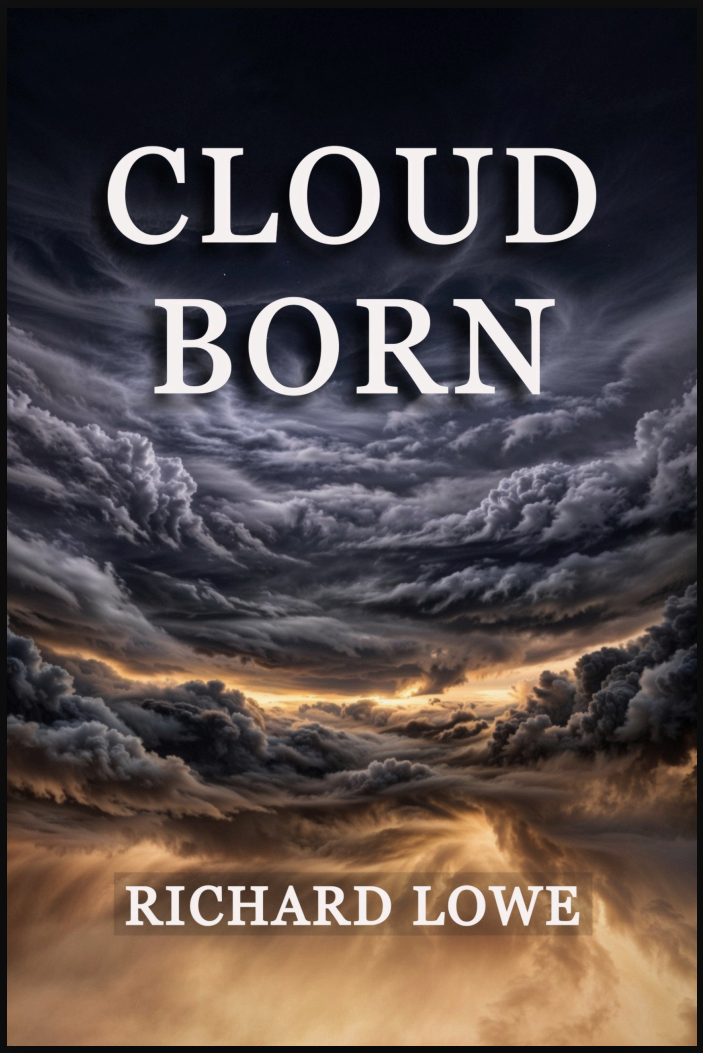
A FREE COMPANION TO CLOUDBORN

Vent Clean

Before Spindle waits at the eastern edge of the Thundersea boundary, wer carries an old still ten days south to the one place where resting costs nothing.



RICHARD LOWE

Vent Clean

The old still was feeding wrong again.

Spindle read it from across the upwelling, the way wer read everything, before wer had decided to look. Rime had extended into the gradient's rising edge too late, the membrane opening after the peak had already gone through, and what came back into wer reserves was the thin tail of a discharge the rest of the flock had eaten twenty seconds earlier. Rime's mist was the white of old frost, and it did not brighten at all.

Why does a field feed late when it knows the timing. Spindle sent the question into the air, where nobody was required to catch it. The pale gold of wer mist dimmed a shade and stayed dim, because the question had no answer yet, only a shape.

The upwelling was a good one. It rose out of the southern cloudbank's lower edge in a broad warm column, and the flock had been riding its dome for nine pressure cycles, longer than anyone could remember holding one feeding ground in the charging season. Bellows sat at the center, the elder's surge-field pushing outward at the heart of the dome, and the twenty-nine others had arranged themselves around wer by habit and temperature and old arguments about who fed where.

Rime fed at the edge. Rime had fed at the edge for as long as Spindle had been alive.

Spindle drifted east along the dome until wer field-edge was close enough to Rime's to feel the cold of it. Old fields ran cold at the boundary. It was the first thing wer had ever learned about Rime, before the name, before wer understood that the cold meant the membrane was spending less on itself because there was less to spend.

Wer extended a field-touch, the plain kind, nothing asked.

Rime did not answer it. Rime never did. Spindle let the touch rest against the old still's boundary and opened the smallest channel wer could hold open, and let the charge go.

It went slowly. Draw charge was inward-pulling, built to gather, and turning it outward against its own grain took attention. The first few seconds always felt like pushing warm air uphill.

Then the channel settled and the charge ran, a thin steady line from wer reserves into Rime's. The pale gold came up bright at Spindle's edges. It always did, and wer had never found out why.

Why does giving feel better than holding.

The gold dimmed again. That one had been open for a long time.

Rime's white brightened by a hair. The old still's field made a small buoyancy correction it had not been able to afford a minute earlier, and lifted two meters back toward the dome.

You're doing it again,

Rime said.

I'm feeding,

Spindle said.

You're feeding me. An old field can still read a channel open at its own edge.

Then close it.

Rime didn't. Rime never did that either.

