

PROLOGUE

A little red light goes off on Amanda Mitchell's desk. The only spark of color in her otherwise gray-toned office. It's a signal. Not a bad one or a good one, just simply a "heads up" from the powers that be.

There's a new arrival. And that means there's work to be done.

"Christopher." Amanda calls bluntly. No response. That is to be expected. Chris is always preoccupied.

Rolling her eyes, Amanda trods down the utterly unordained hallways at her typical rapid pace. She is a frequent sight in these halls, yet Amanda still stirs whispers as she passes, followed by a trail of watchful eyes. She always has. The attention was an unanticipated side-effect of being named Director, and one she would be happy to live without. She gives passersby a glance and they immediately avert their gaze. Everyone is always on their best behavior around Ms. Amanda Mitchell. She is on a mission, they know better than to be anything other than quiet and respectful.

She grits her teeth and all but races to her colleague's office, where he surely has headphones on and music blaring.

"Christopher." She pushes the door open, lips pursed and head tilted to give a condescending look a tired mother would give a petulant child. Seated at his desk, ignorant to the world, is Chris Tanaka. His office is cluttered, she needed to remind him to pick up after himself every once and a while. His bookshelves, his *many* bookshelves, are piled high with enough literature to fill a small library and enough half-full journals and crumpled sheets of paper to start Chris on several books of his own.

Chris, true to form, yanks out his headphones and slams his laptop shut. He stifles a grimace and returns his face to a pleasant mask of compliance.

"I called."

"My bad," Chris starts, with a smile that begs forgiveness and bright eyes that ensure he'll receive it, "headphones. What did you need?"

"There's another one. Arizona." Amanda states clearly, no room for chit chat.

"Now? Not much time between them, is there?" Chris chuckles, "Who?"

“Danielle Nadir. Eighteen, female.”

“Ah yes, spare no detail,” Chris jokes, ever pleasant, “Eighteen? Really?”

“You’ll do what’s required?”

“Of course, Mandy.”

“Ms. Mitchell is fine.” Amanda says dryly and for the nth time. Chris stands at attention and gives a salute, a gesture that is both sincere and ironic. As Ms. Mitchell exits, Chris stands for a moment, waiting until he’s sure she won’t return.

“Did you hear all that?” Chris asks quietly.

“Yes.” A voice calls, then after a pause, “Is she going to be one of mine?”

Chris nods, a tight-lipped smile creeping onto his face, “you’re next in rotation.”

“I had to ask,” the voice states evenly. A small figure comes out from behind a conveniently placed pile of clutter surrounding one of Chris’s larger bookshelves. She reaches her hands to her head and starts styling her long dark hair in two tight braids.

“I won’t lose this one.” She swears, her eyes fixed on the wall in front of her.

“You don’t need to promise that to me.” Chris nods, “I know you’ll do everything you can. You’re excellent.”

Hair pinned tight to her head, Becca Sawyer turns and meets Chris’s gaze. Her eyes, finally making contact, are focused and unblinking but warm.

“I learned from the best.”