

FLASHTIDE

THE SEQUEL TO FLASHFALL

JENNY MOYER

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

NEW YORK

Henry Holt and Company, *Publishers since 1866*
Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010 • fiercereads.com

Copyright © 2017 by Jenny Moyer
Map on pp. vi–vii copyright © 2017 by Jon Chadjurian
All rights reserved.

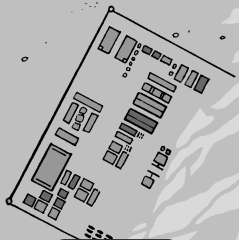
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 978-1-62779-483-1

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First edition, 2017 / Design by Liz Dresner
Printed in the United States of America

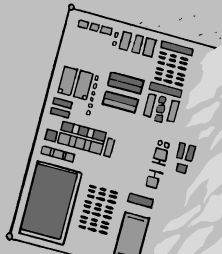
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my boys—
Caden, Landon, and Kai.
I'd cross the cordons for you.*



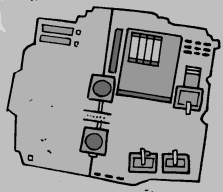
OUTPOST 1

CORDON 1



OUTPOST 2

CORDON 2



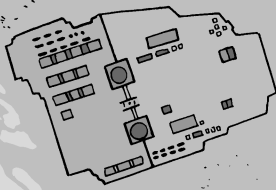
OUTPOST 3

CORDON 3



OUTPOST 4

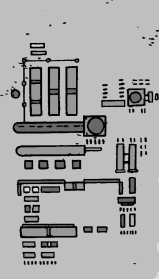
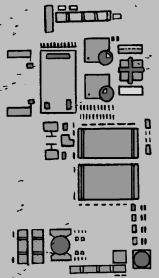
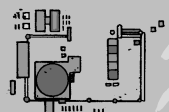
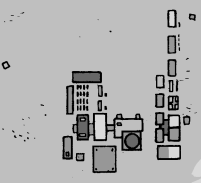
CORDON 4



OUTPOST 5

CORDON 5

OVERBURDEN





TRADES

ORDINANCE

PROTECTED CITY
OF ALARA

OUTLIER
REGIONS

MOUNTAIN
PROVINCES

PROLOGUE

A HUNDRED AND fifty years ago, our sun turned on us. At first, observers noted the largest solar flare in recorded history, an X29 that they later changed to the first-ever Y-classified flare. Still, it was nothing to cause alarm—our sun was approaching solar maximum, a cycle that had repeated every eleven years for millennia.

Scientists with NASA and NOAA reported the approach of a CME—a coronal mass ejection. They predicted a disturbance to spacecraft and aircraft navigation systems, as well as potential damage to power grids, all caused by the burst of electromagnetic radiation impacting our atmosphere. But what came hurtling toward us was nothing at all like they predicted. An unprecedented solar event.

The world changed in an instant—a flash of radioactive electromagnetic particles that invaded our atmosphere and hangs here still, a visible reminder of humanity's vulnerability.

And adaptability. For some of us, anyway.

They called it a flash curtain and watched as it turned cities

to rubble in the space of a breath. It altered landmasses, raised water levels, made islands where none existed before. Then seventeen more fell in the following days. The US, UK, Europe, Asia—no place was unaffected.

And the world broke apart.

ONE

31.5 km from flash curtain

WE MOVE THROUGH the forest like we're being chased.

Dram and I don't speak, both of us listening for the drone of Inquiry Modules, or things less mechanical, coming after us. The mountain provinces, once a haven, are now a trap closing. Each day new Mods are added to the small, autonomous hovers patrolling this region in low-flying grids. The Congress is desperate to find me before I can finish what I started on the other side of the flash curtain.

And since we can't go back to the cordons, that leaves only the protected city—from which Subpars are exiled—or the lawless outlier regions on its far side. Either place could hold Dram's father. Or maybe Arrun Berrends is as dead as the rumors suggest.

The branches of a pine tree slip through my fingers, the stiff needles scraping against my palm. One touch from a Conjuror, and it could transform into something that would shield us from the Congress's trackers.

Of course, under my hand it's just a tree. Which really doesn't help with our current dilemma.

"Hurry, Rye," Dram says. "We're almost there."

I lift my feet, trying to place them in the snow-packed steps his boots have made. My breaths feel heavier up here in the mountains, and each exhale clouds the air.

Everything looks and feels different beyond the flashfall. Especially the air.

People have a name for the place we came from. Westfall. This side of the flash curtain is considered Eastfall. Dram and I grew up with only the five outposts and the five cordons as boundaries, but here there's the Overburden, the mountain provinces, Alara, and the outlier regions. Apparently, being closer to safety gives people time to name things.

And apparently, we Subpars weren't given that much space.

I grasp another branch as we shuffle past, our steps carving a path through the snow. Living with the Conjies has taught me to see nature as something *more*. Alive, radiating with energy similar to mine. Even the dirt and rocks. I didn't understand that before.

Or maybe I did.

"Wishing you could conjure?"

I look up at Dram, pine needles slipping through my fingers.

"The way you're holding on to that tree—it's the third one you've grabbed."

Words crowd my mouth, but the only true answer is—

"Yes."

I want the ability so badly that at times I think I can feel elements transform when I watch a Conjuror at work. More

likely, it's jealousy stirring in me, a creature inside my soul roused by equal parts gratitude and resentment.

"Me too." Dram touches the branch and grins ruefully. He sighs, and the branch snaps back. "You ready for this?" he asks, drawing his hood over his dark hair. A chill snakes down my spine as the camo-cloth shifts, altering shades of white, adapting until he blends with our surroundings. In an instant, my Subpar-who-looks-like-a-Conjia is gone. Dram doesn't look like a Strider—he's not wearing their electrified armored suit and flash weapons—but still, he doesn't look like the caver I've known all my life.

He looks like someone who belongs in Eastfall.

I'm glad he can't see my face as he slips the gun from his thigh holster and checks the ammo clip.

"I wish you would use a gun, Orion." He looks at me now, and I'm not fast enough to hide my revulsion. Guns, like camo-cloth, are tools of the Congress. It's enough that I'm wearing their stolen cloak.

"I'll be fine." I reach to free the pickaxe on my back. "I can handle a couple of vultures." It's the same words I said to Bade when I convinced him to let only Dram and me go after the creatures. None of the free Conjias have ever faced down a flash vulture. Except for the two Conjias they found in pieces. Stiff black feathers with thorny protrusions were discovered beside the bodies.

Dram and I knew at once what they were—and what they meant. Flash vultures. In the mountain provinces.

I adjust my grip on the axe handle, but it still feels foreign—this is Dram's pickaxe. I left mine—my mother's axe—in

Outpost Five. Its handle was split, just a few swings away from cracking apart. I couldn't justify the extra weight, though I've regretted the loss of it ever since.

I regret the loss of many things.

"Orion," Dram says softly. "We're going back for them. We'll get them out."

My fist tightens around the handle. I wish my thoughts weren't so transparent to Dram. Sometimes I want to cling to my aches without him knowing.

"How many blades on you?" he asks.

"Three." I can't see the knives tucked in my arm holster, but I feel them beneath the lightweight cloak. I wear another, larger knife at my hip and a slim blade inside my boot. But I don't tell Dram. Telling him I brought five knives would reveal I'm more worried about this than I pretend to be.

We used to hide from the flash curtain's altered creatures. Now we're hunting them.

I wish I could unsee what happened to those two poor Conjies. They fought hard, but they didn't know what they were up against. Beasts with wings so tough they can withstand the flash curtain. Talons that pierce your skin before you've even registered that there's a beak aiming for your jugular.

"They were sighted near the boundary," Dram says, "about thirty kilometers from the curtain."

