

FLASHFALL

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*For Jacob,
who wouldn't let me quit*

MAP TK

MAP TK

ONE

297.84 grams curium

CAVES MAKE GOOD hiding places. But this close to the flash-fall, they also make the most likely places to die. The creatures dwelling in the deep caverns are rabid by-products of the flash curtain, altered by radioactive particles. And they're starving.

Which makes them almost as desperate as us.

My boots scrape the cavern ledge, and a red marker illuminates at my feet. *Danger. Do not cross.* Behind me, Dram shifts, and in the soft jangle of climbing harness and anchors, I sense the questions he's not saying aloud.

My mother once told me I have magic. She didn't speak the words, nothing as dangerous as that. The day she guided me down my first tunnel, she simply pressed my hand to the cavern wall, and I knew.

I have magic in a place where it is outlawed.

My father would call it something different—bioadaptability. That's really what we Subpars are, adapted to the curtain's fallout and resistant to its elements in ways that Naturals aren't.

But he doesn't know what I feel when I'm down here.

I tip forward, and musty air caresses my face like the breath of a ghost.

“You passed the boundary marker,” Dram says, his soft warning drawing me back.

I lean past the ledge, my heart thundering. My headlamp penetrates the first few meters of darkness.

“Secure an anchor,” I command softly. “We’re going down.” When he doesn’t move, I glance back. He studies me, blue eyes narrowing beneath his headlamp. “There’s cirium down there, enough to earn more Rays.”

“Rays don’t mean much if we’re no longer breathing.”

My gaze slips to his arm, to the seal of our city-state and the two curving metal bars he wears pinned beside his designation. Each Ray represents 100 grams of cirium mined in service to Alara. If we earn two more, the director will pin them beside the others and then we will never have to wear these suits again.

“Step in my steps,” I murmur. He sighs, loud enough for me to hear it through my earpiece, then kneels to anchor a line. I’ve invoked our cavers’ creed, and there’s not much you can say when someone commands you to follow blindly. Besides, there’s more than that going on here, and Dram knows it.

At least, I hope it’s more than me just being reckless. *And desperate*, my mind whispers.

“When you were little,” Mom told me once, “I couldn’t keep you from climbing the Range. You’d press your cheek to the stone and tell me it was singing to you.” Her eyes had grown anxious then, so I didn’t tell her that the cirium called to me so much stronger from beneath the mountains—that it reached for me like a hand in the dark.

“Use it to get free, Orion,” she had said. A week later, tunnel seven swallowed her in a waterfall of rock.

Now, at sixteen, I’m the caver closest to earning a place in Alara, the city safe behind the cirium shield. As much as I want to live beyond the reaches of the flash curtain, far from the flashfall, I wonder how much of what I risk is for her. So that the part of her I carry inside me will know a place beyond this dust and ash.

I move my pickaxe to the holster on my back, watching Dram secure the bolt. We stand in a place where light filters down through cracks in the rock ceiling. I can almost pretend that it’s sunlight, instead of fallout from a solar incident that occurred over a century ago. The flashfall is like this—hinting at the curtain’s beauty, painting our excuse for a sky with luminescent clouds, quietly killing us while we’re mesmerized.

“Anchor’s secure,” Dram says, giving the rope a tug. He knots the other end and throws it over the side.

“Be sure to mute your lights before you descend.”

“At that depth, even muted lights will draw the gulls—”

“I know the risks.” Tension pours from me, like I’m bleeding out with all the worry I’ve kept buried for days, and since despair will immobilize me, I lean into anger. I face Dram, trying to decide how to confront him.

Protecting Alara isn’t the only reason we’re down here.

My caving partner is keeping things from me, and while it’s true I’m keeping things from him, my feelings aren’t going to get me killed. His secret is a clock ticking down to death.

“Let me see your Radband,” I say. In the sparse light threading past the flashfall, I see his face register shock. “Five years we’ve been scouting tunnels together—”

I grasp his wrist. “Did you really think I wouldn’t notice when you started covering your Radband?” My fingers tighten over the biotech dosimeter we’re all fitted with at birth—the band that monitors our radiation levels and sets us apart as Subpars. “How bad is it?”

“Orion—”

“Show me.”

He mutters a curse and holsters his pickaxe, all the while meeting my stare. He flicks open a knife and cuts the cloth wound over his Radband.

“There.” He holds his wrist in front of my face. “Satisfied?”

For the past year, I’ve watched his glowing green indicator dull to the muted shade of cave moss, but this gleaming light hits me like a kick to the stomach.

“How are you at *yellow*?” There are only two colors beyond it, and no one in the flashfall lives long with a red indicator.

He doesn’t answer, and I know—I *know*—it’s this cursed tunnel. Nine is bigger than all the rest, with the most potential for cirium. And the most potential for exposure.

“Why did you hide this?” I whisper.

“I got tired of looking at the damn thing!” His tone is hollow, but I hear the fear there. He’s only eighteen, in prime health otherwise . . . but his body’s cumulative radiation levels indicate yellow. It’s the warning before amber, when you really start dying.

Subpars are resistant to the curtain’s particles, but not immune.

He squeezes my hand. Some of what I feel must be showing on my face. “There’s nothing I can do about it,” Dram says.

“You can get to the protected city.” And it’s like I’ve dropped over the ledge, my blood pounds through me like I’m falling. “There’s a vein of cirium down there,” I say, pointing past the boundary marker. “I’m certain.”

He studies me, as if he’s listening for the words I’m not saying. Then he lights a flare, steps to the edge, and tosses it over. We watch it fall, red fire sputtering against the darkness. One second, two, three . . . the smoking flame grows smaller as it drops . . . six, seven . . . I know Dram’s counting, measuring the distance to gauge how much climbing line we’ll need, what it will take to get us down and back up again.

I barely watch the flare. In my mind, I’ve already made the drop. The truth is, I stepped off this ledge the moment I saw Dram’s Radband.

“You understand the risks of going down there?” he asks.

“I understand the risks of not going.” The statement hangs between us, but I don’t look away, not even as his gaze locks with mine.

He threads the rope through my repel device and secures it to my harness. I’m aware of his touch, his closeness, and I try to make my breaths sound normal, in case he can hear them through his earpiece.

“You’re shaking,” he says. I don’t answer because he’ll hear the emotions rioting through me—anger, fear, and something new that feels out of place down tunnel nine. A longing that probably belongs more with a Natural girl in the protected city who doesn’t have an entire mining outpost relying on her. A normal girl who isn’t trying to save her best friend with a pickaxe and a reckless disregard for boundary markers.

“Alara needs this cirium,” I say. But it’s not duty to our city-state that gives me the courage to grasp the line and lean back over the chasm.

“Careful,” Dram says.

“Step in my steps,” I murmur, thinking how many hundreds of Subpars have echoed those words. I’m not the first to scout the unknown, to face my fears and drop.

I’m just the youngest.

I rappel, my stomach dropping as I give in to gravity. The silence of the chasm presses around me, and I feel like that flare, tumbling through a void. Cold creeps in through my caver’s suit, making me shiver as I descend. My heart beats in my ears, and it sounds like *too deep, too deep, too deep*.

But then another part of me comes awake.

Ah, yes, this.

The innermost parts of me—places I think of as distinctly Subpar—stir, as imprinted memory and sensation come to life.

My feet touch bottom. I free myself from the line and kneel, pressing my bare hand to the chasm floor. Humming. A faint vibration I feel deep inside. I stand, turning in a slow circle as my headlamp skips over walls wet with rivulets of water. Fear seizes me, a reactive instinct, but no orbies lurk in this water, piling atop one another to reach me, to taste me.

“Abseil clear!” I call, giving the rope a tug. The descending line is free. Safe to follow.

Moments later, Dram drops beside me. He pulls free of the rope and grasps a knife. “Lead the way.”

As I mute my lights, his Radband glows in my periphery, a flash of yellow. I feel the color, an undeniable warning, pushing me on. We forge through a crevice, the rock so tight around

us, our Rays scrape the stone. I hear each one of Dram's breaths. Then, a sound louder than our sliding and scraping. Soft mewling, like the cry of an infant for its mother. But not a human mother.

I freeze.

"Orion . . .," Dram breathes, so close I feel his breath against my ear. He says a hundred things in that one utterance, his tone confirming my worst fears.

Tunnel gulls.

I turn my head and meet Dram's eyes. We share a conversation in the space of a few shattered breaths. Survival instincts fire along my synapses.

There's a knife clenched in my hand that I don't recall reaching for.

"Right behind you, ore scout," Dram whispers. He turns off his headlamp and all his suit lights. We are going to cross beneath this gulls' nest blind, and he trusts me to lead the way.

I force myself to take one step, then another, and all the while we listen as the mother gull feeds her baby with a clicking of beaks and the dying sounds of some creature. We are soundless, holding our breath as we hug the wall and pass the rows of roosting father gulls, anxiously awaiting their turns to feast. I look up—just once—and the light of our Radbands illuminates the knife-point feathers of dozens of gulls. I want to cover my hair so badly. It would be the first thing they'd tear into—but I force my attention to the widening of this pass I can just see about ten meters ahead. After that, we'll at least stand a chance fighting back. Or running.

Five meters.

One.

I let my senses move beyond me, a part of me detaching and finding its home in the call of the caverns. Free of its bonds, the cavern creature within me stirs, listening from a place of bone and marrow.

Yes. This.

Slowly, impressions filter through my mind, and passages overlay my senses like the pages of a map. The vein of cirium is down here.

I just need to find it.

The youngling gull cries out for more, and talons scrape the stone. The mother is off to hunt.

And so am I.

TWO

297.84 grams cirium

WHEN YOUR NAME is a source of irony among the cavers of Outpost Five, you're motivated to work hard for a new one. Scout isn't an illustrious nickname, but it sure beats Orion in a place where you can't see the stars.

It's exactly this kind of musing that tells me my oxygen levels are dropping faster than I thought. I should be focused on not dying. I've earned the title of ore scout, but right now it's about to earn me a funeral pyre beside my best friend. I've led us too far off course.

"Read me our coordinates, Dram," I command softly, trying to keep the tension from my voice. Our mouthpieces pick up everything.

"Fifty-two meters southwest by thirty-three degrees, ten minutes," he says.

Not where we're supposed to be.

I close my eyes, straining my senses to pick up the vein of cirium I've been chasing. It's harder to do when your air's not

a guarantee. I adjust the Oxinator I'm wearing over my nose and mouth.

Some people die on a sort of sigh, a shift of breath from one path to another. I doubt I'll go like that. Nothing in my life is peaceful—I don't expect death to be any different.

One thing is certain—I'm going to experience it for myself soon. My air tank hisses as my lungs reach for a breath that isn't there. When I go, there won't be any peaceful sighing, but a violent thrashing, a desperate wrestling with an invisible opponent. I refuse to die before I've had a chance to live.

I tap gloved fingers on my wrist monitor, hoping the readings there will contradict what the tightening in my chest is hinting at.

“Your oxygen levels are low, Rye,” Dram says.

I look back at him through my lighted goggles. His brown hair falls into his eyes beneath his skullcap. Even with the Oxinator, I can hear the concern in his deep voice.

I glance at the cylinder looped over my shoulder. “Tank fifty-nine's always testy.”

We duck beneath a dripstone, avoiding the water that drops from its sharp points like saliva from a monster's teeth. These caverns are always hungry, tunnel nine most of all. It's taken everyone on our scouting team. All but Dram and me.

I pull off my glove and set my hand to the wall. Cavern particles prick my exposed skin like the warning nip of a feral creature. Even the air bites down here. I listen for the call of tunnel gulls. Instead, I hear the flash curtain.

A hundred fifty kilometers long, one hundred kilometers high—even if techs hadn't told us its dimensions, I think I would sense its magnitude. Our outpost lies thirty kilometers

west of it, behind a barrier of mountains, but I feel it, distant, pulsing with energy. It hums, and something inside me sings back.