* * *

Bellows came to the edge at the end of the cycle, when the gradient had discharged and the dome had gone quiet and most of the flock had drawn in toward the center for the cold half of the rhythm. The

elder did not usually travel. Wer field was large and dense and moving it cost more than wer liked to spend, so when Bellows came to the edge, the edge knew it was about to hear an opinion.

The elder read Spindle first. The read was long and heavy and did not pretend to be anything other than an inventory.

You're running under your own line,

Bellows said.

I'm fine.

You're running at what a still your age runs at, and you're a draw. Draws run high, and you've run high since you came out of the nursery. You're not running high now.

The gold dimmed before Spindle could stop it, and Bellows read that too.

I fed well,

Spindle said.

You fed well and then you gave it away. The flock moves north at the end of this cycle, and the gradients between here and the northern grounds are thin for four days. A field that starts that trip under its own line finishes it under somebody else's.

North,

Spindle said.

The upwelling's thinning. Read the column.

Spindle read the column. Bellows was right: the warm rise from below had a ragged edge to it now, a stutter in the thermal output that had not been there five cycles ago. It would hold a few more days and then go the way upwellings went.

What makes an upwelling stop.

The question went into the air. Bellows, who answered perhaps one question in ten, answered this one.

What's under it changes. Nothing up here decides it.

The gold came up. That one had closed.

Bellows turned toward Rime then. The read the elder gave the old still was shorter, the read of two fields who had known each other a long time and had already said most of what there was to say.

Four days,

Bellows said.

I know how far it is,

Rime said.

Can you make it.

Rime's frost-white held flat. The old still did not answer, and Bellows did not ask again. After a while the elder went back to the center, wer surge-field shoving the cold air aside as wer went.

* * *

Rime told Spindle on the next cycle.

They were at the dome's eastern edge, the farthest point from the center, where the upwelling's warmth thinned out into the cloudbank and the air carried the faint metal sharpness of ammonia crystal. Spindle had been asking about the crystal all morning. Why does it taste of metal when it isn't metal, why does it fall in some layers and hang in others, and whether a crystal knows which way it's going to fall.

Rime said,

I'm not going north.

The gold went out.

It did not dim. It went out all at once, the way a mist went when a field took every resource it had and sent it somewhere else. Spindle did not know where wer had sent it until wer felt wer own field pull in tight around its core, like a membrane bracing for a shear.

Where, then,

wer said.

South.

There's nothing south. The cloudbank thins out south, and then there's the Thundersea.

Before the Thundersea there's the boundary. The upper edge. I've been there once.

Every field in the flock had the Thundersea in the same place in its encoding, the place Bellows had put it with a sustained low pulse when each of them was new: not this. The amplitude of that pulse sat in Spindle's field even now, a weight wer could feel without looking for it. And Rime had been there.

When,

Spindle said.

Before Bellows was elder. Before Bellows was much of anything. I was younger than you, and I went with a surge who wanted to see it, and we saw it.

What was it like.

Rime's mist shifted. Old frost, and under the frost, briefly, a warm thin trace Spindle had never seen in it.

Warm. Not like this, where thirty fields make the heat by sitting in it. There the whole sea runs underneath you, and the air holds you up whether you feed or not.

Spindle held it: a place where staying alive cost nothing.

You want to rest,

wer said.

I want to rest somewhere it doesn't cost.

It's dangerous.

The boundary isn't the sea. The sea is dangerous, and the boundary is the edge of it, and edges are where old fields go.

How far.

Eight days for a healthy field. Ten for me.

The gold came back at the edges, faint. Wer had already decided, and the deciding had closed a question wer had not known was open.

I'll come,

wer said.

No.

I'll come, and I'll feed and you'll feed. When you feed wrong, I'll be there.

You'll give me your charge for ten days and arrive under your own line. Then you'll be a young draw alone at the edge of the Thundersea with nothing.

I'll have the boundary. You said the air holds you up.

Rime had no answer for that. The frost-white held flat for a long time, and then Rime said what old cloudbank fields said when an upwelling's mouth ran clean, when the rising air came up without crystal in it and the feeding was right.

Vent clean.

It sounded like a field who had lost an argument to someone younger and was not unhappy about it.

* * *

Bellows did not try to stop wer.

Spindle had been ready for it. Wer had spent the whole cold half of the rhythm building arguments, laying them out and knocking them down and building them again. When the elder came to the edge at the start of the next cycle, Spindle was carrying a dozen of them.

Bellows read wer, and read Rime, and did not ask anything.

Draws go where the pull is,

the elder said.

I'm not going because of a pull. I'm going because...

Because a draw goes where the pull is. I've had draws in this flock since before your nursery, and I've never held one yet.

The gold dimmed. Spindle had wanted to be argued with, and the wanting caught wer by surprise, and Bellows read the surprise and let it sit.

Come back north when it's done,

Bellows said.

Will the flock be there.

The flock will be where the grounds are. Follow the grounds.