I draw the hood of my cloak over my head. I don't need to see the flashfall to know we're getting close. The past months with the Conjies have only increased my sensitivity to the elements, to the altered particles that have always called my name.

He turns without another word, and I follow. Adrenaline surges through me like the silence is a cue. This is when Dram

and I are at our best—when our actions supersede our words, and we talk to each other with the language we developed down tunnel nine.

Our boots push at the snow, and my hand tightens around my axe handle. White camo-cloth drapes us, and with the snow swiftly falling, I lose Dram at times, even though he's just ahead of me. It is strange to follow when I have always been out front, but we are east of the curtain, and he is the better leader here.

Snow crunches behind me, and I whirl. At first, there's nothing but snow-dusted scrub brush, but as I look harder, I can make out a face in the conjured concealment. Roran.

"I told you to stay back," Dram says.

Roran barely moves. His dark eyes shift toward Dram and away. I don't say anything. Roran hasn't spoken to me since he stumbled into our camp a week ago, half dead with flash fever. When he finally spoke, it was to Dram—to tell him—

I press the point of Dram's pickaxe against my palm and distract myself with the pain. Some pain is easier to take than other kinds.

"Let him stay," I say.

Roran doesn't look at me. The path that once connected us is as gone as the people who made it.

Wind blows up through the pass, rattling bare branches above our heads with a clacking and sifting of snow. A narrow twig the size of my finger lifts from where it's twisted in Roran's black hair. He brushes it absently, and tiny white flowers bloom.

I wonder if he even knows that he's conjuring, or if it's reflexive, a sort of magical respiration. He catches me looking and turns, striding ahead of us. A petal slips to the ground, and I pick it up.

They are for Mere. I can make myself acknowledge that much. Mere, the Tempered Conjie, my friend, his mother, is likely dead. Dram knows how. A flashburst in Cordon Five, Roran separated from the others . . . He parcels out pieces of the story in moments when he thinks I can take it. The truth is like exposure to the flash curtain's radioactive particles. It kills me slowly, over time. All at once, and I'd be nothing more than dust.

Hers is the only loss I accept. I must do that for her. For Roran. If he is ever to heal, then he must grieve. He can blame me, hate me, but I won't leave him alone. I don't wear a Conjie talisman woven in my hair for Mere, but I made her this promise.

The talisman I wear is on the inside. A hollow place that aches like a bruise, that steals my breath when memories sweep in. Especially the good memories. The sound of her laugh is fresh in my mind, and I—

“Rye,” Dram says, “I can't fight these things alone. I need you here.” Wind gusts throw his brown hair into a fury around his face. A faint jingle reaches my ears.

I touch the tiny silver charm woven into a lock of his hair. One I'd never noticed before.

“Maybe you should take this out,” I say. “It might warn the vultures we're approaching.”

“No. That one's important.”

“They're all important, aren't they?” He wears numerous talismans: tiny bits of shell, a narrow strip of bark, the top of a green acorn. It's not the Conjie way to speak of talismans. But we are not Conjies, and I'm filled with a sudden need to know.

“Yes.” He clasps my hand against his head, trapping my

fingers. The charm pushes against my palm. It is strange to think of Dram keeping something important from me.

“Is it for a memory or a promise?” I ask.

“Both.”

I lift my camo-cloth hood. “Lead the way.”

We step over fallen trees, our steps slower, cautious. We catch up to Roran, where he stands like an extension of the trees around us. “I hear them,” he whispers.

We stand unmoving, ears strained for the sounds I’m already dreading, sounds that wake me at night when my nightmares take me back to the cordons.

I hear the faint jingling of Dram’s talisman and the clacking of beads from Roran’s sash. Then, the guttural, drawn-out hissing of agitated flash vultures.

Roran leans in close. “The vultures in the provinces eat only dead things. They don’t attack people.”

“These aren’t normal vultures,” I whisper.

“There,” Dram says, pointing to a snow-dusted tree. “Five of them.”

Five, when once no flash vultures existed beyond the flashfall.

They shift on the branches, like the tree is too small to contain them. Wings extend, the span longer than Dram is tall. These are the largest I’ve seen. Their bones don’t protrude like those of their siblings in the cordons. Perhaps they’ve found prey to feed their appetites. I watch them arch their necks, black eyes fixed on us, and know that whatever they’ve been filling their stomachs with, we are what they hunger for.

“How are they getting through?” Dram asks.

I don’t have an answer. Not one I’m willing to share yet.

“Bade says he’s seen tunnel gulls—”

“Tunnel gulls?” I’m so shocked I lower my axe. “Where? They nest in stone.” I have a hard time imagining gulls surviving beyond the caverns. They don’t have the flame-resistant wings of flash vultures.

“Maybe he was wrong,” Dram says.

Or maybe the curtain is altering things again.

“Get ready,” he says.

My grip tightens, my palms sweating despite the cold. I find the dark shapes of the vultures in the tree, but my gaze strays beyond them, searching for the flash of a silver-white wingtip. A flash like the blade of a knife. If tunnel gulls survived the destruction of the Barrier Range and made their way here, we are in more danger than I thought.

But the sky is overcast, the clouds so low I feel like I could climb up and touch them. They are a shroud, keeping the rest of the world veiled.

A twig snaps, and we both whirl, Dram with his pistol in hand. I’m the only one who still uses a pickaxe. A soft whistle comes from the wood, and we both relax. Conjuror. A girl emerges from the tree, her hair braided like a crown around her head.

“What is it, Meg?” I whisper. Her face is whiter than the snow.

“Newel sent me to find you,” she says. I try to imagine what could compel the older leader of the free Conjies to send her after us. “To warn you,” she adds.

“What’s happened?” Dram asks, and it’s his commander voice—the new one that sounds more like his father, Arrun, and less like the boy I searched caves with.

“Trackers found us just after you left. He said to tell you he’d meet you—”

Two vultures drop to the ground behind Meg. They fan their massive wings, like they’re barring our escape. She stiffens, but I can tell she’s not afraid. Not like she should be.

Dram takes aim, cocking the hammer back with a click. “Don’t move, Meg,” he orders softly.

“They’re just birds,” she says. But she snaps a bead from her bracelet, grasps it in her palm in preparation to conjure.

“If you conjure,” Dram says, “make it something you can hide behind.”

Wings beat the air behind me, the sound taking me back to the cordons, to memories of blood and burning. I don’t have to turn to know at least two more have dropped in. I glance at Roran. He slides a wooden ring from his finger and conjures it into a shard of rock, sharp as a blade.

“Rye,” Dram says, and it’s more a breath than a sound.

“Yes,” I whisper. I am ready.

“Now,” he says. I pivot and swing my axe at the nearest black body, while shots fire one after another from Dram’s gun. I dive at the second screeching creature. A third shot. I throw all my weight behind my axe and—

Wings. Pain shoots up my arm. I wasn’t prepared for the resistance, and my axe tumbles from my fingers. I reach with my left hand to free a knife while the vulture recovers from my failed attack, grunting and twitching under the force of the blow. It’s on me before I’ve freed my knife. The beak pierces my skin through my coat, and I cry out. It holds fast to my flesh, digging and tearing. I fall back, light-headed, searching for my blade.

“Orion!”

The last vulture drops from the sky and lands heavy on me. A beak jabs, glancing off my ribs. I scream from the pain, from the shock of facing these beasts this far from the cordons, in a place that should be safe from the flash curtain’s horrors.

“Stay still, Rye!” Dram’s voice, deadly calm. I force myself to quit struggling so he can get a clean shot. I wait for the report of the gun, but all I hear is a click and Dram’s curse. He drops the pistol and dives toward me, to where I shake on bloody snow that surrounds me like a target.