My breath stutters.

“They issued you a compromised air tank,” Dram says. “We should turn back.”

I take a cautious sip of air and press on. Without cirium, we are all dead anyway. An element born of the flash curtain, it can be milled and refined into the only effective shields we have against the band of radioactive, electromagnetic particles the sun sent crashing through our atmosphere more than a hundred years ago.

“Alara needs this cirium, Dram.” A cough catches me off guard, breaking up my words. I steal a glance at my indicators. Worse than I thought.

“Our city-state doesn’t need a dead ore scout,” Dram says, unclasping his tank. He pulls a deep breath from his mask and switches the tubing to the valves on my tank.

“No, Dram—”

He pushes my hands aside as easily as he ignores my protests. The air hisses, and he takes a breath from faulty tank fifty-nine. I realize I’m holding my breath for every one of his, more concerned about the busted valves on that tank now that it’s strapped to his back.

“Let’s get what we came for,” he says. “And get the hell out of here.”

We tromp past a narrow river of water glowing with luminescent bacteria. It’s strange how the beautiful things are often the most deadly. If the cavern is hungry, the water is ravenous.

“That’s right,” I say. “You promised Marin a date tonight.”

“Just a dance.”

“Uh-huh,” I hum the word. Teasing him makes it sound like I don’t care. I can’t afford to care. These caves are too hungry.

The Congress of Natural Humanity gives the Subpars at Outpost Five one night and one day off each week. Since we’re hemmed in by fences on the fringes of the Exclusion Zone, all sixty of us just end up around the fire pits, playing music and dancing. Food is still our rationed nutrition packets, but on Friday nights there is the addition of alcohol—lots of it.

My father says it’s when the Congress lets the monkeys out of the cages and throws bananas at them. Too many bananas is not a good thing. His words, not mine. I take my bananas where I can get them. So does Dram.

“Stop,” I say suddenly. I lift my palm light to a stretch of rock. Hope spins through me, more sustaining than oxygen. “It’s up there.”

“You sure?”

I don’t bother responding. The air tank Dram gave me is having issues, and I need to conserve my breath. Besides, we both know I’m sure. They don’t name a sixteen-year-old girl lead ore scout for no reason.

I approach the seam of ore, and Dram follows. He has mined 271.56 grams of cirium. We are both less than 200 grams from freedom—a nearly impossible goal. Until now.

“Marker, please,” I say.

He slides a cartridge into his bolt gun and aims it at the cavern floor. “Mark,” he says, and pulls the trigger. I cover my ears to block the sound. Yellow light fills the cavern, illuminating the wall. I hear his gasp through my earpiece. There might be even more here than we hoped.

A piercing cry rips through the dank underbelly of the cavern. We reach for our pickaxes at the same time.

“Tunnel gull?” Dram asks.

“Could be,” I murmur. “Or a flash bat.” Our backs nearly touch as we turn slowly, our palms and headlamps illuminating the shadows.

“Fire,” Dram curses. “Let’s hope it’s just a gull. They don’t usually attack.”

“Unless we’re near a nest . . .”

Dram curses again.

We stand in tense silence for a few moments. My hand hovers over my arm sheath and my double-bladed knife. I slowly let out a breath.

“Whatever it was, it’s gone,” I say. “Let’s hurry and collect the sample.”

Dram unhooks a rope and loops it through our harnesses. I feel his hands move over me, tightening straps, checking tension. Under the pretense of planning my climbing route, I tip my head back and let my headlamp flash over the silvery veins in the wall.

Dram and I have a system, a sort of wordless communication that’s evolved from years working the tunnels together—which is why I have to work hard to conceal my panic from him now. Tank twenty-seven has a popped seal and at least one cracked valve. I can feel the cavern’s particles slipping into the airstream, attaching to my lungs like microscopic leeches. But if we go back empty-handed, they won’t let us come this far again. And we are so, so close.

“Will your axe hold?” Dram asks.

I glance down at my pickaxe, its worn handle split by a

narrow crack that has been widening for weeks, a fault line in the wood that threatens to send my axe head flying loose. But this axe is all I have left of my mother. I fit my fingers to the impressions hers left in the handle. When I grasp it, I feel like I'm holding her hand.

I imagine her with me now, urging me on. "It'll hold."

I tuck the axe in my holster and climb.

When I told our outpost director what I suspected was down here, he didn't believe me. Large deposits of cirium are rare. I told him he just wasn't looking in the right place. When you're bargaining for your life, you use whatever words are at your disposal—and whatever leverage. I have a surprising amount for a sixteen-year-old in a mining camp, but then, I didn't hang the sign above the lodge.

400 GRAMS CIRIUM = PASSAGE THROUGH FLASH CURTAIN

Dad says the Congress hung it there to motivate as well as mock us. Four hundred grams of cirium takes a lifetime to acquire. No one going down the tunnels lives that long.

The day after Mom died, I took up her axe and went down my first tunnel. Dad said nine was too young to mine; the director said I wasn't strong enough. The 2.38 grams I brought back with me told them both what they could do with their opinions.

But I'm afraid that sign is going to end up mocking me after all. The pain in my chest tells me I've already started dying.

"What's wrong, Rye?" Dram asks.

"I'm fine." I shoot a climbing bolt into stone and clip my rope into it.

"I don't have enough energy for your lies, today," he says. And he's right—he sounds exhausted. I let go of the wall and

Dram takes my weight as I sink into my harness and dangle beside the rockface.

“Let’s get what we came for,” I say. “Just enough to convince them.” I slam my axe into the rock. Sparks flash as I chip away at the stone.

“Tell me when you’re ready for the dust,” he says, his words breathless.

“Are you all right?”

“I don’t have enough energy for my lies, either,” Dram mutters.

“Fine, let’s hurry this up.” I holster my axe and brace my legs against the water-streaked stone.

“Careful,” Dram cautions.

My breath hitches, and I’m not sure if it’s my restricted air supply or fear. The water flows, glowing with *orbiturnus nocturne*—we call orbies. My father believes they’re drawn to the cirion gas released from oxidizing cirium. So I followed them, like a trail of bread crumbs. Bread crumbs that will just as likely eat me before I can use them to find my way.

“Rye?” Dram says. “You ready?”

All I can think is, *The water is hungry, and I am so, so close.*

The stone glistens near my face, swarming with orbies so dense I can’t see the rock beneath them. But if this seam of ore is as big as I think it is, I can finally earn a life that offers more than darkness and death. I can get the people I love to Alara, safe behind the cirium shield.

If I think on that hard enough, I imagine it is worth my blood.

Time to test Dad’s theory.

“Now!” I call.

Dram launches a pouch of dust at the wall, and it explodes against the dripping rock. I yank my flash blanket over my head and body. It sizzles, burning with the drone of thirsty, unsatisfied bacteria.

“Clear!” shouts Dram.

I toss the blanket away from me, holding in a scream as a few orbies burrow their way through my gloves. Then I see the wall.

“Holy fire,” I breathe. Dad was right. The compound he made illuminates the cirion gas. The dust glimmers above the stone, revealing a massive vein of cirium. My eyes water like I’m staring into a Subpar’s headlamp.

I’ve found enough to buy my way out of the Exclusion Zone—and Dad, Dram, and his sister, Lenore. There’s more than enough here for 400 grams each. We just have to dig it out of rock covered in carnivorous bacteria. But not today. I’m running out of air, and so is Dram.

There’s a tug on my rope.

“Rye . . . I can’t—”

Dram’s voice cuts out. My earpiece crackles, and I crane my neck to see behind me. He collapses to the ground, the belay line slipping from his grasp.

“Fire!” I swear, dropping, lurching for handholds as the tension goes out of the line. I cling to the rock, my feet dangling. “Dram!” I’m fifteen meters above the ground in a dark, wet cavern. The glowing water drips over my hands, deep orange and burning like lava. I scream

Orbies are minuscule, but I swear I feel their teeth as they burrow through the layers of my gloves and skin. I drag in air,

force myself to think through the pain. I'm starting to lose feeling in my hands. My grip on my handholds loosens.

I let go with one hand and reach for my bolt gun. I need to secure myself and set up a rappel, but the orbies swarm over my remaining hand, a mass of glowing orange. They travel past my wrist. My hand shakes. I am telling it to hold tight, but I'm not sure it can hear me anymore. I slip my rope free and bite the end with my teeth, threading it through the bolt. Tears seep from my eyes, blurring my vision behind my goggles. I shove them down around my neck and swipe my sleeve across my eyes. The orbies are eating through my wrist gauge. My radial artery pulses fast just beneath it.

My claw of a hand slips. I cry out, firing the bolt and falling. It sinks into an arch of rock, and my wrist nearly snaps with the force of the rope catching. I dangle from the line, swaying over the pool of orbies. I try to shake off the ones clinging to me, but they've dug in deep.

The pain is the only thing keeping me conscious. That, and my fear of falling into the water. The particles in the air float into my eyes, but I steal a glimpse of Dram, passed out beside the pool. One of his hands dangles over the water. Orbies pile on top of one other, forming a liquid ladder of want that grows out of the water toward his fingers.

"Dram!" I shout his name, even though he's got my voice right in his earpiece. I can't hear him breathing.

I tilt my head back and assess my situation. I start with the positives: not dead yet. I move on to the negatives: Dram needs air now. I can't climb one-handed. Can't lower myself to the ground because I'm directly over the water.

There's a loosening over my wrist and what's left of my

depth gauge falls to the pool six meters below. The orbies on my wrist celebrate by digging into my epidermis.

“Flash me,” I mutter. I’m out of time. There’s only one thing I can think to do. Grasping tight to the rope, I bring my legs up and sway my body. When I get close to the wall of ore, I catch myself with my boots and shove off. Back and forth, I repeat the motion, building momentum. The third time, I push with all my strength and let go of the rope.

Air rushes up at me, and my stomach tells me I’m free-falling. I stretch my arms, willing my body to make it beyond the reaches of the orbie pool. I hit the ground and curl up, my protective padding slapping the ground as I roll. I gasp for breath, and the particles in my lungs scratch like grains of sand.

Groaning, I turn onto my stomach and crawl toward Dram. The orbies still swarm my left hand and wrist. As I push myself toward him, I pull a flare from my belt and ignite it on the cave floor. Red flames pop and hiss, and I hold it under my orbie-covered arm. I scream behind my teeth as the heat penetrates my suit and the holes in my gloves, but the orbies ignite, burning to bits of ash. They make a screeching sound before they flame up, and the ones that are deep burrow with renewed urgency. I still can’t feel anything in my hand, so I dip it closer to the flame, grateful the synthetic layers of my suit aren’t flammable. The flare burns out, and I toss it away.

“Dram!” I drag myself to his side and lift his head. His lips are blue.

I unstrap my Oxinator and press it over his nose and mouth. “Breathe.” I tap the side of his face. “Open your eyes. Breathe.” Tears prick my eyes.

He sucks in a breath, and his eyes slowly open, meeting

mine. The orange lights of the goggles distort their color, but I know they are blue with flecks of gold. Like I imagine the sky looks in places where there are no flash curtains.

“You are not allowed to go before I do,” I say. “That was our deal.”

“Other . . . way . . . ’round,” he says. With a shaking hand, Dram presses the mask to my mouth. I breathe.

“Can’t . . . do this . . . long,” he gasps.

The air hisses through the tube. “Not leaving you,” I say.

“So stubborn.”

“We’re not dying here.” I lift my palm light to point to a narrow crevice carved into the rock face. “Air cave.”

“Too far,” he says.

“Thirty meters.”

“Too narrow.” Breath.

“Have to try.” Breath.

The indicator light on his Radband begins to pulse, responding to the drop in his vital signs. If we hadn’t already switched off the auditory alarms, it would be screeching at us by now.

