

# CHAPTER ONE

Gertrude, as usual, was giving me a headache. Her high-pitched wails echoed from the tall ceiling of our dormitory. I stood with my arms crossed tightly and my fingertips digging into my ribs as if that could keep my short temper from betraying me. Again.

“Why did you do it?” Professor Dunn asked me, a thread of exasperation in her voice. She tilted her head, grimacing as one of Gertrude’s cries reached a bone-rattling volume. I studied the embroidered ruffle at the professor’s collar. It was slightly askew. She’d likely hurled herself out of bed in alarm at the sound of Gertrude’s shrieking. Gertrude had that effect on people. And I had a negative effect on Gertrude.

My hesitation betrayed my lack of a reasonable answer to Professor Dunn’s question. With my teeth set together so tightly that my jaw ached, I lowered my chin and tried to recall precisely what Gertrude had been saying before my radiance escaped me like a rabid dog unleashed.

She’d been harping on my temper, probably. My lack of precision when conducting. My generally unpleasant nature. How I deserved to

be a Generator, kept locked away and out of trouble. Normally these declarations were easy to ignore. Gertrude had nasty things to say about everyone, from the pimple-faced first years to the kind old cook who made us cinnamon buns.

But tonight was the night before the Assignment Ceremony.

If Master Hayes shared Gertrude's sentiments, I'd never be assigned to a renowned Mission. I'd be cast impossibly far from the hubs of Industry. I'd end up in some miserable rural Mission—unappreciated at best, feared by backwards locals at worst. I'd be years behind my peers. Years away from the chance to prove I was capable of running my own Mission.

I'd be an insignificant cog in the great machine of Progress. Powerless. Disappointing.

"Gertrude made me angry," I finally mumbled. The blush that followed was like a thousand ants shimmying up my throat. I resisted the urge to cover my scarlet cheeks. Professor Dunn was harder on me than any of my other instructors, but she'd also taken the most interest in the rehabilitation of my inconsistent academic performance. Now, with mere hours left at the House of Industry, I still required her pitying sort of patience.

And I'd let her down one last time.

Professor Dunn sighed and removed her glasses to wipe them with a kerchief from her pocket—a tic I'd long since identified as an attempt to work through tremendous frustration with one of her students.

Usually me.

Time and time again, she'd explained this to me: If I wanted to be a great Conductor, I had to control my impulses. My temper. These traits were at odds with the House of Industry.

Sometimes it felt like my very nature was at odds with the House of Industry.

The only undesirable trait Professor Dunn had ever let slide was my curiosity. Occasionally, I asked questions that resulted in being

kept behind after lectures. Each time, I expected my palms to be caned. But Professor Dunn never hit me. Instead, she would take the time to answer me, showing me the inner workings of gadgets and helping me understand why radiance made the intricate gears whirr.

I'd miss her classes.

In our dormitory, Gertrude had stopped wailing, likely in smug anticipation of discovering what my punishment would be. A crowd of girls perched on her tiny cot, petting her hair and glaring at me. I couldn't bring myself to care whether they were angry. After all, none of us would see one another ever again after tomorrow afternoon. Our bags were already packed and lined up along the wall.

We'd been taught for ten years not to become attached to anyone. That was one rule I followed as if my life depended on it. Caring made people unreasonable. I could see it now in the way these girls felt compelled to protect Gertrude and her big, stupid mouth. The way their eyes flicked over me warily.

I wondered if any of them knew what Gertrude and I had done when no one was looking.

It didn't matter. They'd be the ones weeping tomorrow, agonizing over leaving their friends. While I'd walk away without a single care for who I was leaving behind. It would make me stronger. More focused. No longer distracted by how difficult it was to avoid knowing and being known by others.

I had to do what was expected of me without hesitation, without question. Only then would I be trusted to run my own Mission.

Only then would I stop doubting myself.

