

If he thought I was there to kill him, he was wrong. Circumstances would do that for me. His lips were black, one eye frozen shut, the other still open but drifting. Faint puffs of moisture iced his beard. Freezing to death is more merciful in the end stage. The slope was steep, and I steadied myself against the boulder, propping him up, then watched that drifting eye shift into a lifeless stare. Security had warned he might be Anteater. I had never seen one in real life, but I knew they were vicious killers. An Anteater this close to our complex was a problem.

There wasn't much to take—his worn leather aviator's cap was typical Anteater uniform, his hikers still had use, no weapons. In his pocket were empty vials, perhaps some sort of medicine, and a thin silvery glove, a piece of old technology but still useful. I put it on. Immediately, its warmth surrounded my fingers. But neither the glove nor anything else he owned saved him from the wrath of the Desolation.

I slung his boots over my shoulder and headed back up the icy mountain path. From the upper valley, his figure looked like a grain of sand on the edge of an ocean, waiting to be washed away. The wind was bitter, temperatures well below zero, my time outside already over the limit. He died but a few miles from our upper gate, not that he would have found it. Hidden deep within the mountain core is our underground community. The snow-covered valley is disorienting — landmarks are few. Still, it was curious that he chose this mountain and this valley out of all the others.

The wind stabbed my face like a thousand pricking needles. Clouds poured over distant mountains, a waterfall of thick grayish vapor; a monstrous storm was approaching. Soon night would descend, creating an inescapable blindness where a hand inches from the eye could not be seen. I have never seen actual moonlight, nor stars, and tomorrow there will be no sun. Blue sky is only a fairytale. We call this era The Change and we are the unlucky who have survived.