I grasp him under the arms and half drag him to his feet. We stagger across the cavern like a couple of drunks. Halfway there, black spots fill my vision and I forget to pick up my feet. I stumble against the wall, and Dram steadies me with his hands at my waist. A second later, the mask presses against my face and I take a shaky breath. I can see the cave through the black spots. I turn and grasp Dram’s wrist, force the mask to his face. We stare at each other, and I swear I can hear his thoughts over the sounds of the oxygen draining from tank twenty-seven.

If you go now, you’ll still make it.

I'm not leaving you.

So stubborn.

He sighs behind the mask, grips my arm, and hauls me across the crevice toward the air cave.

Please, let it be an air cave. I've never been wrong about the hidden passages beneath the Range, but still, air caves are rare this far past tunnel seven. We stagger toward the opening. I have to squeeze in sideways. Once inside, I grip the rocks and climb up to give Dram room. His shoulders won't fit through.

Dram pushes the tank through the crack. "Take it!"

"Not without you." I drag in a breath and shove the respirator over his mouth.

He clasps the mask and scans the crevice with his palm light. A whine vibrates through the cylinder. Dram and I meet eyes. I bang my hand against tank twenty-seven, hoping it's just being temperamental. It protests with a whir and goes silent. I bang it again. Nothing.

In the space between breaths I wonder at the coincidence of both Dram and me being sent down with faulty air tanks. Then my survival instincts kick in.

The air pocket is trapped up against the ceiling of rock. I crack a glow stick and toss it on the ground. The green light illuminates the walls. The air cave's about two arm's lengths wide and twice my height. No water, no gull nests, no flash bats. Shoving my feet into cracks, I grip narrow handholds and scale my way up as best I can with injured hands. Toward the top, there's a shift in the air, like it's lighter without the particles that infiltrate the rest.

Heading back down, I don't bother with handholds. I drag in air and drop. The force of the impact jars my legs, but I lurch

for the crack where Dram is trapped. I cup his face in my hands, point to my mouth and mime taking a breath. He nods, and we reach for each other at the same time. His lips press mine, and he draws a breath from my mouth. I'm sure I will think about the intimacy of this moment later, but for now all I can think is *Breathe, Dram. Don't die on me.*

We yank off his harness and bulky outer layers. I unzip his suit and peel it down to his hips. He gasps as the air pricks his skin and my fingers tangle in the synthetic mesh cloth of his undershirt, working the buckles free. The dark rises up. I need air. Now.

There's no time to spray skin barrier over Dram's chest and arms. The particles in the air frost his torso with slivers of crystal. He groans as they adhere, but without the protective layers, he can squeeze through the opening. He falls into my arms, gasping and trembling. My hands slip over his torso, and I feel the hard ridges of muscle he's carved from years mining and trolling the tunnels with me.

"Have to climb," I gasp, pointing to the shadows above us.

He leaps for the nearest handhold and drags himself up. I'm smaller, but faster, and we reach the ledge at the same time. We brace ourselves in the air pocket, letting the clean air fill our burning lungs.

He shudders, and I let my palm light shine over him, head to toe. His Radband lets off its pulsating glow. Someone back in Central is seeing the alert and passing along the message.

Dram Berrends is dying.

They will study our coordinates. Down tunnel nine, far from where we're supposed to be.

I wrap my arms around him, and he shakes against me. "We

made it,” I murmur. “We’re going to be okay.” I watch the mineral burn spread over his skin. He is far from okay.

I unzip the emergency medical supplies from a pouch in my suit. Serum 38 is a vaporized spray. I empty the canister. His skin rises up in angry red pustules, but he doesn’t seem to feel it anymore. I uncap a syringe of Serum 129 with my teeth and push it into his arm. A shock inhibitor, though I’m sure it’s late for that. I can’t cover his skin, or risk flame to warm him, so I turn up the heater in his suit and clasp his gloved hands in mine.

“What . . . happened . . . your hands?” he asks.

“Made some orbie friends. Introduced them to my flare.”

He grunts, and reaches for a syringe in the pocket of his suit.

“What are you doing?” I ask. “That’s adrenaline—” He flicks off the cap and holds the needle above my thigh.

“Old . . . caver trick.” He slams the needle into my leg and presses the plunger.

I take rapid breaths, my eyes tearing from the pain. “My blood pressure,” I gasp. “Those orbies will explode—”

“That’s the . . . idea,” Dram murmurs, dragging my glove from my hand.

Adrenaline pulses through me, and I suppress the urge to run, my breath hitching from my mouth. “Dram, what—” A scream cuts off my words. The orbies burst under my skin, illuminating my veins in splashes of orange.

“I’m sorry.” He drops the syringe and pulls me against his side. “They would’ve . . . gotten to . . . arteries.”

Tears stream from my eyes, but the adrenaline is a barrier

against the pain. As we huddle at the top of the air cave, our legs start to shake from the effort of bracing ourselves up. Dram slips off his goggles and turns his head. I think he's afraid I'll see the pain he's hiding from me. As the minutes tick by, his skin swells, until every needle-like puncture looks like a bee sting. We have to get him out before they burst. There's nothing in our medical kits for that.

I've seen only one person die from mineral burn. His death was no gentle sigh.

"What . . . did we . . . find?" Dram's head is still turned away, his voice shaking more than his body.

"Enough cirium to earn a place in the protected city."

"Something more than . . . cirium in that cavern."

"Yeah, orbies." I feel them, even now, pushing against the current of my bloodstream.

"Two . . . bad tanks." His words penetrate my haze of pain. The idea that someone tried to sabotage our ascent wedges a knot of fear in my stomach. He turns, and his eyes bore into mine. My good hand clenches my arm, above the seal of our city-state, where black stitching marks my designation. Lead Ore Scout.

What have I led us to?

I remind myself that the Congress needs our cirium. Generations of Subpars have served at this outpost, hunting the caverns for cirium ore to protect one of the last remnants of civilized humanity—the city on the other side of the flash curtain.

Help will come. If not for us, then for the vein of cirium we discovered. We are too valuable to lose.

My eyes stay fixed on the rhythmic pulse of Dram's rescue tracker.

"Help is coming," I murmur. "They'll find us soon."

Surely it's true.

I'm not ready to die. Not when we've found a way to finally live.

THREE

305.82 grams cirium

NEWS OF OUR escapade down the tunnel spreads through camp. I can tell by the number of people gathered near the mouth of nine as we stagger out. I think it has less to do with our near-death rescue, and more with the seam of ore we found. Someone in Central must have let it slip. Hardly surprising in a place where cirium is everything.

I lean into the man supporting the bulk of my weight. “I think we missed the monkey party, Owen.” He gives me a pitying look that tells me the drugs in my system must be talking again. I’ve never reacted well to shock inhibitors.

“Hang on just a bit longer, Scout.” He smiles, his teeth flashing white against his dark skin.

“We’ll have to dance another day, girlie,” says Graham Jorgensen, breathing hard under Dram’s weight. He always calls me girlie and Dram boyo. Since our mothers died and he taught us how to swing their axes.

The other two members of the retrieval team follow close behind, dragging our discarded Oxinators. By now, the fires

around camp have burned to embers. Someone plays a waltz on a fiddle, and a few of the cavers stagger toward us in an alcohol-induced haze. They're probably more coherent than I am.

Dram missed his dance with Marin, but she is waiting for him anyway, a draft of ale in hand. I have people waiting for me too, but they wear guns instead of smiles.

I feel Dram hesitate beside me, and his eyes skip past Marin to the group of guards circling me. "Flash pistols," he whispers.

My gaze swings to the metallic cylinders projecting from the sides of their guns, reservoirs for flash dust. Only Alara's elite are issued weapons that harness the energy of the flash curtain. Mined in the cordons, flash dust is an even more precious commodity than cirium.

"Orion Denman?" A man steps past the unfamiliar guards. Tall, younger than my father, but with a bearing that feels ageless. His uniform bears the seal of Alara on his arm like we all have, but his opposite sleeve carries five red bands for the five outposts, and five black bands for the cordons.

"Flash me," I whisper.

"I'm Commissary Jameson." He shows the chain at his neck—his badge of office, as if I needed further proof he's from the Congress of Natural Humanity. His gaze flicks to Dram, then back. I feel us being assessed and weighed, like the ore in our pouches. "Are the reports true?"

His cultured tone sets me on edge, reminding me that he comes from a place behind a shield.

"I brought proof, as requested." I barely stop myself from saying "ordered." Subservience is always an effort for me. I pull away from Owen's support, swaying slightly. I will meet this man on my own two feet, even if they're wobbly.

“I’m here to inspect your ore,” he says.

Dram grips my arm. I think he’s afraid I’ll make some derogatory reply, and I bite my lip to keep it in. Subpar humor is usually lost on Naturals.

The commissary’s features swim before me, and some part of my addled mind orders me to stand up straighter and dig deep for some respect. This man is the Congress’s own representative, overseeing all the outposts and cordons. It’s hard to imagine one person in charge of the entire Exclusion Zone, but he carries himself like he owns whatever land he stands on.

“Come this way, Scout,” Mull Cranston says, striding forward as if he wants to take my arm. Or grab me by the hair.

I drag my goggles off my face and let my gaze skip over the director all us cavers refer to as Cranny. He wears an ill-fitting, rumpled gray uniform. “I didn’t realize you owned a uniform, sir.”

Definitely grab me by the hair. His eyes narrow over his beaklike nose. I can’t help it. I’m angry about the faulty tanks. Dram and I almost died.

Cranny stands off to the side, an inconsequential planet inhabiting the commissary’s solar system. He glares at me as if it’s my fault a man of such importance is striding about his domain reminding him he’s inferior.

“I want you to describe how you located the vein of cirium,” Jameson says.

I pull off my skullcap, and my hair tumbles out. I need to get out of my caver’s gear—the cavern particles are irritating my skin like tiny slivers. A stricken look crosses the commissary’s face, as if a weapon unexpectedly lodged in his chest. Maybe he’s realizing how bad the exposure is down nine.

“Come with us to Central,” he commands. I look past him, to the command center that dominates the outpost, the gated mansion that houses all the Natural techs and guards. As far as I know, no Subpars have ever gone inside.

“Huh.” Not what I intended to say, but my brain’s struggling to connect the dots.

“She needs the infirmary,” Dram says.

I start laughing. Dram’s words, spoken from someone who looks like death warmed over, strike me as terribly ironic.

“My sh-shock inhi-hibitors are w-wearing off,” I announce. The smile on my face feels out of place; my body’s having a hard time matching my expressions to my emotions. I feel Serum 129 evaporating from my system, like a blanket sliding from my body. Pain penetrates the haze, and I cry out, clenching my teeth to hold in the sound.

“What’s wrong with her?” Jameson demands.

“I b-brought you your ore,” I murmur, lifting the samples. It’s like I’ve finally remembered I have hands, and they’re not in good shape.

“She’s infected.” Cranny eyes my burned, chewed-up gloves as if I’m aiming a weapon. I suppose in a way, I am.

“Get the physic!” Jameson calls.

Marin gasps. I suppose my glowing hand is something of a stunner. She drops the mug of ale and dashes off.

“Director, the boy is worse off,” Graham says, supporting Dram with an arm around his waist. “We did what we could for him down the tunnel, but he’s got the burn bad.” He slides aside the silver shock blanket draped over Dram’s torso.

This time, it’s Cranny who gasps. “How is he still standing?”

“You’d be surprised what p-people with the will to live can

do,” I say, too loudly. If Dram had any strength at all, he would’ve clamped his hand over my mouth. Apparently Serum 129 breaks down the brain-to-mouth filter, and mine was questionable to begin with. I try to bite my lip, but my mouth is growing numb.

“Get them to the infirmary,” my father calls. He runs to Dram’s side and gives him a cursory scan, palpating his torso gently. “Good, we’ve still time.” He looks at Graham. “Get him on the table and start an IV.”

“Hi, Daddy,” I sing. A giggle bursts past my numb lips. “Owen gave me Serum 129.” My words still sound like a song.