Dram wrestles the vulture off me, and it shrieks in protest. Two more fly toward him, circling, their bodies so massive that Dram’s camo-cloth ripples with shades of black. I can only listen as he rolls and grunts—and then his breathing changes, and I know he’s in control just before he levers his body atop the creature and beats it with my dropped axe. He’s up on his knees a moment later, a blur of motion, with an overhand grip on two knives. The beasts fly at him, wings extended, and his camo-cloth responds with matching ebony, then they shift away, launching themselves skyward. His cloak absorbs him into the winter woods again. I roll onto my side, clasp the torn skin that burns and pulses in time with my pounding heart.

It smells of blood. With my eyes squeezed shut, and my body numb from shock and cold, that’s all I sense. The smell weighs on me, heavy, like two flash vultures pressing on my chest. I gasp into the snow, needing the clean air to flush out the taste of death.

Dram pries my hands away to look at the wound. I refuse to cry, to give in to the despair I feel tearing into me as sharp

as talons. Somehow our nightmares followed us through the flash curtain.

We're not free yet.

"It's not deep," he says, stanching the blood. "But it might need stitching." He winds a bandage around my ribs, and I hiss as he cinches it tight. "Where else?"

"Shoulder." I grit the word out between clenched teeth. He lifts aside my camo-cloth and peels back my torn coat. A Conjie curse slips past his lips.

"Something's wrong," he murmurs. "Your wound—"

I crane my neck to see what has him frozen in shock. A shallow gash, no wider than my palm, bleeding steadily. But as Dram lifts the cloth, my breath stutters. The blood . . . shimmers. The gash glints with opalescent shades of pink and aquamarine, as if the flash curtain took hold of me and left its handprint behind.

"It's spreading," he says. Iridescent streaks fan from the wound, illuminating my skin in ominous rays.

As if the sight of it tripped a signal in my brain, I suddenly feel it—pain catches up to my senses, and I scream behind my teeth.

"Worse than orbies," I gasp, knowing Dram will understand. Whatever this is, it hurts more than the tiny glowing organisms that chewed through our skin down tunnel nine.

"Clean it," Meg says. She leans past Dram with handfuls of conjured water and scrubs at my skin. "It's still spreading!"

"Do you think it's some kind of venom?" Dram asks, his face grim. This, too, he's familiar with. He drew flash bat poison out of my body twice down nine. A look of resolve crosses his face, and he leans toward my wound.

“No!” I shove his head back, my body screaming with pain. “You’re not putting your mouth on this thing. This isn’t . . . flash bat venom.” My voice shakes, but my gaze is steady. I tell him more, without words, the silent communication that saved our lives hundreds of times down the tunnels. Whatever the flash vulture did to me, it’s worse than anything we faced on the other side of the curtain.

“Cut it out of me,” I say.

“I’m not *cutting* it out of you—”

“Cut it!” I throw all the authority of a lead ore scout into my voice, though my designation means nothing now.

“You’ll bleed to death!” Dram says.

“Then burn it!”

Dram’s wild eyes meet mine. “There’s not time for a fire. The wood is wet—”

“Flare,” I gasp. And I know, flash me, I know what this pain is like. “It’s making me sick,” I murmur. “Whatever it’s done to me—I can feel it!”

“I’ll help,” Roran says, kneeling beside me. He holds me steady while Dram yanks a flare from his pocket.

“Her Radband’s changing!” Meg’s voice.

I shift to see my Radband glowing pale yellow at my wrist. It darkens as I watch. Dram’s stark gaze collides with mine, then shifts to my shoulder. “What if this doesn’t work? We don’t know what this is—”

“Dram.” I bite his name out, a brittle command. A moment from now, I won’t be able to speak.

He lights the flare and sets it to my skin.

Pain. Burning. Radiating. Like a piece of a star pressing

against me. My eyes squeeze shut, but colors explode behind my eyelids.

Tremors rack my body, the chill of shock on the heels of fire.

“It’s gone. We got it all.” Dram’s voice shakes. “Breathe, Rye,” he murmurs.

Air slips unsteadily through my nostrils. Burning flesh. I choke on the smell. My skin burns so badly I fight the urge to vomit. I shake uncontrollably, as if the rest of my skin is trying to escape from the source of pain. I count to five and push up onto my hands and knees.

“What are you doing?” Meg asks. “Let us tend your wound.”

“There are at least two more of those vultures out there.” I gasp the words, panting past the pain.

I clasp Dram’s hand and tell him the rest with my eyes. He nods grimly. We are back to relying on our tunnel talk. I bite back a cry as he tows me to my feet. Blood spatters the snow like cavers’ marks. I think of flash vultures seeing them. *This way to an easy meal.* If more come now, I’m done. I’m already dizzy from shock.

“Let’s move, ore scout,” Dram says, tucking his axe into his belt. I didn’t realize I’d dropped it. He scoops snow into his hands and rubs it between his palms, cleaning them of the vulture and Orion blood. “Still with me?” he asks, giving my hands the same treatment.

“I’m fine,” I murmur. We head toward the camp, my staggering steps no longer quiet. I make it a dozen meters before I collapse against a tree. Dram lifts me in his arms.

“Tomorrow I teach you to shoot,” he mutters.

He trudges behind Meg and Roran over snow-covered trails, and I will myself to be lighter, less a burden. At least he's not injured. Just me—the girl who can't let go of her caver's ways. The Westfaller.

Snowflakes whirl down from the heavy blanket of sky so thick I can watch their lazy descent. It makes a hush fall over everything, and I imagine it helping us, covering our tracks, shielding us from the Congress's trackers.

Then, a glint of silver through the flakes—and I blink the snow out of my eyes to look harder.

Beyond the sounds of their footfalls, the creature calls, *Mew, mew, keow*. Dram heard it too; I can see it in the tensing of his jaw. I'm suddenly too aware of my hair, dangling past his arm, and Meg's braids—wound like the nest this monster would use them for.

Mew, mew, keow, the tunnel gull calls again. I slide my knife free and grip it tightly, eyes fastened on the sky above us.

I will learn to shoot tomorrow.

TWO

40.2 km from flash curtain

THUNDER RUMBLES THROUGH camp, and I'm grateful for our conjured tree shelter. Most nights, Dram and I sleep under the stars, but the winter has brought snow. And snow, this close to the flash curtain, can be deadly.

Particle snow exposes us to radiation as surely as a breath of cordon air. It shouldn't reach us here—we're camped beyond the flashfall—but I feel a shift in the atmosphere, as if it's pushing past boundaries along with the vultures and gulls.

Another rumble, and I give up on sleep. Usually I sense the approach of a flash storm, the deepest parts of me awakened to the curtain's particles. A bead of sweat trickles down my back, and I realize it's not a storm that woke me, but a premonition, a tingling sense of dread I can't ignore.

I push up my sleeve, and my Radband casts a glow on the woven branches on either side of us. My eyes water from staring at the indicator. It turned yellow while I was imprisoned by King in Cordon Three. Even then, starving and half mad with fear, I marveled that it wasn't red after the days I'd spent in

the cordons, so close to the flash curtain I could feel its song pulse through my body. My father's compound saved me, preserved my life long enough to get him the elements he needed to create a cure.

But no one's heard from him in weeks.

Dram stirs, and I glance down to find him studying my face. He gently clasps my wrist, blocking the light of my Radband. He despises the biotech all Subpars wear from birth—indicators of approaching death by radiation.

But we're safe from that now. So long as we don't get close to the curtain again. And as long as we take shelter from any storms that carry its radioactive particles to us. I weave my fingers through his, and our callused palms press together, hands scarred from years of mining and fighting the creatures down tunnel nine.

Tension creeps into his eyes, and I turn up the lantern before he has to ask. I need the sky above me, and Dram needs light in dark spaces. We both carry demons from Outpost Five. He sits up and gently checks my wounds. I didn't need stitches after all. He trails his finger beside a row of butterfly bandages.

"You in pain?" he asks.

