



1 A Glitch



As darkness fell on the cliffs of Cape Wrath, a storm blew in from the North Sea. There had been many storms at Cape Wrath before, but this one rocked around the fortress as if a DJ were spinning dark matter. Waves boomed against the cliffs, clouds rolled like molten lead, and all those elements in between warped in the night as if part of the strange event that was occurring in the fortress.

For most of the day, the dormitories had been as quiet as tombs. Thousands of children lay in rows of metal beds, sleeping so silently in the dim light that the nurses had to lean right over them to make sure they were still breathing.

The new implants glowed like moons on their foreheads. Their sheets covered them like shrouds.

The nurses treated the wounds around the implants as if they were caring for crops or things, just stuff, not the living, breathing, feisty children who had filled the arcades with

rush and noise, Pod Fighter T-shirts, and talk of the game. The implants were working. Now these children were Northern Government property: pilots and gunners, weapons of war.

But as darkness fell and the storm rolled in, the implanted army began to stir.

It breathed, faster.

Eyelids flickered, as if brains were rebooting.

It whispered and writhed, frowned and tangled in its long white gowns and sheets, until it looked like a shoal of fish trying to escape from a net.

Now, this was not supposed to happen.

These children had been told to sleep until they were needed.

There were only two nurses in each dormitory. For a while they watched the children stir, not quite sure what was happening. But as the army began to rise like mist from those long lines of beds, the nurses were gripped by dark horror, as if they were witnessing a morgue of corpses rising. Some tried to bully the children back to their beds, as if they were still just children, but most ran as if a dam had burst.

Waves boomed against the cliffs.

Wind howled.

Darkness warped.

Now it felt as if the storm was inside the fortress.

The implanted army rose, and the nurses ran, gasping with fright.

Implant engineers rushed to Mal Gorman's office. The dormitory nurses were hard on their heels, followed by any other members of staff who suspected they might get blamed for

the awakening. While all this was going on, Ralph, the butler, was in the kitchen next to Mal Gorman's dressing room, preparing his master's supper.

As he walked toward the door with the tray, alarms began to wail and a herd of nurses ran past with their hair flying from their buns. He paused. It was clearly not a good time to deliver cheese on toast to the Minister for Youth Development, but since Mal Gorman had ordered it, the butler decided he'd better deliver it. He valued his head almost as much as the nurses sprinting past him valued theirs.

The office was as packed as a Tube train at rush hour. It took all of Ralph's best navigation skills to carve a path through it to the desk. Mal Gorman made a frightening spectacle. While his staff crushed in around him, he sat at his desk, illuminated by the light of its giant screen. He was a government minister from a broken world; half bone, half blinking machine.

A mass of tubes and wires connected him to a life-support system on the frame around his chair.

The eyes in his skull face were poison pale.

He was building up to one of his venomous outbursts.

The butler prepared to set down the tray on the corner of the desk.

"Not there," Gorman said.

"Where would you like it, sir?"

"Not on the desk, you fool, I won't be able to see what's happening."

Images flickered across the screen. His skeletal hands touched heads and gowns. He shuffled views like playing cards and watched his implanted army run, like a cat watches a mouse it has been torturing. It would not get far before he

pounced on it again. He had taken these children to fight for the vast riches on the other side of The Wall.

There was nowhere else to put the tray. Ralph looked around, but every inch of floor had a panicking person standing upon it.

"Stop hovering," Gorman said. "Get out."

The butler left, the tray still in hand.

Gorman's eyes remained glued to the screen.

The engineers were telling him the awakening was a glitch that could be fixed via a computer. But some of the children now had blood seeping from the wounds around their implants. Running around in such a state, they were damaging Northern Government property.

"Hurry up!" he yelled. "Fix this glitch before these children make themselves even more stupid!"

It did not occur to him for a moment that there was no glitch to fix, that these children had been strong enough to defy their implants and climb out of bed. For what he had unwittingly harvested, from the arcades he had built across the North, was a spectacular upgrade of the human design: children who were smarter, stronger, and more likely to survive than any born before them. And among their repertoire of strange new talents was the ability to connect with each other. Even in their sleep.

Mal Gorman did not know this, yet he was the one who'd made it happen. An hour before, he'd reunited the twins Mika and Ellie and formed the clasp that would hold this new connection together, that would cause the start of a seismic shift in the human world order. While he was thinking about cheese on toast, twenty-seven thousand sleeping children were down-

loading the contents of Mika Smith's mind. That quiet, clever, black-eyed boy who'd flown over The Wall . . .

There was no glitch to fix.

These children were running because they now knew what lay on the other side.

One of the nurses was trying to talk to him, trying to tell him that the army had climbed out of bed knowing impossible things. But he didn't hear her. The nurses were annoying him; they were talking all at once, crowding around his desk, hot-faced and disarrayed.

"Get out!" he yelled. "I can't breathe with you all flapping around me! Someone fix this glitch—now!"

The implanted army had awoken knowing there were trees and animals on the other side of The Wall and that they themselves had been taken to bomb them. But it wasn't going to be easy to escape from that fortress.

The implants had been shot like bolts into their heads and were still fighting for control, demanding the children obey the Northern Government, ordering them to sleep until they were needed. The children had been strong enough to wake themselves up, but moving away from those lines of beds felt like pulling against the jaws of a mantrap. The moment they ran out of the dormitories and into the fortress passages, they felt an intense, punitive pain in their minds that made them drop the connection that had formed when Mika and Ellie touched. And this connection was important. They would need it to work out what to do. For what they'd learned from Mika while they slept made the concrete feel like quicksand beneath their feet. They ran in a wild panic with it all hot in their heads.