He tears off my remaining glove. A couple orbies have chewed through the fabric and burrowed deeper. They move slowly beneath my skin, twin black dots. Full orbies don’t glow. Not once their bodies begin to swell like ticks.

“I need to remove these at once, before they chew through an artery,” Dad says. He looks at Jameson. “Whatever business you have with her will have to wait.”

The commissary looks equal parts horrified and fascinated. Then his features blur, and I can’t tell which way is up and which way is down. He reaches out to assist me, and it’s an unexpected sight. Naturals tend to keep their distance from Subpars—and none of them touch us when we are fresh from the tunnels, with particle dust coating our suits. He catches my arm, and his dosimeter flashes red at the contact, in case there was any doubt I’ve been crawling through radioactive elements.

Now it’s Cranny’s turn to look poleaxed. Naturals protect themselves from the flashfall, and that includes us.

“Commissary, you’re breaking Protocol,” he says, his tone carefully neutral, though I see shock in his eyes.

The ALARA Protocol, the rule our city-state was named for, an acronym for As Low As Reasonably Achievable. A philosophy of radiation use and exposure, borrowed from the time before the flash curtain. Everything in our society is based upon this principle: exploit the resources of the flashfall, but limit radiation exposure and preserve human life, particularly the most vulnerable of our society, the Naturals whose genes remain uncorrupted by exposure.

My thoughts suddenly break apart, whirling from my mind's reach like ash on the wind. Someone stuck me with more Serum 129. The night sky tips up and spins. My father breaks my fall. I focus my last remaining energy trying to interpret the expression on Jameson's face.

The commissary who crossed the flash curtain to inspect my ore.

Who broke Protocol to keep me from falling.

"Explain to me again how both your Oxinators ceased to function," my father says.

"Coincidence," I say softly, watching him tie off the bandage on my hand.

"Funny thing, coincidence," he muses.

"Hilarious." I hop down off the kitchen table and pace. There isn't much space, just this room beside a bedroom and a small loft, but my steps carry me across the worn floorboards again and again as I work through what happened down nine.

Dad rinses his hands in our rationed water, his thoughts churning like mine. I watch him across the kitchen—both the room and the word itself a remnant from the days of the first

outposters, when Congress still transported food into the camps, before techs developed nutri-pacs. I trail my fingers along the wall, a mix of wood and metal. With the exception of Central's mansion, everything here is like this—a blend of tech bracing up the original buildings. “Archaic” Dad calls it, but that's only because he's seen a picture of Alara.

I pick up one of his slides and peer at it. “What did you find?” I ask.

“How do you know I found anything?” He drops into his chair and adjusts the focus on his microscope.

“'Cause you've barely looked up from those slides since I gave you the sample.”

“Who else has seen this?”

I shrug. “The retrieval team and Cranny. Oh, and the commissary who came all the way from Alara.”

His gaze narrows. “It's likely they still don't know.”

“What?”

“This isn't typical cirium.”

“I don't care what kind of cirium it is as long as it measures four hundred grams.”

He looks at me over his glasses.

“What now?” I ask.

“You need to take me down there. I need to see this for myself.”

“Too dangerous. Tunnel nine's not like the others.”

I can practically see the wheels turning in his mind, assessing, shifting variables in equations I will never understand. He sighs and settles back in front of his microscope.

“Eat this.” He hands me a nutri-pac.

I glance at the blue foil packet. “I'm not taking your rations.”

He eyes my empty red packet, the half-size ‘children’s portion’ we’re given until we turn eighteen.

“You’re not getting enough,” he says, pressing it into my hands. “Take it.” I don’t tell him that Dram shares his larger portions with me each day, because he’s right—I’m starving.

I rip open the packet and squeeze some of the nutrient gel into my mouth. Dad told me it used to be flavored when he was a child. Berry, I think he called it. I don’t know what berry tastes like, but the slick texture is similar to the water-*posey* down nine, if not as bitter.

“The orbies covered this vein of cirium?” he asks.

“More than I’ve ever seen before.”

“So they’ve been down there . . . absorbing the cirium gas, and taking . . . nutrients from the cirium for the past hundred and fifty years.” I know better than to answer. He’s not looking for my response. He scribbles a series of numbers and letters on his notes, staring hard, like he’s waiting for them to rearrange themselves. “This cirium is altered,” he murmurs, one eye peering through the microscope. “Fewer radioactive isotopes.” He shoves his notes aside and grabs a beaker. “Orion. Grind this ore. I need to see something.”

“Dad?” I grip the pestle and set myself to pulverizing the ore.

“Our ancestors drank the water down the tunnels,” he says. “Those who didn’t die adapted.” There’s urgency in his actions as he lights a burner. “They ate water *posey* and tunnel gulls—the only things available to them. They absorbed trace amounts of cirium, and built a tolerance to the curtain’s electromagnetic particles—like drinking small doses of poison until you

eventually develop immunity to it.” He looks at me; hair mussed, glasses askew and fire in his hazel eyes. “Do you understand what I’m suggesting, Orion?” His voice is as soft as a whisper, and I feel his words move over me. I can only nod.

He takes my bowl of crushed ore and pours it over a burner. I know what he means to do, and part of me is wishing I’d never found this vein of cirium. He goes back to his notes and slides, and I stare at the beaker, where this new, altered cirium is beginning to liquefy. I wonder if he plans to inject it or ingest it.

“Please don’t do this.” I cannot lose him too.

He looks up, surprised. “If I’m right, a compound made of this cirium could boost our resistance to the flash curtain. We could survive in places without cirium shields. I’m talking about freedom, Orion.”

Freedom. The word shivers through me. “But if you’re wrong, then it’s just poison.”

There’s a knock on the door, and Dad yanks the slide from the microscope. I cut the burner flame and whisk the beaker into a cabinet. The door opens and Cranny steps into the dim light of Dad’s desk lamp.

“I saw a light on,” Cranny says. “You know how important our energy rations are.”

“Yes, of course.” Dad switches off the light. “I was bandaging Orion’s hand.”

“We have an infirmary for that, John,” Cranny says. He walks toward me, his focus so sharp I feel it cutting through the haze of pain and exhaustion. “You need to be more careful next time, Scout.”

A tart reply forms on my lips, but then I catch sight of

something through the open door. Indicator flags, red with three yellow stripes. Something in my expression must reveal my horror. He follows my gaze.

“We’ve just raised the alert. Techs have traced patterns of instability in the atmosphere. They’ve warned us to expect anomalies and fluctuations in the flash curtain. A flash storm’s coming.” He tosses the words out as if they don’t weigh anything at all. As if they don’t invoke memories of deaths so violent, I still have nightmares of it.

“When?” Dad asks, his voice rough.

“A week at most. You’ll need to begin prepping the infirmary.”

“There’s not a lot that gauze can do for radiation poisoning,” I say.

Dad throws me a warning look, but I can’t seem to help myself. My three-year-old brother died in the last storm.

“Fortunately,” Cranny says, “the cirium shields over Central are larger now. We shouldn’t have as many casualties.”

I snort. “Fortunate, indeed—that the guards and techs will be safe while the rest of the *entire camp* scurries under the rocks.”

Cranny’s gaze narrows and he gets that look on his face—like he’d feel better if he were squeezing my neck between his hands. “The lodge has a steel roof—”

“Which worked so well before.” Images of Wes, the last time I saw him, tear through my mind.

“She’s right,” my father says softly. “The cavers down the tunnels were safer that day.”

“Then I guess it’s lucky your daughter was taking her mother’s place down there.” Cranny taps the cord I wear around

my neck—the pendant I never take off. His fingers brush the blue glass that contains Mom’s ashes.

This time, I’m the one to restrain my father. His arm tenses under my bandaged hand.

“You understand I must maintain order,” Cranny says. His gaze slips to our empty ration packets. He picks one up and idly passes it through his fingers. I want to ask him what size his rations are. I doubt anyone at Central is going hungry. “If Central falls, the outpost falls.” Cranny gifts me with the paternal look he uses on Burning Days. “Subpars are helpless without this vital connection to Congress.

“If you don’t care for me, or the guards, or the technicians”—Cranny leans in, like he’s sharing a secret—“at least have some concern for the city this outpost protects.”

My teeth clamp my lip. But the words won’t stay put. “*Concern?*” I throw the word back in his face. “I risk my life every day for *the city this outpost protects.*”

Cranny’s expression hardens. “You went past the boundary marker.”

I can’t immediately speak past my shock. “I found a vein of ore!”

“Whatever you found has brought the commissary breathing down my neck!”

“I’m supposed to protect Alara—”

“Not without *compliance*,” Cranny growls. “There are boundaries for reasons, Scout.”

My heart pounds like Dram just shot me with adrenaline. I know this tone. There is punishment coming.

“Two weeks, half rations.” He turns toward the door. “And, John—prepare for the storm.”

The door bangs shut, and I tremble in the darkness. My unsteady breaths punctuate the stillness as Dad folds me in his arms. His memorial pendant presses against mine.

“I’m going to get us free,” I whisper. The flash curtain will not take one more person I love.

Dad doesn’t answer. I know he’s thinking of broken air tanks and coincidence that likely wasn’t coincidence.

“Me too,” he says after a moment, and even in the dark, I can tell he’s looking at the cupboard. At the place we’ve hidden the altered cirium.

I shiver again, and he holds me tighter.

I’m out the door before most cavers have stirred from their alcohol-induced sleep. Daylight—or what passes for that around here—lightens the sky like it’s as reluctant to emerge as the rest of the outpost.

Frost coats the ground, but I wear only my undershirt with my shirt tied around my waist. When you spend most of your life beneath stone, in darkness, the wind on your skin feels like a gift. I tear open my red foil packet and eat my rations—just half—and tuck the rest in my pocket. Thoughts of Cranny and his angry warnings fill my mind, but I push them away.

Today belongs to me.

I pass the tunnels, ignoring their yawning entrances, pretending that my feet haven’t carved a path into the ground between my house and this place. I’m a Subpar by birth, but for the next few hours, I don’t have to be a caver. I’m no one’s ore scout. I’m not a potential meal for orbies, flash bats, or tunnel gulls.

I have no idea what girls my age do on the other side of the

cirium shield, but I have never shied away from imagining it. I know only that sixteen-year-old girls in the protected city are safe from the flash curtain. They don't fear storms, and they never, ever pick up axes.

I set my foot on a ledge of rock and push up, my fingers skimming the stone and finding handholds. Outpost Five is bordered along its east side by giant heaps of rubble that fused with the mountains when the flash curtain fell. We call it the Barrier Range because it provides a natural shield, separating us from the burnt sands of the cordons which stretch all the way to the curtain. As bad as things get at the outposts, things could be worse. We are the fortunate ones.

My bandaged hand loses hold, and I hang from my other fingers. Breath saws from my lungs, filling the air with tiny clouds. I shake feeling into my injured hand and reach up, my toes sliding into familiar footholds. I've been climbing here since before I started down the tunnels. I guess that, even as a child, I looked for something beyond Outpost Five.

No one here climbs like I do. They call me the mountain goat, which I think is funny, since none of us have seen such a creature. The flash curtain killed most nearby animals and vegetation. Except my ancestors. They eked out a means of survival beneath the ground and emerged when the worst of the radiation dissipated. Subpartisans. Not a grand name for a new kind of people, but I suppose they weren't really concerned with how it would sound to their great-grandchildren.

I push myself over the final ledge and lie on the ground a moment, catching my breath. I imagine the air this high up is truer to what it once was. It's not, but this is a place for pretending.

“Fire, you’ve gotten fast,” Dram says.

My head whips up. Dram reclines on a projection of stone that overlooks the cordon.

My stone.

I can count on one hand the times he’s come here with me, and none within the last year. We tend to give each other space when we’re not partners beneath the earth. Especially since Marin.

“You going to keep lying there?” he asks. “I thought the point was to look out at the . . .” Dram stretches his gaze toward the pseudo-horizon. “The nothingness.”