"No. Looks worse than it feels." I pull my shirt back over the angry red gash marking my ribs.

"Glenting vultures," he mutters.

"Glenting out-of-practice axe skills," I say.

He grins ruefully and draws me into his arms. "What's got you flighty, ore scout?"

Lately, Dram speaks more and more like the Conjies who've taken us in. I feel the rings on his fingers as his hands move over my skin—another bit of Conjie adornment, like the matching

cuffs we both wear. But the rest of him is all Subpar. His lips brush mine, and I lean into his kiss, weaving my fingers through his dark hair. My hands skim his shoulders, the hard muscles that mark him for the caver he was, the boy who climbed down tunnels every day after me.

“Orion?” He senses my tension, like there’s a line stretched between us that he can feel when it pulls too tight. But how do I tell him what I’m uncertain of myself? “Is it the curtain?”

Four words that state perfectly the nature of our existence. If we Subpars live, it is because the curtain stayed far enough away, that it yielded enough of its cirium to provide a shield, but not so many radioactive particles that it killed us. If the curtain reaches toward us through winds or storms, though . . . we become flash dust the Congress can use to fuel its weapons.

Is it the curtain?

When you live this close to the flashfall, it is *always* the curtain. But Dram knows there’s more to it for me.

“I feel it . . . *pressing*,” I whisper.

“We’re more than thirty kilometers from it,” Dram says. “Beyond the flashfall.” I can’t stand the tension drawing his brows together. I should tell him that I barely sleep at night, that in my dreams the curtain rolls and undulates in waves, an iridescent sea of pink, green, and violet—and it moves. Toward us. Toward *me*, as if I am tied to it so strongly I have the power to bring it with me wherever I go.

I shiver, and Dram slips his blanket around my shoulders. “Talk to me, Rye. What’s going on?”

Something. Something bad. But since I don’t have any answers, I clasp him around the neck and kiss him. He makes a soft sound of surprise, but then a moment later, his arms

wind around me. We fled the cordons, found our way to the freedom of the mountain provinces, but this is our true escape—the places we find together where fear can't follow.

Thunder shakes the ground, blocking out the sounds of our breaths, our soft words. Not thunder.

Engines.

“Dram!”

He shoots up, letting go of me to reach for his guns. Outside our shelter, Conjies shout, a child cries.

“Weapons and warmth,” Dram commands, shoving his feet into boots. “The cold can take us as fast as their flash weapons.”

We snatch up every weapon that's not already strapped to us, and he tosses me my coat.

A Conjie ducks inside our shelter. “Inquiry Module at the edge of camp—”

We follow him, gliding down a conjured slide to the ground. I gasp. Particle snow. I sense it even before I touch the fresh white powder.

In the feeble dawn sunlight, Conjies flee from the earthen shelters they've conjured; others leap down from the woven branches of tree forts. None of it offers sufficient protection from the Congress's trackers. The orbs swarm in the distance, their sensors glinting with light. If we can't evade them, they'll bring the Inquiry Modules racing to collect us.

Our band of Conjies is small—twenty-six men, women, and children. Fewer than half have fighting experience—but they know how to hide. Trees twist up around us, sending snow and pine needles cascading. Conjured rock juts from the ground, and Dram grasps my arm before I collide with the sudden barrier.

“Camo-cloth,” Dram says, digging his cloak from his pack.

I yank mine over my head and thrust my arms through the sleeves. We thread through the trees, blending with the snow whipping up around us.

A Conjuror sends a wall of snow flurries arcing over our camp, shielding us from view of the Inquiry Module approaching from the east. We don’t have the kind of weapons necessary to take down one of the unmanned hovers. Bade’s the only Conjie I know who can make fire in his hands and throw it, but he’s not here now.

It rumbles, nearing, and the Conjies still. They are suddenly tree or rock, nothing but elements the Mod’s roving sensor won’t see. It drones above us, so low it knocks snow from the treetops.

Buzzing metallic cylinders drop from its hold.

“Pulse trackers,” Dram murmurs. These don’t need to see us to find us. “Everyone—get wet—they track body heat!”

“The spring’s a half kilometer—”

“Get in the snow!” I shout.

They look at me, eyes wide, deciding which danger is worse. If the Congress captures us, we’ll be processed and sent into the cordons. The particle snow might not kill us—not right away, anyway.

With Bade away, everyone looks to Dram. And right now, he’s looking to me.

His brow creases beneath his cloak’s hood. He doesn’t want to ask me to take the risk—but he’s never had to. I tug my glove off with my teeth and crouch. My heart hammers in my chest, urging me to stop. I thrust my hand into the fresh powder, closing my eyes to better sense the—

Burn. Like paper taken by flame, the way the fire curls the edges before it turns black . . . I breathe past the pain, wedging my hand farther, into the deeper layer of snow. My hand freezes, numb with cold, but that is all.

“Is it safe?” Dram asks.

My eyes meet his, and he curses. “Flash me. How bad, Rye?”

“We need to get deep,” I call. “Don’t let the fresh snow touch your skin.” We’re resistant to the curtain’s radioactive particles, but not immune. And it’s the recent snow the curtain has gifted with its particles, brushing our camp like a radioactive caress.

The pulse trackers whine toward us, drawn to our body heat.

“Get under the snow!” Dram calls.

We burrow, digging ourselves under blankets of fresh powder. The cold soaks through, and I shiver, burrowing deeper. I lie back, gasping when wet droplets snake down my collar. The trackers hum above us, whistling through the air. Roran lifts his hands, cupping dirt, and snow flurries lift from his palm, giving us cover.

We are cold enough that the machines don’t register our body heat, but parts of us are on fire. Beside me, in a hastily dug trench, a little girl whimpers.

“Where does it hurt, Briar?” I whisper.

“My hands,” she says, shivering. “They burn.”

Particle snow. At this elevation, we experience it more than we did down in the outpost. Like the rains and wind that herald a flash storm, they carry with them the deadly particles of the curtain. We should be far enough from the flash curtain to avoid any of its fallout. More proof of what I fear.

“This isn’t right,” Roran says, shifting in the snow. “It

shouldn't burn like this. We made camp ten kilometers from the boundary marker. We're beyond the flashfall."

"Maybe you read the marker wrong—"

"I didn't read the *glenting* marker wrong, Meg!"

"Then why is there *glenting particle snow* burning my arms?"

"Quit scrammin' or we're all slayed!" Dram hisses.

"It's shifting," I announce softly. In the hush that follows, I hear wind whining through bare branches. They know I have a connection to the curtain, even if they don't understand it. These are Conjies—people so tied to nature they can transform it at will. They don't question my scout's senses. But it doesn't make them any less afraid.

"What do you mean, it's *shifting*?" Newel asks.

I try to think how to describe what I've been sensing for days. I close my eyes, letting the snow around me numb all outside distractions—shut out the rational side of me that wars with my instinct.

"Pulses," I whisper, and my blood—my Subpar, adapted blood—seems to echo the sentiment. I sit up, and the Conjies watch me like I'm a creature they haven't yet named. "Pulses of energy, like it's testing for holes, pockets of energy that have dissipated. That's why it's worse at night—when the Earth's turned away from the sun. Like it . . . frees the curtain, to stretch, to reach . . ." I'm babbling, I realize, throwing out half-formed theories in an effort to help them understand how much danger we're in. Their wide eyes fasten on me like I'm something that came from the flashfall, something feral.

I *did* come from the flashfall. And I am more a creature of the caverns than they will ever understand.

“Trackers are gone,” Dram announces. We dig ourselves from the snow, wet and shivering. “No fires,” he says. “Dry clothes and pack up. We need to leave within the hour.”

The Conjies set about their tasks without further instruction. This is how they’ve evaded the Congress for generations. One hour. They will be ready in half that time.

I don’t go to collect my gear with Dram. Instead, I jog to the base of the nearest ridge and start climbing.