"You will complete Gertrude's morning chores and your own, along with cleaning the chamber pots," Professor Dunn said, her pale brown eyes daring me to argue. She had a narrow face and wary tension around her mouth. Which made sense—she was surrounded by children all day. "You'll begin now. And when you are finished, make yourself presentable and reflect on your actions in the great hall."

I pinched the thin skin at my ribs through my nightgown. No sleep at all, then. I'd be a bleary-eyed wraith at the Assignment Ceremony. "Yes, Professor."

There was no sense in lingering. There'd be no final lecture. Nothing Professor Dunn could say now would make an impact, considering the last four years in the Secondary School of the House of Industry had done nothing to reduce my impulsivity. I crouched beside my cot and shoved my feet into my boots. To my horror, my fingers trembled as I tied the laces. Pressure built behind my eyes. I closed them briefly, willing back the tears that would humiliate me far more than being punished in front of the other eleven girls in my graduating class.

There were no tears in Gertrude's eyes when I hurried past. There was, I noticed with terrible satisfaction, a burn mark on the front of her nightgown where I'd struck her with radiance.

"If you don't watch yourself," she muttered, grabbing my sleeve, "you'll wash out and end up a House servant."

I rolled my eyes and let her see a threatening thread of radiance stretching between my forefinger and thumb as I shook out of her grip.

Her breath sucked in with a hiss of rage. "Always acting like you're a Transistor," she said in a low snarl that only I could hear. "They didn't want you, Josephine Haven."

It stung like she'd slapped me.

The same refrain ran through my head every night. Every morning. Every time my radiance wanted to lash out without precision. *They didn't want me*. When the time had come to enter secondary school, I'd begged to train as a Transistor, to learn how to fight and defend the House of Industry as a powerful, elite guard. I hoped down to my bones that it was my destiny, because I couldn't understand why else I felt so hopelessly angry, so in need of release.

What I hoped for didn't matter. They'd denied my request, and instead the House had called on me to serve as a Conductor. There were

no adjustments to the decisions the Elders made. It didn't matter that I was certain they'd only disqualified me from serving in the Transistor guard on account of my being small for my age. It didn't matter that I was certain I had the ability to use my radiance as a weapon.

It didn't matter that my emotions made me feel violent.

Maybe they'd looked into my heart and seen how much I hated the part of myself that enjoyed hurting people.

With my face searing hot, I left the dormitory for the washroom, where I'd spend hours scouring chamber pots until my hands were raw with lye.

Transistors, perhaps even more so than Conductors, had to demonstrate extreme control in addition to the ability to cast radiance from their bodies like lightning. Professor Dunn had explained this on numerous occasions in the rare joint classes we had with the Transistors. Every time, I'd felt her eyes on me. It was a reminder that a penchant for occasionally attacking classmates wasn't enough for an elite role in the House's guard. Transistors protected the House of Industry and its interests. They didn't use radiance at will to get revenge on bratty girls with overly perceptive eyes and soft mouths.

Tears wet my cheeks in the chilly washroom as I scrubbed each porcelain pot mercilessly, wishing there were a way to wash off the fear that my temper and my lack of certainty made me inadequate to even function as a Conductor—let alone advance enough to run my own Mission. If I didn't perform to expectations as an apprentice, I'd be sent home to the House of Industry. I'd join the servants who became nameless over the years, blessed with radiance but unworthy of representing the House as Conductors or Transistors. House servants turned on the lights, heated the hearths, ran the lifts. Tasks any small child with radiance could complete.

A birthright unrealized.

I could not allow that to happen. I had to stop lashing out. I had to stop examining the place in me that felt like a loose tooth. And I had to

stop caring about what the other girls thought of me or what I thought of them.

Once I ran my own Mission, an entire community would rely on me. Everyone would know exactly who I was and why I existed. I'd gladly do what was expected of me.

Scraping my tears away with the inside of my arms, I rinsed another chamber pot. Just because I wanted to throw it across the room didn't mean I would, didn't mean my impulses were anything but that—fleeting weaknesses.