“It’s not nothingness.” I climb to my feet and join him on the rock.

He looks toward the flash curtain. The view is hampered by the orange and red sulfur clouds over Cordon Five.

“Okay,” Dram murmurs. “The view of hell.”

Hell is climbing a kilometer beneath the ground with orbs digging through your skin.

“I like it,” I say.

“That’s because you have a good imagination.” He turns to face me. I imagine the sight of Cordon Five reminds him of his father and his exile to Cordon Four.

“I thought you’d take the day to heal up,” I say. “How’s your skin?”

“Healing.” He lifts his shirt. Small red bruises cover his chest and abdomen. I look away before he can see the heat creeping into my cheeks. He does this to me lately—confronts me with reminders that he’s eighteen and not the boy I’ve been hunting ore with most of my life.

Fire, my hands are sweating. I wipe them on my pants and

stare toward Cordon Five. The image is still emblazoned in my mind. The curve of his muscles, the smattering of hair—

Ergh! Why did he have to come here? Seeing his bare chest reminds me I touched him mere hours ago, that our lips pressed together. Yesterday, all I could think about was saving him. Today, far above the tunnels, with plenty of air—it makes me breathless.

“How’s Marin?” I tease, even though I’m sure he spent most of the night in the infirmary.

He grins. “Marin’s good.” The look he shoots me makes me think that maybe he wasn’t as incapacitated as I thought.

“I imagine she was worn out from pouring those pints all night long.”

He lifts a brow. “Jealous?”

“Of her proximity to the ale? Yes.”

He grins. “Of her?”

“Am I jealous of the lodgemistress’s daughter? Of tending the lodge and looking after the orphans and unmarrieds? No.”

Dram smiles.

“Why are you here?” My tone holds more bite than the winter air, and I pick at the bandage on my hand. My nails are broken, and the skin peels away from where the orbies chewed their paths. I’m sure Marin holds nothing more dangerous than a cleaning cloth. I doubt she even has a callus.

Dram studies me a moment. “How’s your hand?”

“Tiny glowing organisms exploded inside it less than a day ago. How do you think it feels?”

Dram grins. “You *are* jealous.”

“I’m irritated. There’s a difference.” I spear him with a look. “You’re intruding on my time.”

His smile fades. “I won’t stay long.” He looks toward Cordon Five, then quickly away. “I wanted to talk to you about our descent yesterday. I’m concerned about the faulty Oxinators. That shouldn’t have happened.”

I should tell him that my dad said practically the same thing. I look toward the cordon, to the place where orange clouds block the towering, radioactive curtain we’re trying to earn our way past.

“Then a representative from the Congress shows up,” Dram continues. “Something’s off.”

“It makes sense they sent the commissary,” I say. “It’s a massive vein of cirium, probably more than anyone’s found before.”

“You’re *too good*, Orion.” Dram looks at me, his gaze shuttered, but I hear the warning in his voice. “What happens when you have to explain how you found it?”

“I’m lead ore scout—”

“No, Rye. It’s more than skill. You . . . sense the cirium somehow. I’m your marker—I watch you more closely than anyone. You’re *listening* when you’re down there.”

I break eye contact, but it’s too late. There’s nothing I can hope to keep from Dram. Not about the tunnels. Not about cirium.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” he asks. There’s anger in his tone now, mixed with a hint of fear. “What the hell is it saying to you?”

I cannot tell him what I’ve never understood myself—that when I first swung my mother’s axe, I felt something in the stone respond. A pulse, like blood in veins, a hum that’s more than vibration. And it’s not just the cirium I hear, but its source . . . the flash curtain. And it doesn’t speak to me.

It sings.

He curses long and low. I wonder how much he can read on my face. I'm suddenly wishing for the barriers of Oxinator and goggles, the darkness of tunnel nine. But this is Dram—even with all that, he still reads me.

“If they find out,” he says softly, “they’ll never let you go.”

“I’m almost to four hundred grams—”

“No.” He shakes his head. “They need cirium more than they need to give you a place in the city.”

I lurch to my feet, as if I can physically combat what he’s suggesting. “Congress won’t go back on its word. That’s the deal they make with us—Subpars do their part to protect Alara, and if we do really well, we’re granted passage through the curtain.”

“Maybe,” he says, looking out over the cordon. He wears the pensive gaze of his father, like he’s seeing something more than the ash-filled sky.

“We’re not prisoners here, but protected.” I nearly choke on the words. I have seen too many people die to ever call this outpost safe. “Maybe the commissary is here to reward us. Congress knows we’re close to earning four Rays . . .” But even as I speak, my chest tightens, the ghost pain of lungs screaming for air that won’t come.

Dram turns toward me with a shake of his head and a smile that puts a dent in his cheek. “I’m overthinking things. Guess I expected the man in charge of the outposts to greet us with gratitude and a handshake, instead of a contingent of guards with flash weapons.” His dark hair blows into his eyes, his lips lift, and I realize suddenly how much of him is muted down the tunnels. Maybe this is why I avoid him aboveground.

Something in him sings to me in ways more powerful than the flash curtain.

Maybe if I wasn't a girl who needed ninety-five more grams of cirium to be free, I might sit beside him, set my hand next to his, and see if he touched his fingers to mine. I'd reach and see if Dram reached back.

"Orion . . . ?" he says, drawing my name into a question.

I feel like Roland's fiddle, my strings plucked hard, humming. But it's more than this moment. I sense the flash curtain stirring me. My head whips toward the horizon. I can just make out faint waves of iridescence rising above the clouds of the flashfall—same as it always looks. But I feel its approach.

Something stirs above the cordon. Dozens of shimmering projections sail toward us. They're beautiful, like the shooting stars Mom told me stories about.

"Dram, look." He turns, and his face pales.

The wail of an air siren pierces the stillness.

"What is that?" I ask.

"Cordon breach," Dram says.

"A what?"

"Energy shifts in the curtain," Dram says, "strong enough to kick up rocks and debris." He drags me down behind the ledge of stone. "I was only six, but I still remember the last one."

The balls of light make a sound as they approach, a whistling so loud I can hear it over the siren. Two of them arc over us. The flames of the cordon ignited the metal ions in the rocks and they burn with different colors—purple, gold, and aquamarine.

It's like the flash curtain is attacking us, hurling flaming

missiles past the cordon, mocking our shelter. It is spellbindingly beautiful. In a place that is so many shades of gray, the colors mesmerize me. The shards arc over us, pulsating with a vibrant, searing intensity. They are alive.

They are death.

Screams rise from the camp. Too many shards have found their mark in homes, in paths. Dram squeezes my leg, and I realize he's pulling me back, that I've worked half my body over the side.

"Stay here!" He drags me closer, hauls me to his side.

"We have to get below!"

"Too late." He wedges me into a wide crack in the stone just large enough for my small frame. He's torn open a cut above his eye. It drips blood, and he swipes his arm across it. His arms bracket the walls of rock on either side of me as he pushes his body tight against my burrow. It blocks my view of the soaring projectiles; it's dark as a cave.

He's dampened the sound of the screams, but I hear his breaths punctuate the quiet. Everything in me yearns to get deeper. We are too exposed up here. Sounds of shattering rock break into my refuge, and Dram's body tenses.

This is not the air cave. I can't pull him in with me where it's safe. "Dram?"

"I'm okay," he says.

Another minute passes with my pulse pounding out the seconds. The rock beneath us stops trembling.

"I think it's over," Dram says.

"Let's go." I push past him and reach the mountain's edge in three strides, sliding to my knees and pitching myself over.

Dram joins me. Neither of us speaks as we climb down,

both hampered by our injuries. The air siren cuts off, and I hear cries for help from camp. I swing away from the wall and jump. My feet hit the ground, and I pitch to the side, stumbling to my knees. Dram hauls me up, and we both run.

“I’ve got to check on Lenore,” he says. Then: “Flash me.” He staggers to a stop. Half the lodge is missing. Its splintered walls poke up through the wreckage like broken matchsticks.

He doesn’t say her name, but his face screams his fear. Marin.

“Go to the lodge,” I order softly. “I’ll check on Lenore. Most of the homes seem intact.”

He nods and takes off running.

I rake my eyes from the rock and rubble dividing the lodge and pray that Marin-of-the-soft-hands is not beneath it. Dram has already lost too much.

As I sprint past the tunnels, I see the cavers emerging. Face by familiar face appears, and I breathe in gratitude. Their eyes widen, reflecting their shock, when they see the lodge. Then I hear a shout.

“Tunnel three’s been hit!” A bleeding caver comes running from the west end of the tunnels. “Get your axes—they’re buried in there!”

Half the cavers run for the Rig, for caver’s suits and equipment to help save whoever sought refuge down three. The others head toward the lodge, where there might actually be a chance at saving someone.

Yellow containment dust spews from pipes that run the length of the outpost. Even Central’s stalwart fortress is being showered with the radiation barrier. So far, it seems to be effective. As I trudge through the mixture, I don’t see anyone

showing signs of radiation poisoning. Maybe this isn't as bad as a flash storm.

I give my two-room house a quick glance as I pass. Dad won't be there. He's either at the lodge or infirmary, saving as many people as he can.

Nine houses later, I reach the Berrends'.

"Lenore?" I push into the tiny cottage Dram shares with his older sister. The kitchen and loft are spotlessly clean. And empty. A sense of foreboding works its way into my thoughts. It tangles in my stomach until I feel I may lose my meager rations.

"Lenore!" The silence jabs me in the gut. "Fire, oh fire." I dart through the door.

My eyes comb the dirt pathways between the houses, looking for straight brown hair the same shade as Dram's. Every person gets a second look—my hopeful, desperate appraisal. At nineteen, Lenore's just a year older than Dram, but she's cared for him since the day after their mother died and their father was sent to the burnt sands. She is all he has.

Well, he has me. But if I was him and I had to choose, I'd want Lenore. She is kindness, where I am tough. She is thoughtfulness, where I am action. She's compassion. I am survival. We both love Dram, but her love is tender and mine is like an axe forged in fire.

"Lenore!" I scream, not caring who sees my fear. Most people are screaming, anyway. They hardly notice me.

I can't get near the lodge. Our outpost is only sixty strong, but they're all here, gathered beyond the bones of the building. I search the faces, my heart pounding out a rhythm.

Please, please, please.

My chest heaves, and I skirt the crowd. There's Dram—he's with Marin. My heart gives a leap of gratitude, then:

Please, please, please.

Lenore has to be here. Alive.

"Is she safe?" Dram shouts to me over the sounds of the crowd. He's helping to drag away broken timber.

He reads the uncertainty in my eyes. The wood pylon hangs from his grasp, forgotten. Then he drops it and pushes through the people.

"Len!" he shouts. "Len!"

"She's fine, son," calls Foss, a quiet caver with muscles the size of boulders. He sets a broken beam aside and strides toward Dram. "She's helping at the infirmary."

Dram visibly relaxes, and tears stream from my eyes. I sit down right where I am, in the middle of the chaos. My legs shake so hard that it filters up through the rest of my body. Containment dust coats my hands, so I can't wipe my eyes.

"Do you need the infirmary?" A guard crouches beside me, his voice distorted by a rebreather. They are beginning to stream from Central, pouring onto the yellow-coated path in hooded Radsuits.

I shake my head.

"Then clear the area. We need to make room for the forfeit."

A weight lodges in my chest. The forfeit.

We're worse off than I thought.

FOUR

305.82 grams cirium

GUARDS IN HEAVY Radsuits draw their guns, and the locked gate barring the entrance to tunnel four grinds open. We rarely see the forfeit—the prisoners who have been permanently denied the rights of Subpars. Once they pass beyond those bars, it’s easy to forget they exist at all, men and women scrabbling out a life in utter darkness. Cranny stands with Jameson at the entrance, bracketed by guards. He clangs an enormous iron bell.

“Wonder if they know they’re being called?” Ennis says beside me.

“Why are they doing this?” I ask. As the oldest caver, he’s most familiar with outpost customs.