Rock scrapes my palm as I reach past the ledge. My injuries throb, and a sheen of sweat makes my hands slip. I don’t have to climb anymore—I’m no longer the ore scout the Congress forced me to be. But I need to see the flash curtain, need to know why its song started humming through my veins again.

I shove my fingers into a shallow crack, scraping the back of my hand. I repeat the action with my other hand and lever my body higher. If I were a Conjie, I’d just weave a vine from rock and pull myself up. But that is not how the curtain affected my people.

How it affects me.

My breath hitches, and the scent of pine winds through my senses, reminding me that I’m beyond the ash of Outpost Five. I let the memories linger as I climb, until the ghosts of the cavers I loved propel me past my limits.

I reach the top, grasping tree roots to hoist myself up.

I have to do this before Dram leads us farther east. He doesn’t look back—only forward. He doesn’t ever look west beyond this perimeter of mountains, toward the flash curtain. From this vantage, I can make out shifting violet and green

hues, stretching like a wall of light from the ground upward as far as I can see. Rivulets of aquamarine shimmer down, as if an artist dripped paint over a canvas. The colors bleed together as I watch.

The sight of it, after two months of living beyond the flash-fall, steals my breath away. Back at Outpost Five, I'd climb the Range and stare out over Cordon Five, catching glimpses of the curtain beyond the sulfur clouds. It strikes me suddenly that I've missed the view.

I have never hated myself more.

This thing destroys everyone I love. It is killing Subpars and Conjurors forced to mine the burnt sands, even as I perch here, safely beyond its reach. And yet . . . it hums a tune inside my soul that I recognize.

I close my eyes and let the wind buffet me, let the sounds of the air whining through the pines block out the sounds of my self-recrimination. Tears streak down my cheeks—from the cold, the wind, I tell myself.

But I know it's shame. I promised them freedom. Even if the cavers I left behind didn't hear me say the words, I know they've heard stories of the Hunter, the Scout who will find a way out for everyone. Months have passed, and we haven't gotten any closer to finding the leader of the resistance—Dram's father, Arrun—and now we've lost contact with Commissary Jameson, the only connection we had to my father somewhere inside Alara. It's taken all we have just to survive, to outrun the Inquiry Modules.

Now this. The curtain is changing. I can sense it, even if I don't understand what's happening. For 150 years, it's been a

constant horror that wipes out all life within its perimeter. As bad as it is, at least we've adapted to it, found ways to survive even within the flashfall. But now, all that could change. I feel it deep inside myself, like a cup filled to overflowing.

"I thought I'd find you here." I whirl, surprised to find Dram pulling himself over the ledge. "I've watched you slip away for days now, Orion. Like you have a secret." I don't say anything, and he walks to my side, takes in the view. "Alara's the other way, you know."

I smile, but I can feel tears in my throat. During our first weeks of freedom, I climbed for views of the protected city. I'd watch the sunset reflect off its cirium shield.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" he asks softly.

"Because it's useless to lie to you." And the truth is too terrifying.

"You know something about the flashfall. Why it's changing."

"I couldn't tell you *why* it's happening."

"But it is," he says, asking the question more with his eyes than his words.

"Yes." I turn back toward the horizon, the bands of color shifting in the distance. Green, pink, faintest red. Red is rare. Or it used to be.

"What does that mean for us?"

I don't answer. I just watch the red bands bleed across the sky. He hasn't asked the most important question.

"Fire," he curses. "What does this mean for Subpars left in the outposts?"

My stomach twists. It didn't take him long.

“Fire,” I answer, repeating his word that is both curse and truth. It means fire.

Not a literal fire with flames licking the air, but an internal one, that burns from the inside out. The kind of burning our Radbands monitor in shifting shades of green to red. Fire that swept away my beloved mentor, Graham, in a gale of cordon wind, and fire that burned our friend Reeves in pieces, a day at a time.

Exposure to the radioactive particles of the flash curtain takes many forms, but it all ends the same. And it leaves only ashes behind.

Conjies have stories.

When we dare to risk firelight, we huddle close, weapons at the ready, satchels packed—ready to flee at the first rumble of an Inquiry Module, the faintest hum of a tracker. Singing and dancing are saved for special occasions, but storytelling, to Conjurers, is like food. Essential. Life-sustaining.

Tonight, I lean against Dram’s legs, watching flames flicker. The cadence of Newel’s voice lulls me deeper into the tale he weaves as artfully as a song.

“The sun was reaching solar maximum,” he says. “But this was not the eleven-year cycle scientists had come to expect, nor the hundred-year cycle they had predicted. These solar storms didn’t fit any known pattern. They were the largest on record—sixes and sevens on a five-point scale, and the velocities they traveled were unprecedented.”

Conjurers are rarely still. Maybe it’s something to do with the energy within them, or their connection with the elements,

but as we sit listening, I watch them. I think of Roran and the rock he always clutched in his fist, how he was constantly—secretly—altering it. *Practice*, his father had told him. I wonder if it's more than that, though. Like maybe, on some level, they need to conjure, need to maintain an exchange of energy with the natural world.

He sits apart from the rest of us, on the fringes of the camp. Firelight dances over him, leaving the rest in shadow. He stares into the woods, and I wonder if he's watching for flash vultures or maybe for his mother to suddenly emerge. I used to do that with Mom. An entire year after seven collapsed, I still looked for her in the caves. He conjures something in his hand. Dirt morphs into white flowers, which turn to ash before the petals have unfurled, and back to dirt. Dirt-flowers-ash, over and over, while he stares toward the darkness.

I wonder if Dram senses the energy crackling between the Conjurors. The air feels alive tonight. With memories, with magic.

Newel continues his story, speaking of our past, but I'm struck suddenly with a sense of our future. It stirs in me, like a creature waking. Possibility.

"What if we use the Mods against them?" I say.

Heads turn, and on many faces are the looks I've grown accustomed to. Expressions that ask unspoken questions.

"How do you mean?" Newel asks.

"They come from behind the shield, they return there. What if we could . . . harness one? Without them knowing?"

"We're hunted as it is," Newel answers. "We can't risk provoking the Congress further."

“We’ve lost connection to my father. Maybe from inside Alara it would be possible to—”

“We survive because we hide,” Newel says.

“What about those with no place to hide? Subpars and Conjies trapped in the flashfall?”

“We help when we can. Bade and Aisla are tracking Arrun. We wait.”

Wood pops, and sparks lift into the air. Arguments collide in my mind, reasons why we cannot simply *wait*. Mainly, the names and faces of my friends left behind.

“When was the first Conjie Tempered?” I ask.

Newel studies me, as if searching for the hidden meaning in my question. “A hundred years ago. After the first rebellion.”

“A hundred years,” I say. “And you want to wait more?”

“We’re not the revolutionaries we once were.”

“Maybe we should be,” a voice calls. Bade strides into camp, covered in mud and leaves. Branches weave around his arms—he looks more tree than man. I realize it’s intentional, conjured concealment. Another figure pulls away from the forest, mud covering her blond hair. Aisla. Beneath the bark and branches, they wear guns.

I look past them, hoping to see another person wander in from the trees.

“Did you find Arrun?” Newel asks.

“No.” Bade holds his palm against his arm, and the branches morph and dissolve to dust he brushes away. “The outlier regions are overrun with Striders. The Congress set guard towers along the pass. We barely made it out.”

“So we have no word from him.”

“I didn’t say that.” Bade hands Newel what looks like a packet of leaves. “One of his men managed to get us this message.”

Newel conjures the leaves away, then holds up an object that doesn’t belong in a camp of free Conjies. “What does it mean?”

Bade shakes his head. “I have no idea.”

MORIOR INVICTUS.

Death before defeat.

