





# ASCENT

The black airship looms above our heads, blotting out the stars.

Woven from filaments a thousand times thinner than human hair, the hundred-meter craft weighs almost nothing. Inside is hard vacuum—a profound emptiness with more lift than hydrogen. We dangle from the undercarriage, seven commandoes, watching the earth fall away below us.

We're thirty thousand meters up. Halfway to the drop height.

Tonight I'm going home.

The city of Shreve, where my father rules with force and lies, isn't going to welcome us. So we're floating to the top of the stratosphere, then falling like an unexpected rain.

At this altitude, the weather is a rippled sheet of clouds spread out beneath my feet. The outline of the continent peeks through, framing the great wheel of a tropical storm in the Gulf. The tendrils of the Mississippi floodplain reflect the sky. The midwest glows softly,

covered with a pale expanse of white weed, an engineered species that chokes out all other life.

But the most headspinning sight is a bright sun hanging in a black sky. We've almost reached the fringe of space, the atmosphere a fragile band of blue hugging the curved horizon.

From his position beside me, Col reaches out to grasp my shoulder. Our pressure suits are too stealthy for radios, but his voice is carried by touch.

"Minus forty degrees!"

Through the thick visor of his helmet, Col's awestruck expression sends a tremor through me. The planes of his face are askew, his lips thinner, his eyes blue instead of brown. Part of my brain reacts uncertainly.

*Do I know you?*

The camo-surge was three weeks ago, a full-body operation to hide our identities from the surveillance dust of Shreve. My father's city will be watching us every second. There was no choice but to remake ourselves.

Col has a new voice, new fingerprints, a layer of synthetic skin that sheds fake DNA.

I have all these things too. My face is not my own.

Maybe it never was.

It takes me a moment to see Col in there—the boundless smile, the way his hands move when he talks.

The way he thinks.

"Celsius or Fahrenheit?" I ask.

“Both! Minus forty’s where the scales cross.” Col’s new eyes narrow. “I told you that already, didn’t I?”

“You enjoyed telling me again,” I say. Fahrenheit is some oddball Rusty scale I’d never heard of before yesterday.

“Very funny,” he says.

I smile back at Col, trying to ignore the feeling that I’m watching a stranger impersonating him.

“Either way,” he says, “minus forty is *cold*. If you took that suit off, you’d have frostbite in three minutes.”

“Wouldn’t I suffocate first?” There’s not much oxygen up here at the edge of darkness—hardly any atmosphere at all.

“Probably.” Col sounds disappointed, like he had his heart set on freezing to death.

But it’s toasty warm inside our suits, and we’re breathing almost pure oxygen to prevent decompression sickness on the way up. If any of us die tonight, it won’t be from cold or suffocation—it’ll be from hitting the ground too fast.

Have I mentioned we aren’t wearing parachutes?

Chutes would slow our descent too much, making us easy for ground defenses to spot. We have to flit into Shreve invisibly fast, taking the risk of crashing into a tree at forty meters per second.

The risk is worth it, because my friend Boss X is in a cage down there.

I’ve come to set him free, to shore up the alliance between the rebels and the free cities. To repay everything he’s done for me and Col—rescuing us from Shreve, allying with us against my father.

But mostly I need to save X because I killed his love.

Who was also my brother, Seanan, it turns out.

X told me all this in the minutes before he was captured, my whole life thrown into chaos with a few words. Everything I thought I knew was wrong or backward.

Wearing this strange face, this new skin, I'm here to set myself right again.