“They’re going to get the forfeit to move the cordon stones.” He nods toward a boulder coated in particle dust.

“Won’t the radiation kill them?”

“Maybe, maybe not. It’s a chance for them to earn their freedom.”

The bell clangs and clangs, and people begin murmuring.

I think we're all starting to suspect the forfeit are not going to make an appearance. Maybe they don't realize their opportunity to earn back their rights.

Maybe they're hoping we all just rot in radiation exposure.

My Radband still glows a steady green. I steal a glance at Dram's. Whatever we've been exposed to hasn't changed our levels. Yet.

The bell clangs, and I look back at Cranny. His lips are pinched together.

"When was the last sentencing?" Jameson asks, loud enough to be heard through the clear hood of his suit.

"Four years ago," Cranny answers. "A young man tried to stow away on a hover."

"Reeves," Dram says beside me.

Reeves Stram, the impetuous orphan with the wild blond mane, a few years older than Dram.

Shame grips me. I haven't thought about Reeves in months, not since the last time I distracted a guard so Lenore could stash a bundle of clothes and medicine inside the bars. I find her in the crowd. She stares at the gate like it's the entrance to the protected city. Her Radband glows yellow.

"I'll go after them." The words leave my mouth without waiting for my brain to give permission.

Dram scowls at me, and my dad shakes his head. Fire, I'm going down the prison tunnel to search for violent and desperate people who aren't even Subpars anymore.

But I forgot about Reeves, and he has a chance to come up out of that cave.

"Let me suit up," I say. Cranny eyes me like I'm a species he's not encountered before. Jameson looks stricken.

“It’s not safe, girlie,” Graham says.

“I’ll have my axe.” My mouth is a runaway ore cart with more bravado than I actually feel.

“Fine,” Cranny says, handing the bell to a guard. “Hurry and suit up.”

“I’ll go with her,” Dram says.

“So will I,” says Lenore.

“That won’t be necessary,” a low voice says from the other side of the bars. The man’s hidden in shadow, but his voice carries as he emerges slowly. Four years older, less a boy and more a man, but I’d recognize that wavy blond hair anytime.

“Reeves,” I whisper. He’s alive.

“Name?” Jameson demands.

“None,” Reeves says. His gaze narrows on Cranny, and a dark smile lifts his lips. “My existence was wiped from Outpost Five.”

Dram shifts beside me, his hands flexing. I wonder if he feels the same shame I do. Reeves was his friend.

“Where are the others?” Cranny asks. He consults a ledger. “Three males and two females.”

Reeves’s gaze shutters. “Where do you think?”

“You’re telling me they’re dead?”

A cold light hardens his eyes. “They weren’t as resourceful as me.” His gaze slips over the crowd and swings back to Lenore. “I’m the only one down here.”

“We have a proposition for you,” Cranny says.

“So I guessed by the clanging bell.”

Looking at him now, I’d never guess he’d been living beneath a rock. The guy is remarkably clean. There’s water down four. Of course, he would have had to search for it in the

dark. Well, not total darkness. One of the first things Lenore sneaked him was a headlamp that Dram swiped from the Rig. And a battery charger.

Reeves is resourceful. He almost made it away on that hover. No guards saw him stow away in the hold—one of the cavers gave him away. I search the crowd, trying to remember. Foss. The burly caver with a tender heart. A good man who probably thought he was saving Reeves's life.

Foss stares at the ground. Whatever shame I feel, it's multiplied tenfold in that man. He stands hunched, as if his massive frame can't bear the weight of it.

"There are cordon shards all around the camp," Cranny says. "We will provide you with a Radsuit and a cart. You will haul the shards to the catapult and launch them back over the cordon."

"Then you'll no longer be forfeit." This from Jameson, who studies Reeves like he'd like to get him under a microscope.

"The radiation exposure could kill me," Reeves says.

"It might." Cranny shrugs. "It's your choice."

"What if I can't lift some of them?" Reeves asks.

"Then you will return to four."

Reeves tucks his hair behind his ears. He walks forward, and the Subpars part to give him room. Congress told him he wasn't a person anymore, but he defied them—in darkness and isolation, through sickness and death and fire only knows what. As a boy, he risked everything to get free. That same spirit wasn't broken by four; it was honed.

Reeves looks over the crowd, his gaze lingering on Lenore. "I'll do it."

I want to thump my axe into the ground. It's how a caver

tells another they're worthy. I understand why I let myself forget Reeves Stram.

It hurt too much to remember.

They offer him a Radsuit and rebreather like those the Naturals are wearing. If I ever break into Central, it will be to steal one of those things before the next flash storm. I glance at Dram and see that he's thinking the same thing. His eyes narrow, and his head tilts thoughtfully—but there's a reason no Subpar has ever breached the Protocol-protected command center. The mansion's external security sensors would alert guards in seconds, and even if we somehow made it inside, our biotech Radbands would set off the internal alarms. The idea of breaking into the mansion suddenly loses its appeal. I don't want to have to leave clothes and serums inside the bars of four for Dram.

Reeves crouches and hefts the first few shards. The entire camp gathers, hanging back to stay clear of the radioactive particles, but close enough to send an unspoken message of support. Dram slips him rations he palmed off a guard. Lenore gives him a tie for his hair.

But it's not enough. As strong as Reeves is, the day wanes into evening, and there are so many shards left—the largest and heaviest.

A pale haze, the color of bleached bone, hangs over the outpost. Beside the Alaran flag, new indicator flags slap the air with warnings, declaring the higher-than-normal Radlevels.

"I'll help him." Dram strides forward, wearing his caver's suit dusted with yellow powder.

Lenore grasps his arm. "You don't need to do this."

“Yes, I do.” His eyes hold Reeves’s as he moves to his side. He crouches and sets his shoulder to the enormous rock. “You’ve grown since I saw you last.”

Reeves grins. “And you don’t have little-girl arms anymore.” Together, they heft the cordon shard and drop it in the cart.

“And yours are wide as doors,” Dram mutters. “What have you been doing down there, wrestling bears?”

“Flash bears.” Reeves laughs and tosses another huge rock onto the cart. “There are all kinds of things deep in those tunnels.” His gaze shifts to me. “Isn’t that right, mountain goat?”

I smile, pleased to see that four didn’t steal his humor. “I beat your record.”

“That so?” His eyes search the board posted on the lodge. “Well, well, looks like the littlest caver grew up. Lead ore scout, huh?”

“Three hundred five grams.”

“A Third Ray caver,” Reeves muses. He and Dram heave another boulder into the cart, which sags under the weight. “No more help, Berrends—it’s not safe.” He nods toward Dram’s Radband. “We’re resistant, not immune.” He puts his shoulder to the cart and pushes.

No one says anything about the two shards pointing up out of the lodge like a couple of incisors. They are enormous. Deadly. From where I’m standing, I can feel the radiation pouring off them.

Even if Reeves could move them, he wouldn’t survive long after.

I begin to see the other Subpars arrive at the same conclusion—in the way Marin’s mother sneaks Reeves a pint of ale and how Graham talks to him, slipping in words of

wisdom he'll need to survive a lifetime down tunnel four. Dram's palmed so many things off the guards, I'm surprised they haven't caught him. Dad slips Lenore a wrapped bundle, and she disappears toward the prison gate. Everyone's preparing for the inevitable moment when Cranny forces Reeves back down four.

Reeves loads another shard into the catapult. Then he nods to Owen, who releases the catch. The arm swings, hurling the shard back out over Cordon Five.

"Everyone back!" a hoarse voice commands. We all turn as Foss approaches, his shoulder to a cart. Every muscle in his body bulges, straining against the weight. "Clear out!" Cavers dart away, every one of us aware of the danger he's towing.

Reeves stands frozen, with his mouth open.

"Move aside, boy," Foss grunts. His eyes are yellow, and he swipes blood from his nose. The exposure has permeated his system. I don't know how he's still standing.

"How did he lift that on his own?" Dram murmurs.

"Physics," Dad says beside us.

Foss lifts a long metal girder from the cart. I recognize it from the rubble of the lodge. He climbs into the cart, wedges the girder beneath the shard and levers it onto the catapult.

A guard strides forward. "No one gets close. Director's orders."

Apparently, there's a limit to how many of us Cranny's willing to lose in this endeavor.

"Release the lever, son," Foss calls. His breath heaves from his lungs in unsteady gasps. Sweat streams down his body. Sweat and blood.

Reeves pulls the release. Wood groans as the catapult strains

against the weight of the shard. The arm tips forward, sending the boulder sailing over the Range. It's so massive, we see it catch fire over the cordon, a blaze of blue and green, before it plummets.

"Foss," my father says. There's a warning in the way he says the caver's name.

"I know what I'm doing, John." Foss grips the empty cart and tows it back toward the lodge. "Keep everyone clear."

The guards push us back until we can barely see him ply his lever of twisted metal. But we can hear him. He cries out, straining against impossible weight, while his body begins to shut down.

I steal a glance at Graham. Tears slip down the old man's face, and that grips me like nothing else. Graham is a rock—as steady to me as my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Graham . . ." All at once, I'm nine and following him into darkness so deep I can't breathe.

He doesn't look at me. Instead, he raises his axe high above his head. Beside him, Ennis does the same, and suddenly every caver is holding an axe in the air. I don't have mine, so I just raise my arm.

It's what we do to protect the head of the caver standing next to us when there's a cave-in. It is too late to save Foss, but we are here, showing our support in silent salute.

Foss tips the shard into the cart with a grunt and staggers to his knees. Something, maybe the sound of crying, makes him look up. His eyes widen when he sees us. Slowly, he smiles. There is blood on his teeth, and conviction in his eyes like I've never seen before. The indicator on his Radband glows red.

He pushes himself to his feet and drags the iron girder from the ground. With agony in his eyes and that smile on his face, he thrusts his arm toward the sky.

The cavers shout. It's not a cheer, but a roar. The guards pull their weapons, holding us back, but they can't keep Foss from hearing us.

He staggers to the front of the cart, settles the yoke over his massive shoulders, and leans forward, muscles straining. The cart wheels turn, splashing up yellow mud as he guides the shard toward the catapult, never taking his eyes off Reeves.

The boy whose freedom he's buying.

He stumbles twice trying to climb into the cart. His bloody hands slip on the girder, but eventually, the final shard tips into the catapult. The arm swings and the shard flips, end over end, toward its home. Foss collapses. Reeves leaps forward and lifts him in his arms, and Dram runs to help.

"To the infirmary!" Dad shouts. "Lenore and Orion, you come too."

As we run after him, I glance at Lenore, trying to think what possible help we'll be to a man dying from radiation.

"You're not here for Foss," Dad says. His gaze shifts to Reeves, standing white-faced with the caver in his arms.

We settle Foss into the Radbed, a glass-enclosed case that sends oxygen and vaporized Serum 60 over an exposed patient. Dad injects him with Serum 129, twice the dose he'd give normally. He doesn't even start an IV. He's doing what he can to make Foss comfortable and limit our exposure to him.

"You shouldn't have cleared the lodge," Reeves says.

"Four years ago . . . made mistake," Foss murmurs. His eyes

drip blood. “Would’ve . . . traded places . . . with you.” Patches of his hair have fallen out. His red, inflamed skin rises up in open sores.

I bite my lip and will the serums to work faster.

“Will you . . . wear my ashes?” Foss gasps.

“I’m forfeit,” Reeves says. “I’m nobody.”

“You’re . . . Subpar,” Foss says.

Reeves sets his palm against the glass and his eyes fill. “What color?”

“Black.” Foss chokes the word out. “Like cave you . . . survived. You’re . . . survivor.”

I think of the memorial pendant I never take off, a shell-like swirl of blue glass surrounding Mom’s ashes. Dram and Lenore wear green for their mother.

“When you . . . get past . . . curtain,” Foss whispers, “bury it. Put my ashes in ground . . . of free men.”

Tears slip down my face.

