn and bite marks that ran up and down his body. The fight with the salamander hadn't been an easy one.

"It didn't have to be this way," Elyssa said. "You could have let me have her."

"You know I couldn't." He stood, but with a hunch, leaning forward, as if unable to regain his balance.

"Why? For your gathering? You all are doomed to fail."

“If we don’t work together, the chimera will destroy the world.”

“Power will be the only way to stop them.”

Claire wanted to ask what they were talking about, but her lips wouldn’t work. So she just knelt there, watching helplessly. The tingling along her arms grew. She knew Elyssa was once more calling upon power. She had to do something. She didn’t know what, but she needed to act. Otherwise, both she and Tristan would be dead. The shaking in her temples happened again, this time in a smaller, almost refreshing, way. It rose to a crescendo and then expanded.

White ribbons of light rose from Claire’s palms. They swished through the air like a scarf made of pure energy and drifted toward Elyssa, wrapping around the Phoenixborn’s arms and coiling tightly so she couldn’t move. The moment it happened, Claire felt a boost and her fatigue washed away. “What did I do?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Tristan said. “But I think you siphoned away a bit of her strength. It is only a temporary reprieve, but it will give us enough time to do what we need to do.”

Claire reached out a hand and he took it, leaning on her. She saw for the first time just how wounded he was. She had thought he was covered in soot from destroying the second salamander, but she realized now that his skin was burnt black, with lesions showing the underlying muscles. “We need to get you to a healer or—”

“There is no point,” he said, gripping her hand. “I’m dying.”

“You can’t be.”

“I am. I can already feel the fire in me reaching out, desiring to leave.”

“You’ll be okay,” Claire insisted. “I know it. You have to be.”

“You must go. Travel to Rayward. Tell the others what happened here.”

“Why?”

“Because a small group of us believe we Phoenixborn are humanity’s last hope against the chimera. And now you are one of us. The others are gathering in Rayward. Seek them.” Too weak to turn his head, he shifted his eyes to look upon her. “Now, kill me.”

“What? No!”

“You must. I’m not going to make it anyway and it’s your only chance to escape. If you don’t kill me, Elyssa will.”

“I’m not a killer.”

“You are a Phoenixborn.”

The bands of light around Elyssa flickered. Claire could feel that the bindings were weakening.

“Kill me or die.”

Claire’s eye watered. She had never killed. She had no desire to do so. Clearly she was Phoenixborn, accessing her own powers was proof of that, but could she live knowing she was a monster? Maybe the world would be better if she died here with Tristan. One less Phoenixborn around to hurt others, one less to make children orphans.

“Claire,” Tristan coughed. “If you don’t want to do it for yourself, do it for mankind. You made us leave the city to protect the innocent. Think of what you could do as a full Phoenixborn.”

“I can’t.”

The ribbons of light flickered again and this

time Claire could feel the tingling growing as Elyssa summoned her powers. It was now or never.

“Kill me!”

Claire placed one hand under Tristan’s neck and the other on his chin. She pulled and pushed at the same time, snapping his neck. It shocked her how little pressure it took. Tristan’s body went limp and he fell to the ground. Like a monster—no, like a Phoenixborn—she stood over her kill. Water formed in her eyes. She had become the very thing she hated most in life.

A fleck of light, like a tiny star, rose out of Tristan’s chest. It pulsed, floating in the air while his body cracked like hot coals. The embers flared; when they faded, Tristan’s entire body had become ashes. The burning ashes shriveled into dust, becoming nothing more than soot.

“No! That’s mine!” Elyssa shrieked as her bindings fell away. She reached out, grasping for the ball of light, but it passed through her hand and into Claire’s chest.

Claire felt a rush of euphoria, not so much pleasure, but contentment. Everything around her

faded away and for the first time in her life she felt satisfied. The feeling radiated throughout her body and she stood, feeling invincible. It was like being whole after a lifetime of being empty. She now knew who she was.

Elyssa shrank back. A moment later her energy disc appeared under her feet, lifting her upward. “We will meet again.”

Claire watched as Elyssa floated away. Elyssa’s attitude confused her. How could anyone be so bitter and angry when this amazing force existed inside them?

FIVE

Claire left the city and traveled into the forest. Everything she saw and touched felt more vibrant and alive than ever before. Even the little things, like moss on the trees, became magical creatures. She could see their essence and how they tied into everything around them. It made sense, for she saw now that everything was connected. Knowing that brought her joy, a kind of joy she wanted to never end. Yet it did. She couldn't tell how long the feeling lasted. Time was wonky. It could have been minutes or hours, but when it faded away she found herself nearly fifty leagues away from where she had entered the forest.

Although the euphoria and invincibility from the merging were gone, Tristan's power remained in her. She could also feel her own powers, now fully awakened. The pieces of the phoenix inside her yearned to be joined with their counterparts. There was a hunger, a desire that she had never known the Phoenixborn felt. She wanted to ignore that feeling but it was too strong. She knew she couldn't deny it. She wanted more. The phoenix needed to be whole and she wanted it to be whole. Yet Tristan's words echoed in her mind.

We Phoenixborn are humanity's last hope against the chimera.

Claire looked toward the rising sun. Rayward lay that way.

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