I stare at the words emblazoned on the patch. Dram grasps it tightly, the only message from his father. No note. No instructions. Just this patch torn from a Strider’s uniform. In the months we’ve been in the mountain provinces, this is the first we’ve heard from him.

Morior invictus. The Latin words arc above the symbol of a coiled snake with fangs bared. I try to imagine how Arrun got hold of it. Striders wear electrified armor.

“This was all he sent?” I ask.

Bade sighs. “If there was more to this message, it’s been lost.”

Dram presses his lips together in a tight line, probably holding back the words we’re all thinking. Whatever Arrun’s been doing in the outlier regions, it’s likely to cost him his life. There are scorch marks on the jagged bit of cloth. And blood. He breathes a curse and shoves it into his pocket.

“It’s a sign he’s still alive,” Bade says.

“That’s one way of seeing it,” Dram mutters.

“Our coms system is compromised,” Bade says. “We can’t even get through to Jameson right now. Not with Alara on lockdown as it is.”

“What about Orion’s father?” Dram asks. “Any word from him?”

Bade’s features tighten further. “Nothing. I’m sorry.”

Two months with no word.

Dram and I thought we could save our people. So far, we’ve only put them in more danger.

We crouch beside Alara’s shield, camo-cloth draping us head to foot. Dram shifts beside me, and the cloth ripples in shades of moonlight-touched silver. I wouldn’t have known he’d moved if I weren’t pressed against his side, if I hadn’t felt his armored body brush mine. It’s a move I recognize—something we did crawling through tunnels back in Outpost Five. A shift of weight, a stretch of muscles to keep legs from going numb.

We need to be able to move—to run—at a moment’s notice.

We haven’t spoken in over an hour, since we took our places here. I can’t even read his eyes. We wear the camo-cloth draped over our faces, so that when I look in the direction of his head, I see only the cirium shield reflected back at me. I touch my own with a camo-cloth glove, just to make sure I haven’t disappeared. We’ve gotten so used to hiding that at times I lose myself.

It’s the only tech we allow ourselves. The Congress has tracked every screencom, every device. With the commissaries secured somewhere within Alara’s Central Tower, we’ve been cut off from Jameson. From my father.

From our plans to get a cure to our people.

The moon rises in a cloudless sky. I look up at it, feeling a mixture of wonder and trepidation. Wonder, because I never saw it from Outpost Five—the cloudlike layer of flashfall

blocked the sky from view. Trepidation, because we risk capture with this plan.

First night of a full moon. According to Bade, it's when Jameson positions one of his Striders at the third shield entrance. I am not absolutely positive that it's not the *second* night of a full moon. What if it is? I glance at Dram, but see only a thin outline of a shape slightly incongruent with the shield. I want to ask him, How do we know this is the right time? For that matter, are we certain this is the third shield entrance?

I don't ask. Dram is desperate for word of his father, as am I. He has become more like me—moved to action and less to thought.

We track time in constellations, slowly trekking across the sky. Two hours. Four. Finally, a narrow passage opens beside us a meter from Dram's hand. I hear the click of his gun. He lifts it, hidden under the cloth—just in case.

A Strider emerges, electrified armor humming. Dram tenses.

The Strider mutes his armor, then slowly scuffs his boot across the ground, forming a mark: two slanted parallel lines. Still, we don't move. Even Alarans know this symbol now—a caver's mark that's become a rallying cry for Subpars and Conjies, anyone oppressed by the Congress. An easy enough trap to draw us out.

"I can see your heat signatures," the Strider says, looking in our direction.

"Can you see my gun aimed at your head?" Dram asks.

The Strider lifts his face shield. "If Bade trained you, then I'd expect nothing less."

We push back the hoods shielding our faces, but Dram doesn't lower his gun.

The Strider stares at me until I begin to fidget under his close scrutiny. “I can’t believe you risked coming here,” he says.

“Tell me it was worth it,” Dram murmurs. “Do you have a message from Jameson?”

“They’re coming after you with something new. Something worse than trackers and Inquiry Mods.”

“When?”

“He’s already out there, tracking you.”

“*He?*”

“A Conjie that escaped from the prison cordon. They say he caught Orion once before.”

Dram swears beneath his breath. I can’t speak. I can’t breathe.

It’s not possible. The Congress dropped flash bombs on that compound. I barely saved Dram in time—

“His name,” Dram demands softly.

“King,” the Strider answers. “He calls himself King.”

My mind floods with images, memories buried in the deepest parts of myself. The man sizing me up alongside his gang of dusters, cannibals thrilling to the scent of blood. I hear an odd wheezing sound and realize it’s coming from me.

“He’s just one man, Rye,” Dram says.

“Three,” the Strider says. “He leads a squad of three Untempered Conjies. They wear cirium tracking collars—that’s how you’ll know them.”

“Why would he help the Congress?” I ask.

“They captured and interrogated him, then sent him off to hunt you. His life, in exchange for the Scout.” The Strider glances at a screencom on his wrist. “I’m out of time. One last thing—” He activates his armor, then lifts his voice over the

hum of the current. “Within the next few days, a Skimmer will deviate from its flight path and drop supplies in grid echo six. I don’t know what the cargo is, but Jameson says you’re going to want to be there.” He lowers his helmet visor and turns toward the shield.

“Wait,” Dram says. “Did he say anything about our fathers?”

“If Jameson knows where they are, he’s not entrusting that information to anyone. After you two, they’re the most wanted Subpars in the city-state.”

THREE

46.1 km from flash curtain

I TEAR MY hood back the moment we reach the trees. It's thin cloth, but I suck in air like I was suffocating. Dram lifts his hood, and I can see the storm in his eyes.

"Go ahead," I murmur. "Tell me we'll be fine. We handled King before, we will again." Dram releases a shaky breath and drags a hand through his hair.

Moments pass. He doesn't offer me any false assurances.

"He doesn't know the provinces," Dram says finally. "Congress might've supplied him with tech, but he won't know how the free Conjies move, or what our camps look like."

He's right. Free Conjies use their abilities to blend with nature. Not even Dram and I would've found them on our own. They aren't usually seen unless they want to be seen.

"He's not a free Conjie," Dram adds. This, more than anything, assures me. Conjurors born free—beyond the bonds of Alara—are raised attuned to the elements and develop abilities beyond those of their counterparts in the protected city.

“Conjuring ability won’t matter,” I say. “If he gets close enough, he can use tech.”

“Then we don’t let him get close.”

We lift our hoods back over our heads and blend into the night.

I sit beside the fire, my knife within reach. Newel posted extra Conjies to stand watch, and I’ve stayed up with them, feeding logs into the fire.

“Let him come,” they say, with a sort of nervous anticipation.

They don’t understand King. It makes me think of when Meg found us hunting flash vultures and tried to assure us they were “just birds.” King is just a man, a Conjio, but he is also something feral, with the hunger of a flash vulture.

Dram, Bade, Aisla, and Roran surround me—in ways not meant to seem obvious. Dram must’ve told them some of the story, about cages and dusters and a place called Sanctuary.

Fear can be helpful, Graham would say. Keeps us from staying in one place too long. Sometimes it nudges us in the right direction.

I sit sketching, putting an idea to paper. The more details I add, the more I convince myself it’s real.

“What are you drawing?” Aisla asks, looking over my shoulder.

“Working on a theory,” I say, shifting so she can see the map I’ve sketched. “This is Cordon Five—” I point to one edge of the paper. “This is where the Barrier Range was before the Congress blew it up, and these are the places where I think the tunnels are. If they didn’t all collapse.”

“What’s so important about tunnel six?” she asks, skimming her finger over the place I’ve filled in with the most detail.

Roran lifts his head. He doesn't look at us, but I watched his shoulders tense when I mentioned Cordon Five. I haven't shared this with him—not even with Dram. I didn't acknowledge the idea to myself at first, either, but it kept circling my thoughts, fighting past my shock and grief.