I *was* capable. I'd passed my exams and practicals. And tomorrow, I'd leave the House of Industry and work alongside someone who never needed to know that I'd set a few sleeves on fire and burned a few nightgowns and knocked out one particularly mouthy classmate who had entirely deserved it.



“Gertrude Faircove,” Master Hayes intoned, reading from a scroll at the podium, “shall apprentice at the Copper Hills Mission.”

A series of cheers erupted from the girls around me and the boys across the aisle in the great hall. I sat straight as an iron rod, every muscle in my body clenched so tight, I trembled. She was sitting right beside me, close enough that the black fabric of our skirts pooled together. I watched her fingers twist into the folds at her lap. Her breath made a soft whistling sound.

“It's what you wanted,” I muttered under my breath.

Gertrude spoke in a hissing whisper. “I realize that.”

“Then what are you scared of?”

“I am not scared,” she bit out.

I rolled my eyes and took her small hand in my own too quickly for her to yank it away. Copper Hills was as big as Sterling City, but it was deep inland and far north. Farther than either of us had ever

been. I held her cold hand for only a moment, long enough to feel a prickle of discomfort. Long enough for my eyes to sting. “You’ll be fine,” I managed to say before letting go.

She made a show of drying her hand on her skirt. “Says the girl sweating through her dress.”

“It’s hot in here.”

It was actually cold and drafty—early-spring air seeping through the open windows above the stained glass that illuminated the room in shades of cobalt and sky blue. Incense curled from two braziers on each side of the master, lending the air a hazy quality, like the edges of a dream. Intricate chandeliers lit with radiance flickered beneath the polished rafters, a signal of the staggering wealth the House of Industry had amassed by developing Missions in every major city. Access to Progress came at a price, but it added considerable value to people’s lives: automating tasks that used to take sweat and hard labor; lighting the night and extending the time people could work. We were changing the world one Mission at a time.

And now I was about to find out exactly where I’d fit into the march of Progress. My empty stomach curled in on itself. I was so busy trying not to vomit with nerves that the sound of my own name startled a small squeak out of me.

“Josephine Haven,” the master was saying, “shall apprentice at the Frostbrook Mission.”

Silence followed his announcement. I blinked senselessly, trying to understand the words he’d spoken. The room tilted as I finally recognized the name.

Gertrude whispered my realization aloud. “But that Mission isn’t even close to operational.”

Someone laughed in the row behind us. I swallowed a sour taste at the back of my throat and squeezed my eyes shut briefly to quell the dizziness. Frostbrook was the farthest Mission from Sterling City—little more than an experiment in rural development. So remote that it took

nearly a week by train to get materials out to the workers constructing it. So rural that it would only serve a mill and a winch and a few scattered buildings until the trade outpost finally began to thrive.

This wasn't an apprenticeship. It was a punishment. The culmination of too many disappointments.

This was what I'd earned for myself.

I refused to cry.

Master Hayes continued, finishing the list of girls and moving on to the boys. Reading the names of students and places, futures blossoming, talent and Industry spreading across the land, transforming the world.

Gertrude said nothing. But this time, she reached for my hand—and she didn't let go.



We rode to the train station six to a carriage, crammed so close together that I could smell the onions on Tabitha Flint's breath from the tarts she'd snuck from the kitchen. Our bags rattled on the roof, covered by a tarp as rain fell in gray sheets.

"You should have had your skirt tailored to trousers," Tabitha said, twisting on the bench to try to show me hers, which mostly resulted in her sitting on Grace's lap.

Grace shoved her, somehow managing to be forceful and delicate all at once. "Quit that. There's no sense in giving her grief about her skirts. They're lovely skirts, Josephine, really. You can always get them fixed up when you get to Frostland."

"Frostbrook," Tabitha corrected. She'd gotten top marks in every class thanks to encyclopedic knowledge of everything she'd ever heard or read and perhaps even dreamed. And she was not shy about imparting her knowledge on others whether they wanted to hear it or not.