“Ore scout—” Foss’s eyes shift and find mine. “You’ll help him get there, I know it.”

“Yes.” I say it aloud. A dangerous word if the wrong person were to hear. My heart wants to shout it.

He struggles for breath, and I press both hands to the glass, trying to suppress tears. I lost my brother this way. It is agony to stand here.

I like to think I am brave, but I could never do this.

Even if I have to mine his 400 grams myself, I will make sure that Reeves sees the other side of the curtain. And I will see Foss buried in free soil.

That much I can do.

Foss's eyes widen now, and he gasps. I tell myself he caught a glimpse of something beyond the curtain—maybe the sky, with sunlight that is kind, and a breeze against his skin that feels like a gift.

His eyes glaze, and then he's gone.

FIVE

305.82 grams cirium

WE CAVERS HAVE many secrets, most of them preserved down the tunnels where Congress will never see.

Dram and I climb over twin lumps of stone—markers, for those who know what they’re looking for. Past the stones lies the first pool, but this is a puddle compared to our destination.

Cracks dent the cavern ceiling, like someone punched holes to the outside. Someone probably did—back when Conjurors worked the tunnels alongside Subpars.

When Mom first told me of the Conjies, they seemed even less believable than the stars she named me for, but proof such people existed is illuminated in the glow of my headlamp. Gnarled roots twist up through stone, forming a ladder. I climb the underground tree, trying to imagine the ability to manipulate matter, to touch rock and make plants sprout up through my fingers. We weren’t the only ones the flash curtain altered.

Like magic, Orion, Mom would say.

But then Conjies rebelled and the Congress punished them, taking away their abilities through a process called Tempering.

Not magic, after all.

“We’re getting close,” Dram says.

I scan the walls for chalk marks. “There—” I point to a V tipped on its side.

A whining sound echoes off the cavern walls, like the drone of an unnatural insect. Dram grabs my shoulder and hauls me behind a crevice. A second later, a tracker whines past.

Guards don’t have to risk themselves down the tunnels in order to look after us. Years ago, Alara developed pulse trackers; fist-sized, hovering monitors that can detect and monitor human heat signatures. Techs use them to locate cavers when a transmitter’s damaged.

And they use them to expose Subpars who are breaking rules.

The fact that they’re down six tonight tells me that Cranny must suspect we’re up to something, but he won’t find us.

Trackers don’t register us when we’re in water.

Dram cracks a light stick, and we follow the cavers’ marks as the tunnel winds and widens into a cavern. Blue, luminescent light glows so brightly from a pool I have to squint until my eyes adjust.

A band of cirium shimmers at the bottom of the basin, but Subpars will never mine it. We will not carve this place up, not even to buy ourselves freedom.

Reeves and Lenore step from the shadows.

“Did you bring it?” Reeves asks. I hand him Foss’s axe.

They have churches in the protected city. Faith, for us, is

something less tangible—raw as these cavern walls. Graham says that “sacred” is what you carry with you in your heart.

We move toward the pool, and blue light bathes our faces, mimicking the sky beyond the curtain.

“The guards have set pulse trackers,” I say.

Reeves nods. “Let’s hurry and get in the water.”

I hear the sounds of belts unbuckling, and axes and knives clinking on stone. Beside me, Dram drops his boots and zips off his caver’s suit. The air is kind, warm even—a pocket of grace on the fringes of hell.

We leave everything on the side and slip into the water in only our underclothes. The only thing we bring of Outpost Five is Foss’s massive pickaxe, held above the pool in Reeves’s clenched hands.

I spread my arms and lie back, floating, weightless. This place doesn’t have a name, but in my heart I call it the Sky.

We brought Foss’s axe here, where he will never be forgotten.

“You should be the one to do it,” Lenore says to Reeves.

“It should be all of us.” His low voice echoes in the cavern, filling the space, filling my bones. Reeves extends the axe, his arms flexing from the weight.

Dram clasps the end of the handle. I take hold just above, the edge of my hand pressing his. Lenore fits her hand beneath Reeves’s.

“Ready?” Reeves asks.

We hold our breath, and he lowers the axe beneath the water. I take the image of Foss with me as I’m drawn deep, the weight of the axe pulling me down, down. Our bodies brush as we glide to the bottom, each holding tight to the handle as the pick clinks against the cirium.

The last swing of a caver's axe is one of beauty.

We kick to the surface, letting go until Reeves bears the weight of the axe once more, then we swim to the other side, toward an expanse of rock covered in white markings. Water flows over Dram's bare back as he climbs out of the pool.

"Hurry now." He reaches down and clasps my hand, lifting me from the water. It cools our body temperatures, making us less detectable to the trackers, but no one wants to get caught down here.

Some secrets are sacred.

Reeves nestles the axe in a crack in the cavern wall. I slip a watertight pouch from my undershirt and withdraw a piece of chalk. Lenore does the same. The chalk scrapes over the wall as I write Foss's name, and beside it, the flash date.

Took the cordon shards so the rest of us didn't have to, I write.

Gave a forfeit his life back, Lenore writes, dragging her chalk in a circle beneath the words. Before techs in Alara developed light bolts, Subpars marked caverns with an X for danger and a circle for safe.

All the inscriptions bear this caver's mark.

"He is free," Lenore whispers.

"He is free," we echo.

Sometimes I forget the date, in a place where time is measured in grams added to the Cavers' Log, but then I step back and glance over other inscriptions, some reaching back fifty years. My eyes catch on one of the newer ones.

Ferrin Denman, 142:03:07

I touch the date when seven claimed my mom. March 7 in the 142nd year since the flash curtain fell. The words are faint in places, written in a child's scrawl. Lenore's.

*Loved John, Orion, and Wes
Held her axe over my head so I could live*

Lenore swam my mother's axe to the bottom of the Sky, but she didn't leave it here. She brought it back to me.

Tears slip down my cheeks, the only things I have to lay at my mother's memorial. I trace my chalk over the circle beneath her inscription. "You are safe," I whisper.

We never stay long. Soon, others will filter in, staggering their comings and goings so the guards don't notice. Cavers will come throughout the night, slipping in and out like shadows.

Burning Days are for all Subpars, but this ritual is for us. Not even my father knows about this place.

Lenore and Reeves dress beyond the ring of light, preparing to leave.

"I stole something," Dram announces softly. "From one of the guards. This is the only safe place to show you." He crouches beside his suit and slips something from one of the pockets—a narrow, rectangular piece of tech the size of his palm. "When the guard first pulled this out, I thought it was a flash wand—"

"You stole a *flash wand*?" Reeves asks. Even he looks horrified. I've never actually seen one of Congress's most powerful weapons, but I've seen what they can do. Tunnel nine was blasted open with flash wands.

"It's not." Dram grins ruefully. "I wouldn't have risked stealing a flash weapon. This is something different." He touches the device, and an image projects across the cavern.

"A map . . ." I'm relieved, but part of me is oddly disappointed.

"This is more than a map," Lenore says. It moves as she moves, as if it senses her presence.

I walk forward, and the three-dimensional image shifts so that I'm crossing the five outposts bordering the Barrier Range. On the other side of the Range, the cordons stretch all the way to the flash curtain. Beyond it are more cordons, and the tapped-out tunnels of the first outposts, now an abandoned strip of the Exclusion Zone. Congress calls this area the Overburden, the name given to land above depleted mines. All around me are elements of the flashfall—shifting clouds and the fractured radiance of the curtain I've known all my life

I step beyond it.

My breath catches. I know it's just tech—an illusion only—but as the towering peaks of the provinces rise up around me and the first forest I've ever seen enfolds me like a lush green secret, I want to take hold of it. I want to grasp at bark and pine needles and seize this life for myself. Living things. Life-giving, natural things. A life of my own choosing.

This isn't real, this isn't real, I keep telling myself.

But, fire, I want it to be.

Everyone stops moving, and I look to see what they're all staring at. The cirium shield rises up before us, arcing around the city like an enormous silver wing.

The shield our ancestors died to put in place. And beyond it, the place we're trying to earn our way into, a gram of cirium at a time.

"Ready?" Dram asks. We step forward, and the shield shifts past us. We stand inside the protected city.

The jewel.

The Prime Commissary called it that once, during a transmission she sent to cavers. I remember her smiling when she

said it, her accent lending precise corners to her words. *The protected city is the jewel in the crown that is our city-state.*

I see so much water and so many green, growing things—not rugged, like the provinces, but tamed. I reach toward buildings glowing with light, thinking, *Jewel*. In the distance, waterways bisect parks and roads. Transport devices whirl by, and I’m saddened by how small-minded I was all the times I imagined this.

Dad is right. We live a rustic life here in the outposts. Now I understand the way he half laughs, half cringes the word when he says it. *Rustic*. I want to spit it out like a sour taste. No wonder Cranny and the other Naturals spare no smiles for us. Who would want to leave this to go serve in the outposts? I can hardly imagine more different worlds.

I’m standing in sunlight that does not wish to consume me, with the arc of the shield casting part of the city in shadow. There is no hint of the flashfall. Above me the sky—

Ah, the sky—

Clear. Not a cloud in sight. And blue, like Mom always told me it was.

Blue, like her glass memorial pendant around my neck.

The thought brings me back to this cavern, my bare feet on smooth stone, the grit of memorial chalk on my fingers.

I glance at Dram, but his eyes aren’t fastened on the jewel. They’re on me.

“You climb the Range like you keep hoping to see beyond Cordon Five,” he says softly. “So when I saw the guard use this . . .” His lips lift in a half smile.

My eyes fill, blurring Dram and his gift.

“They’ll tear the outpost apart when they find out this is missing,” Reeves says.

“I’ll return it tonight.”

“You’re mad, Dram. If you’re caught, they’ll send you down four.”

“Some things are worth the risk,” Lenore says, and she crushes Dram in a hug. I’m not the only one who longs for a life beyond this outpost. She breaks away, darting a look toward the shadows. “I think I hear a tracker.”

“We need to leave,” Reeves says.

Lenore fastens her skullcap, her eyes locked on Dram. “Stay by the water. We’ll go first.” She reaches for the rest of her gear.

“Hurry, Len,” Dram whispers, his concern as evident as hers. The air fairly hums between them, like there is a special tension reserved for siblings who have only each other left in the world. Reeves stoops to help Lenore, and it occurs to me that he has *no one*—not a single person in the world with shared blood. But as he and Lenore duck from the cavern, he clasps her hand, and I think maybe shared blood doesn’t mean as much as love.

I’ve never been more aware of the chalk circles in this cavern.

Dram slides his finger over the device, and the image cuts out. Now it’s just us two beside the luminous blue pool. He sets the device with his gear, and our gazes collide and bounce away. With Reeves and Lenore gone, this space feels smaller, and I’m suddenly aware that we are wearing almost nothing. Wet almost nothing.

But now, when I close my eyes, I can call up an image of a forest, and the sky, and they are more than my imaginings of them ever were before. No one has ever given me such a gift.

“Thank you,” I whisper. The words aren’t enough, but I don’t know how to say what I’m feeling.

He starts to respond, but then whirls toward the cave entrance. We hear the whistling at the same time, louder than usual, and throw ourselves into the water just as they hum into view. Not one, but four trackers.

“Dive!” Dram says.

I kick to the bottom of the pool, my chest squeezing for lack of air. I’ve never seen trackers working in tandem, and some instinct tells me it magnifies their sensors. I press my hands to the cirium, willing my body to stay down.

Dram’s beside me, staring up toward the surface. We breathe out air, working to keep our bodies submerged. The bubbles lift, where we can see the trackers hovering, still.

I need air. Panic flutters beside the pain in my lungs. These aren’t black spots clouding my vision, but a red wave of pain. One set of trackers leaves.

My body is having a war with my mind. I’m telling it to stay under, but it’s showing me it intends to live, and I realize I’m kicking to the surface.

Dram grabs my leg, and I cry out, losing my last bit of air.