“It's where my friends are, if they're still alive.”

“Why do you think that?” Aisla asks.

“Water.” I speak the word like a prayer, a hopeful belief, too fragile to throw out carelessly. Like the shell on display in the lodge at Outpost Five—small and chipped, yet powerful enough to make us believe in a place we'd never seen.

It's like the word is a summons. First Dram, then Bade and even Roran lean in to see what I've drawn. I feel suddenly like Dad, having to explain equations I haven't finished solving.

“The Sky,” Dram murmurs, his gaze skipping over the sketch, reading it like a caver. Suddenly his eyes widen, and I know the moment he latches onto my idea. Blue eyes meet mine over the tops of heads.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“If Owen or Roland survived, then it's possible. If the cavern held.”

“Somebody translate their caver's code,” Bade grumbles.

“Survival,” I answer. “With Roran gone, the first thing they would've gone after was a water source. There's nothing in the cordon, so they would've had to go back in the direction of Outpost Five—but just as far as the rubble of the Barrier Range. Specifically, tunnel six.”

“How do you know?” Bade asks.

“Most cave water isn't safe to drink—the bacteria will make

you sick. But down six is a pool of blue water, a secret memorial cavern that every caver knows how to find—the Sky.”

“Wouldn’t Roran have seen them?”

“Cordon Five is clouded with flashfall—it’s one of the things that make it a good place to hide. If they were sheltering underground from flashbursts, I can see how they might’ve lost each other. They wouldn’t have spent more than a day searching for Roran—” I glance at him. “I’m sorry, but Owen wouldn’t have let them. He knew you could survive, and he would’ve had to think about keeping the others alive.”

“Owen?” Bade asks. “He’s a Subpar?”

“Yes, a Third Ray caver, and a scout. He would’ve been the one to lead them.”

“You’re assuming they could dig their way down through rock and rubble to this cavern?”

“They could,” Dram says.

“They had full caving gear,” I add. “Oxinators, rations, medkits . . . If they survived the flashburst—and if the cavern held—there’s a good chance they’re alive.”

“It’s been two months,” Aisla murmurs. “If they ran out of rations . . .”

“Tunnel gulls,” Dram and I say at the same time.

“It’s how the forfeit survived,” he says. “Subpars who were sentenced down tunnel four for noncompliance weren’t supplied with rations.”

“There’s more,” I say softly. “This cavern, it’s . . .”

Sacred doesn’t seem like the right word. I’m not sure I can put the Sky into words.

“It’s like a talisman,” Dram says. “If a place could be a talisman.”

Bade studies us for a long moment. Finally he nods. “Then you have to go after them. Somehow.”

I lift my gaze to the young boy standing so still. Too still, like the wrong word might make him shatter. “I don’t want to give you false hope, Roran. I could be wrong about all of this.”

“My mom would’ve stayed,” he says, his voice thick with emotion.

“I know.” Maybe this is why I didn’t share my thoughts earlier—because he’s right. It’s possible Mere would’ve died searching the cordon before she gave up trying to find her son. Her mother’s instinct is stronger than her survival instinct. My eyes fill with tears. I drop my gaze, but too late. Roran runs off.

“Let him grieve her,” Bade says. “We don’t have any real reason to believe she’s alive. That any of them are.”

“Just a fragile hope,” I murmur.

“No such thing,” Aisla says. I meet her green eyes, which are filled with some emotion I can’t interpret. “Dram said the Sky is a talisman. I’d say that’s pretty powerful.”

The screams sound inhuman.

I jolt upright, still caught in the foggy remnants of a restless sleep. It’s dark; the fire has died. I listen for the sound that woke me. Was it a vulture? It sounded like a man. A man in pain. The ground shifts beneath me, and I shove my sleeve up and use the glow of my Radband to see it. At first, I don’t understand how the pine needles and dirt seem to be melting. Then, suddenly, I do. *King*.

“Orion!” Dram’s voice, but garbled, like he’s drown—

I sink. Mud surrounds me, sucks me deeper. I scream, and it fills my mouth. I struggle to lift my arms above my head. It’s

like lifting my caving gear. Mud oozes into my ears, my eyes. I thrash but barely move.

How like King, to kill us horribly rather than trading us for freedom.

All at once, the mud evaporates. I flop forward onto a carpet of grass, coughing, spitting mud. My arms weigh a thousand pounds, but I drag them across my eyes so I can see. Roran crouches at my side, his hands still pressed to the ground. He grits his teeth, and the mud pushes back.

“Stay down!” he shouts.

He saved us. I can’t speak. Dram drags himself across the ground to my side. He holds his pistol out to Roran, who grasps it and conjures away the mud without looking. We scan the darkness for our attackers.

King laughs, the sound lifting from the trees a few meters away. Dram levels his gun at the shadows.

“Ah, how I’ve missed you, Orion,” King says. I stand, shaking, mute, caked in mud. My lungs ache. Part of me is still drowning. “The Congress promoted me,” he says.

“You’re still wearing their collar,” I mutter.

They leap from the trees like wolves, all three of them at once. A wall of clashing matter collides as free Conjies rush to meet them. Energy pulses around us, exchanges of matter so rapid it makes my head spin. A scent on the air, verdant, like grass pulled up from the roots. Then fire, smoke, and electricity in the air like lightning.

Gunshots rip across the night, the sounds reverberating over the mountains. Birds scatter from the trees, children cry. Men shout, and I can’t tell if they are ours or theirs.

Bade rushes by, arms swinging, fire launching from his

hands. He catches one of the men in the chest, knocking him off his feet. The man yells, and I recognize the sound that woke me. He conjures the flames to water, then lurches up, aiming a weapon unlike any I've seen. Something illuminates Bade's hands, like the ionic marks trackers use, then twin bolts launch toward him. Webs of metal wrap around Bade's hands. Cirium binders.

"The Congress gave us toys to play with," the man calls.

I run to Bade's side, reaching for a weapon. My knife. I left it back beside the fire. It's somewhere deep beneath the earth, in mud that isn't mud anymore.

"Rye!" Dram shouts. He throws his pickaxe, and I catch it.

I grasp Bade's bound hands and shove them against a rock. "Don't move." Every metal has its breaking point. Even cirium.

"You can do this?" Bade asks, his eyes wide.

"I'm really good at this." I focus on the loose links and swing my axe. The metal shatters apart. Bade frees his hands, muttering Conjie words I don't know. Then he conjures a spear of rock that sails across the clearing into the man's chest.

"Conjure *that* to water," Bade mutters. The man collapses to the ground.

Suddenly, King grabs me from behind, his hands around my throat.

"Stop!" he shouts. "One move—from any of you—and I conjure a branch right through her neck."

Everyone stills.

"Weapons down." King slides a glance to Dram.

Dram reluctantly drops his gun, his gaze fastened to King's hand on my throat.

“The Congress wants the Scout and Berrends. Alive. We’re going to take them, and you’re going to let us.”

“No.”

We all look to see who dares refuse the mad Conjie. Aisla. Bade’s bonded mate. She walks toward King as if he’s not about to spear me with conjured bark. She extends her left arm to Bade, and he grasps her forearm. I stare in shock as he conjures away her *skin*. A blue Codev glows in its place.

“You can conjure a Codev?” King asks. Even he sounds impressed.

“Ordinance gave me this,” Aisla answers. “Bade just helps me hide it.”

“You see that symbol on her arm?” King’s man calls. “She’s a *Vigil*! We need to get away—”

“CEASE!” King roars. “I have the power here! I’m not afraid of some Gem.”

“You should be,” Aisla says. She shifts her arm, and the collared man jolts, then drops like a stone.

King’s hand loosens, and I lurch from his grasp. He conjures a rock wall and dives into the trees. Bade and Aisla sprint after him. Dram retrieves his gun and jogs to my side. He pulls me into his arms.