A quality I'd taken advantage of on more than one occasion to better prepare for an exam after letting my mind drift in class. Now her deep, musical voice only made the tightness in my chest worse. I'd tried so hard not to care, but each one of the girls felt like a splinter in my palm. I wasn't ready to dig them out from under my skin.

"You know," she was saying, "it's right at the base of the mountains where the last of the Animators ran off to. No one knows how many bodies are up there in the snow. They had to have died of exposure. Anyone would."

"We get it, you aced the House's legacy," Gertrude said with a sigh that heaved her chest. She carried a fan and fluttered it toward Tabitha, likely on account of the onions. "We don't need a history lesson now."

I might as well have been one of the Animators who'd tried to break from the House of Industry to practice their wild magic without regulation. Once they'd showed the House how dangerous they were, they'd been hunted down and exterminated. That had been nearly two decades ago, with a few stragglers rumored to have made it to the treacherous mountain range that served as a nearly impassable border between the plains and the far sea. Frostbrook was nearly as far as those mountains—snowcapped peaks I'd seen only in paintings and drawings. A desolate place that was likely years behind anything reasonably close to modern life.

Suddenly claustrophobic in the crowded carriage, I opened the waxed curtain beside me and let the rain mist my face. I sucked in great gulps of Sterling City air, tasting the grease and smoke and piss and occasional wafts of rot that characterized the metropolis I'd spent most of my life in.

"She's lost it," Grace announced mournfully.

I drew the curtain shut and directed my gaze toward her until she flinched. Abruptly, I felt heavy and tired. Something must have crossed my face, because her expression softened and she leaned forward, our knees knocking together.

"I'll miss this place, too," Grace said. "I'm off to Quinley Mission, you know. It's not even half the size of Sterling City. They don't even have a proper symphony orchestra."

Tabitha cringed. "Frostbrook lacks *running water*, Grace."

"All the more chance for me to make a tremendous name for myself," I snapped, hearing the childish tone to my voice—but unable to stop it. "Think of the way they'll admire me and my Senior. We'll be changing lives, you know. Changing the whole world."

Grace patted my hand. "Of course you will, dear."

My hands, uncommonly clean, were as pale as bone against her tan skin. I'd scrubbed with lemon and rough salt and a sharp boar-bristle brush until my nails shone and my cuticles bled. I felt naked without grease in the folds of my knuckles. This cleanliness was nothing but absurd pageantry. It wouldn't take long for my black dress to smell like machine grease and the comforting cling of ozone.

"It's a shame we won't be here for the Continental Exposition," Grace said, straightening her scarf. "The House's exhibit will be the grandest of all."

"The Hall of Radiance is nothing but a replica of the House of Industry," I said irritably. "It's not even to scale."

In truth, I felt sick over missing it. The House had been constructing the Hall of Radiance for nearly a year in anticipation of the exposition. The people of Sterling City would gather to learn about our great work, and we wouldn't be there.

"It's not about the exhibit," Grace said, scoffing. "It's about being seen and admired. Every notable figure in Sterling City will be there celebrating Progress."

"I suppose you'll have settle for being *seen* and *admired* at the Quinley Mission," I told her, taking satisfaction in her offended huff.

Tabitha spoke up with an anxious waver. "Do you imagine we'll encounter resisters at the station?"

Gertrude met my gaze, as if she knew exactly what I was thinking. The notion of encountering a resistor made my pulse quicken. It was a Transistor's duty to fight those who sought to harm Children of Industry and halt the march of Progress. But if I had no other choice, surely I would not be faulted for defending myself and my classmates.

"I doubt it," I said, unable to mask my disappointment. I would never be called on to fight. The station was likely crawling with Transistors in plain clothes tasked with making sure each of us made it into our trains safely.

"Incredible," Gertrude muttered, shaking her head.

How did she manage to know me so keenly?

Who would I be without her?

A train whistle screeched in the distance, and I tilted my head back with an impotent snarl, wishing I could be that loud—that unbridled. One of those trains was going to take me away from here. From Gertrude. From everything we'd ever known.

I was supposed to be happy about that.

But all I felt was sick.