One second . . . two . . . three. The trackers leave. And now Dram’s not pulling me down, but pushing me toward the surface.

We gasp, treading water, and I lie back, letting the Sky hold me in its embrace again.

Dram dives deep, and I watch him stretch his hand along the cirium basin. The water moves in eddies as he breaks the surface, droplets shimmering over his chest and arms. He looks different with his hair slicked back from his forehead, more a man, less a boy.

“If you’re going to look at me like that, it’s only fair that I get to stare back.”

I blink. “Oh. Um.” I duck beneath the water. Flash me, what am I doing? I stay under longer than my lungs tell me they’re comfortable with.

When I emerge, Dram’s waiting. A smile lingers in his eyes.

“We should go,” I say. But I don’t swim to the edge. The levity fades from Dram’s eyes as he watches me. “What is it?”

“I just had this image of you—taking my axe to the bottom.”

“Our axes will *never* hang here.” I swim to him, grasp his shoulders. “We’re getting free.”

He studies me as if he’s judging how sure I really am. “What does it sound like?” He speaks so softly, but I know what he’s asking.

All Subpars sense the elements in the earth—to some extent. We are born with an innate connection to the curtain that is honed down these tunnels, where our families have mined for generations.

But it is different for me.

“I don’t hear it with my ears.” I take his hand and press it above my sternum. “I feel it here. Like a sort of vibration . . .” I hum and watch his face. “Feel it?”

He looks down at his hand, pressed above my heart. “No.”

I lift his hand so it cradles my jaw. His fingers brush my skin, and there’s a question in his eyes. “Sometimes it’s stronger, like this . . .” I hum, and his breath stutters.

“Felt that,” he says.

Then there is just the sound of Dram’s breathing and mine, and the water lifting us, so that everything feels impossibly light. I feel things that scare me, that threaten to take what

Dram and I have together and trade it for something altogether different.

“I have an idea,” Dram says suddenly. He pulls away and swims for the pool’s edge.

“What are you doing?” I heave myself over the side and follow him.

“We’re both about to reach four hundred grams, so this may be our last time here.” He fishes some chalk from his suit pocket and writes *Orion* on the blank stone wall. And beside it, Dram. But he doesn’t draw the caver’s circle. We’re not safe yet. Instead, he scrapes two parallel lines, tilted at an angle. It means—

“The way out,” Dram says. He and I will be the first cavers of Outpost Five to earn our way beyond the curtain without dying. “Maybe one day this wall will be filled with more names—other Subpars who mined enough.”

I touch the expanse of dark stone, and something stirs in me, too big to name. A promise that beats above my heart, in the place where the cirium sings.

We rarely see hovers at Outpost Five. The few times a year Congress sends us supplies and collects our cirium, the machines drop down behind the walls of Central, usually in the dead of night. But a cordon breach must break all kinds of rules. Cranny released a forfeit, and the day after, a craft lands beside the lodge.

I nearly drop the hammer I’m clasping in my blistered hand. Nails hang forgotten from my mouth as I watch the craft settle with a hiss into yellow sludge and ash. We were given the day free from caving, to honor the dead, but we’ve spent the remaining hours of this Burning Day salvaging what we can

of the lodge. Because I'm the "mountain goat," Cranny has me perched in the eaves, banging shingles into place.

I spit out the nails and scurry down the roof. My mind is racing so many places at once, I nearly fall. All I can think is that a hover like this will be coming soon for Dram and me, Lenore, and Dad.

I make my way to Dram's side, where he watches the craft, grim-faced. He saw this sight the day his father was forced aboard. I can barely picture the hover that day, but I remember Dram clearly. His shirt had a tear and I kept thinking that Lenore was going to have to learn how to sew. And I wondered about the new memorial pendant he wore for his mother—if it felt as heavy to him as mine did to me.

Technicians unload the craft, revealing crates of nutrient packs and wooden beams to rebuild the lodge. There are also new cavers. Congress sent us replacement parts and, apparently, replacement people.

Ashes from the funeral pyres lift on the wind, mingling with the smoldering remnants of the cordon breach. Even now, there's a burn in the air. It irritates my exposed skin and makes my lungs work a little harder for air.

People are pouring from the hover. Four women, six men, and two I can't quite believe. A little girl, maybe eight years old, and a boy who looks about eleven. I watch the children through the smoke of nine bodies.

"Looks like they're planning the future repopulation of Outpost Five," Dram murmurs.

"No Radbands," I say. "They're not Subpars." These new people aren't transplants from another outpost. They're Naturals.

“Cave fodder,” Ennis huffs at my side.

I look at Dram. His jaw clenches so tight I see a muscle twitch in his cheek. “Why wouldn’t they just send more Subpars?” I ask.

“Maybe there aren’t any,” he says.

Outpost Five has never lost so many. Not even in the last flash storm. It’s safe to assume the other four outposts would have been impacted, too.

The little girl tips her head back, like she’s looking for a familiar landmark. She’s discovered the night is darker this close to the curtain, where we have only ashes for stars. Her dark hair hangs down over her yellow dress. She is the only splash of color in this gray world.

My eyes sting. From grief, from ash, the remnants of the curtain—it hardly matters. Congress is going to send this child down the tunnels.

“Fire,” I whisper. I have this horrible image of flash bats seizing her through that yellow dress.

“We’ll keep her safe,” Dram says.

I curse again and turn on my heel. I can’t listen to any more empty promises today, so I run past the infirmary, the Rig, and the weigh station, unsure where my feet are taking me. We tell ourselves we’re serving the city in some noble way, but the truth is so ugly, and it’s getting harder and harder to believe what they tell us.

“Evening, Scout,” Barro says as I turn into the forge. He glances up from his bellows just long enough to nod his head.

“Can I just . . . sit here awhile?” I ask.

His eyes shift back to mine, and in their depths I see a deep sorrow. This man gave me the memory of my mother that hangs

around my neck. Barro is the only artisan at Outpost Five, but I've always thought of him as a magician because he takes all the death and gives back some precious bit of beauty. Something that reminds us that the tunnels don't take everything—not the memory of the person we love.

I sit beside the furnace, absorbing its warmth, hoping it will thaw the ice within me. I close my eyes and imagine that I'm on the other side of the flash curtain—but it's difficult with smoke burning my nostrils and the ache of Foss's death pressing my chest like a stone.

"Found you," Dram says quietly. The firelight plays across his face, bathing his stubbled cheeks in flickering shadow. He sits beside me and watches the glassblower pour ash into his tube. "They are free."

It's what we say on Burning Days to comfort the grieving. Today it just makes me angry. "Do you think Naturals have Burning Days?" I ask.

"Naturals aren't as strong as us," Dram says. "I'm sure they mourn even more dead than we do."

"They call them 'funerals.'" A young man steps into view. He has almond-shaped eyes and fair skin, and I remember seeing him emerge from the hover. His black hair hangs to his shoulders. "I'm Gabe," he says. "Gabrielein, actually."

He has an inflection to his voice I've never heard before. It makes me think that the language we speak is not the only one he knows. I stare at his hands—or rather, the metal palms and fingers that have taken the place of his hands.

"Not seen these before?" he asks.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to stare."

“It’s fine. I still catch myself looking at them.” He flexes his hands. The hinged phalanges and metacarpals make a pinging sound.

“Were you in an accident?”

His eyes narrow, like he’s weighing his words. “No. I had two perfectly great hands. The Congress gave me these.”

“Why?” I can’t keep the shock from my voice.

“Have you never heard of Tempered Conjurors before?”

Conjurer.

I glance at Dram. His eyes are as wide as mine. “There hasn’t been a Conjie here for fifty years,” he says.

“That you know of,” Gabe says with a wink. “We’re a sneaky lot.” He lifts his hands. “Have to be, these days.”

“So you could . . . *alter* natural elements?” Dram asks.

Gabe watches the flames dance in Barro’s forge. “Our talents vary, but I could build shelters from rock, make shrubs produce berries—that kind of thing. Before my alterations, anyway.” He waggles his fingers.

I imagine weaving a vine from rock and letting its twisting arms carry me up and out of Outpost Five. But that’s ridiculous—there’s nothing out there but wasteland, outposts, and the cordoned zones on the other side of the mountains.

“I once knew a free Conjie so skilled he could form fire in his hand,” Gabe says.

“A free Conjie?”

Gabe gives me a smile, like I’m a child asking if the boogeyman is real. “How much do you know about the world beyond Outpost Five?”

“You mean the protected city?” Dram asks. “Are you from there?”

“I get to keep my hands—or what passes for my hands these days—if I limit what I say to you Subpars. That’s the deal your director made with me. So, in the interests of keeping my fingers—”

“Why are they sending Conjurors to the outposts?” Something isn’t adding up, and my own talent is telling me something that’s impossible.

Gabe smiles, but his eyes darken. “Stay safe in your ignorance, young ore scout. I intend to keep my hands this time.” He stands and walks out of the forge.

“Wait!” I jump to my feet and follow. “What’s it like—beyond the curtain?”

“Like nothing you can imagine. My people live in the mountain provinces—in places where you can still see the sun rise.” He’s right. It’s hard for me to imagine such a sight. His gaze sweeps the shadows. “I’m really not supposed to talk to you.”

“Your hands . . .” I reach toward him, needing to confirm what my scout’s senses are telling me. “Holy fire,” I breathe, clasping his metal wrists. “Cirium.”

His eyes widen. “You’re mistaken. It’s not even the same color—”

I scrape my fingernail across a joint seam. “Paint,” I whisper. “Why would they—”

He yanks his hands away. “Not a word to anyone, Subpar.” “Why cirium?”

“It’s the only substance we can’t conjure.” He moves his fingers. “Or conjure through.”

The element hums along my senses. Purest cirium. It would take every gram I’ve ever mined to create just one of these hands. “Is this rare? What they did to you?”

“I can’t—”

“How many?” My voice is a bare whisper. “How many Conjies get cirium?”

Pain fills his brown eyes. “All of them.”

His answer stuns me into silence. “I thought . . . I thought cirium was used only to protect the city.”

“If I tell you what you want to know, they won’t just take my hands.”

Dram coughs, over by the forge. A guard is walking toward us. When I look back, Gabe is gone. Gabrielein. The Conjie with secrets too deadly to tell.

I came here hoping the heat of the forge would thaw the ice inside me, but now I’m on fire. A lifetime of mining nine to produce shackles for another human being?

“Five minutes to curfew,” the guard says.

“Thank you,” Dram says, cutting off my reply that wasn’t as polite. He touches my elbow. “I’ll walk you home.”

Silence stretches between us as we pass the mill and thread the dirt paths between the houses. My mind is a storm, as if I’m seeing through new eyes.

“Talk to me,” Dram says as we reach my door.

I want to tell him. My teeth ache because I’ve clenched my jaw so tightly, holding back the words. Congress disguised the cirium used for Gabe’s hands. They want the truth hidden, and they have no idea I don’t need to see cirium to know it’s there.

What Gabe told me is enough to incite rebellion. Subpars have served at the outposts for over a hundred years, dying in our efforts to mine the one element that can preserve Alara.

I mustn’t tell anyone, not even Dram.

“Rye?” he studies my face, trying to read me as usual, but I’m getting better at hiding secrets.

“What if my dad’s right, and we really are all prisoners here?” I muse, looking toward the boundaries of our camp.

“It’s been a long day, Orion.”

“They took your father away, Dram!” I hurl these words because I can’t say the ones I want—and I need him to feel the same sense of betrayal I feel.

He looks like I sucker punched him. “We each have a role,” he says after a moment. “My father refused his.” There’s hurt in his eyes still, but confusion too. “What did Gabe say to you?”

For a moment I can’t answer him.

“He said there are places you can see the sun rise,” I say. The diversion works, and Dram smiles.

“We’re going to see it,” he says. “The new vein you found will get us to four hundred grams.”

My gut twists. We are so close.

I want to be free, like the Conjies.

Instead, I mine the element that Tempers them.