“They’ll have announced our location to the Congress,” Newel calls. “We move. Now!”

Dram and I turn to gather our gear, and Newel stops me with a hand on my arm.

“I haven’t seen Aisla’s Codev since she was a child,” he says. “You must be very special to her.”

“She’s special to a lot of people,” Dram says.

“Yes, but Aisla risked more than her life by revealing herself like that.”

“They’ll come after her?” I ask.

“Not the Congress,” Newel says. “Ordinance.”

“She’s not a Conjuror, then?”

“No. She was sent to hunt us, years ago. We adopted her instead.” He looks at the Conjies hurriedly loading supplies. “I suppose that’s the nature of secrets. Apply enough pressure, and they unravel. Nothing stays hidden indefinitely.”

Bade and Aisla meet up with us hours later, slinking in from the woods, once more looking like they’re part of it.

“The Congress picked him up before we could get to him,” Bade announces grimly. He conjures away their camouflage, and I see that Aisla’s Codev is again just a smooth patch of skin.

“Thank you,” I tell her. I glance at the other Conjurors, hard at work constructing a new camp, even more concealed than the last. “Did they know about you?”

“Yes. Conjies are good at keeping secrets.”

“What you did to that man . . . Can all Gems do that?”

“No. Vigils are genetically modified for a specific purpose.”

“King probably told them what you did,” I say. “They know your secret now.”

“Not all of them,” she says softly. “This world is changing.” She looks up toward the flashfall, visible in the distance. “Not even the provinces are safe anymore. The flash curtain, the Congress—it’s all so unpredictable.” She crouches and draws an inverted V in the snow. “Only Vigils bear this mark,” she says. “If you ever see this symbol on a Codev—run.”

FOUR

41.6 km from flash curtain

I SLING MY pack over my shoulder, and it drags across the flare wound. I groan aloud, shoving the pack off and dropping it on the ground. I sink to a rock, peeling back my cloak and shirt as the burn pulses in time with my heart.

I don't want to look at it. I've seen enough burns that I know what it looks like, and how the skin will eventually heal into a puckered scar. But this wasn't a normal wound; this was the flash curtain, reaching across boundaries to brand me.

Dram's checked it each day, to make sure the strange luminescent streaks didn't come back. I turned my head away each time, too afraid I'd see the flash curtain's imprint on my body again. I can feel it oozing now, the skin torn open from our fight with King.

"You have a bad owie."

I glance up. Briar stands over me, her conjured cloak dwarfing her small frame.

"Yes," I whisper, trying to muster a smile. I slap a handful of snow over my wound, hoping to numb the pain.

“Mom says aloe for burns.” She kneels beside me and digs in the snow until she uncovers a green shoot. I wonder if she sensed it was there, like Subpars sense cirium in stone. She peels off her mittens and cradles the blade of grass. The grass quivers, like it’s waking up. It grows, stretches, as if spring just announced its arrival.

My pulse quickens. I never tire of watching Conjurors in that moment when they shift matter to something else. I realize I’m stretching my hand toward that shivering plant, like I’m somehow part of its alteration, as if I can feel the energy making it something new. It widens, splits; spines ripple along its length, and pointy fronds burst from the center.

“Aloe,” she says, breaking off a spiny leaf. She squeezes the juice along my wound. I hiss from the touch, but moments later the cool liquid chases away the burn. She snaps another pad from the plant and dabs it over my skin, humming softly.

She is a child of nature. Everything we Subpars have sacrificed was to protect the remnant of natural humanity inside the city, but I wonder if our society has been looking at it wrong this whole time.

“It will heal now,” she says.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

Healers. These people are healers, and the Congress is exterminating them.

I think of all the wounds torn open by our city-state—the families ripped apart in the outposts, and the miners burning in the cordons. A Protocol that preserves some people and not others.

I wonder if Alara could ever heal.

Maybe. If we use our abilities to transform what is into something new.

My wound still aches as I jog from our camp, but instead of slowing me down, it propels me, a warning of a single truth that can no longer be ignored. The flash curtain is expanding its reach, and if we don't act soon, it will take hold of us all.

"Orion, wait!" Roran calls. His gaze travels over my pack to the climbing harness I'm wearing. "I know you're planning something. I want to help."

"It's too dangerous."

"As if things around here are ever *safe*." He lifts his wrist to show the flash vulture feather he wears as a cuff. "This is my fight as much as it's yours."

"No."

"How long have you been hiding from the Congress?" he asks. "A few months? I've been running from them my entire life."

"I'm going after a Mod."

Words die on his lips, and he simply stares. "What do you mean 'going after'?"

"I'm going to climb a charging station and bolt onto one of them. Ride it straight into Alara."

A smile spreads across his face. "The camo-cloth . . ." I can see him mentally piecing together my plan. "But the platform is fifty meters high. How do you plan to—"

He breaks off when I shift my coat to reveal the climbing harness strapped tightly around my waist and thighs. From my belt sways Dram's old climbing bolt gun and a dozen bolts.

He shakes his head. “Not good enough. Those platforms are alive with current. Even if you made the climb without attracting attention, I’m sure your charred corpse would hinder the rest of your plan.”

I glare at him.

He shrugs. “You need to think like a Conjie.”

“Fine. What would a *Conjie* do?”

“It’s better if I show you.” He shoves two handfuls of dirt into his pockets and strides ahead of me, in the direction of the one remaining charging station.

We’re silent the first few kilometers, stealthily trekking through the woods. Then we pass through the trees at the top of a ridge and see it rising from the ground like a finger balancing a plate. I was never really aware of the charging towers before. Not with the visceral awareness thrumming through me now. Seeing them and knowing you’re about to climb to the top of one are very different things. I step forward, before fear paralyzes me.

“Wait.” Roran catches my arm. “Not much cover once we head down the ridge.”

“Except what you conjure.”

“True.” He plucks a pinecone off the ground and closes both hands around it. Seconds later his fingers spread apart, revealing the shiny skin of an apple. He hands it to me and conjures water. “There won’t be time for rations once you anchor onto that Mod.”

I crunch the apple down to the core, not even tasting it. I don’t tell him that my stomach is a twisting ball of nerves. Instead, I hand him my loaded gun. “In case of flash vultures.”

“You’ve seen more of them?”

I consider lying, just to spare him, but I can’t think of a time that has ever helped any of us. I nod.

His features harden, like water turning to ice. “Let them come,” he murmurs, lifting dirt from his pocket. The soil bounces in his palm, twisting on an invisible wind current, then suddenly explodes in thick spikes of wood, a five-pointed star with tips sharp as blades. “Keep your gun,” he says.

“Promise me—if something goes wrong, you’ll get out of there.”

He conjures the wood back to dirt. “They won’t catch me.”

We race down the ridge at the same time.

“I should warn you,” I call, “this plan has a lot of holes.” *Foolish, reckless, headstrong.* The words pass through my mind on a loop, sometimes in Dram’s voice; other times it’s Graham, shaking his head at me with a caver’s whistle clamped between his teeth. *Stop, Orion. Think.*

Fire sparks inside me, the way it did in Outpost Five when I climbed the sign that hung before the tunnels. WE ARE THE FORTUNATE ONES, it said. I had beaten the words with my axe like a battle cry.

And the Congress punished every Subpar for my noncompliance.

But this is different. I’m not just reacting in anger. I’m going to do something that will help everyone.

Beneath my resolve unease tingles, like I’m stretching my hand toward an electrified fence. We run toward the station, and all the while anxiety dances in my belly to the tune of *foolish, reckless, headstrong.*

I press my fingers against my flare burn, and pain answers, overriding my thoughts, my senses.

“What are you doing?” Roran asks.

“Reminding myself.”

“Of what?”

“That doing nothing isn’t an option.”