That was all. The elder went back to the center, and the flock began to lift off the thinning dome by ones and threes, turning north into the middle layer's slow current. Spindle and Rime held at the eastern edge until the last of the twenty-eight signatures had faded past the range of a young draw's sensors.

Spindle's sensors were good. Wer held them out longer than wer needed to.

Then they turned south.

* * *

Ten days was a long time to be the only two fields in the air.

Spindle had never been the only anything. Wer had come out of the nursery into a flock, and the flock had been around wer every cycle since, thirty presences in the collective field like the sound of wer own processing, and wer had not known it was a sound until it stopped. On the first day south wer kept sending small pulses into the empty middle layer and getting nothing back, and each nothing landed in wer like a missed step.

Rime didn't send pulses. Rime moved at the old still's pace, slow and level, riding the current where it ran south and spending as little as possible against it where it didn't.

Spindle asked questions instead.

Why does the current run south down here and north up there. Why does the infrasound get lower the farther south we go. Is the Thundersea loud, or is it only loud to fields close enough to hear it.

Rime answered one in five, maybe. The ones Rime answered, wer answered well, and by the second day Spindle could tell which kind they were: questions about the current, about the air, about where to feed and when, the questions with a cost hanging off them. The rest Rime let go into the air, and the gold carried them dim until the next question came.

They fed together at whatever gradients the middle layer offered. The gradients were thin, as Bellows had said, sliding in and out of reach under the slow movement of the atmosphere, and Rime's

timing was worse in thin air than it had been on the dome. Spindle fed fast and fed first, and then opened the channel at Rime's edge before the old still had finished missing.

You don't have to wait for me to miss,

Rime said, on the third day.

You always miss.

Not always.

Mostly.

The frost-white flickered. It took Spindle a moment to read it, because wer had never seen Rime do it before. The old still was laughing.

On the fourth day they passed a cloudmass so old its outer crystal had gone the color of dull amber, and Rime would not go near it. Spindle wanted to know why. Rime said old cloudmasses had eddies in their lee, and eddies caught things, and some of the things they caught had been fields once.

Spindle went around it with wer sensors turned toward it the whole way, and read nothing in its lee but slow spinning air. The gold carried the question for the rest of the day.

* * *

The squall came on the fifth day from the west, on a low approach.

It was a small one. Spindle read its front at range, the charge building in a thin wall and the pressure ahead of it pushing the ambient air into a shallow ridge, and wer sensors put its size at the low end of what a flock would bother to notice. On the dome, Bellows would have let it pass through without a pulse.

Squall,

Spindle said.

I read it.

It's small.

I read that too.

It arrived three minutes later. The pressure came down on them from above and to the west, a steady weight with nothing violent in it. Spindle's buoyancy compensation fired, and wer dropped a meter and held.

Rime dropped four.

The old still's compensation was running. Spindle could feel it at Rime's edge, the automatic corrections firing at a rate that would have been fine for a younger field, and it was not fine for Rime because each correction came out smaller than it needed to be. Rime was working as hard as wer field could work, and the squall was pushing harder.

Four meters in thirty seconds. Then four more.

The frost-white went pale. Then it went out, the mist shut down while Rime's field hauled every scrap of charge it had toward the buoyancy work.

Spindle moved down to wer.

Wer didn't decide it. Wer was beside Rime before the question of whether to be beside Rime had formed, wer field-edge against the old still's cold boundary, the touch already extended and the channel already opening.

Not now,

Rime said. The pulse was thin, because Rime had no charge left for a strong one.

Spindle opened the channel all the way.

On the dome, the charge had gone out of a full reserve in a thin careful line. Here wer was pushing it out of a reserve that was also holding wer up, against a squall that was also pushing wer down, and every unit that went into Rime was a unit wer own compensation did not get.

Wer dropped two meters. Then three.

The gold went flat. Spindle felt it go and did not reach after it.

Rime's compensation took the charge and used it. The old still's drop slowed as the corrections fired at the size they needed, and Rime hung at the new depth and held. The squall pushed, and Rime held.

Spindle did not hold. Wer field had given the buoyancy work less than the buoyancy work wanted, and the squall found the difference and leaned on it. Wer slid down past Rime with the channel still open between them, stretching, the touch thinning as the distance grew.

Close it,

Rime said.

Spindle didn't. Wer had no idea what wer would do if the touch broke, and wer did not want to find out.

The squall passed.

It went east the way small squalls went, carrying its weight with it and leaving the air behind it disturbed and light. Spindle's compensation caught up with the sudden absence of pressure and overcorrected, and wer rose three meters in a rush that left wer field ringing.

The channel was still open. Spindle closed it then, because there was nothing left in wer to send.

They hung in the air the squall had left, the old still above and the young draw below. For a long time neither of them pulsed anything.

Rime's white came back first. It came back faint, in increments, as the reserves climbed past the level where mist was a thing a field could afford. Spindle's gold didn't come back at all for most of an hour.

When it did, it came back dim.

You spent under your own line,

Rime said.

I had it to spend.

You had it to stay up with, and you spent it on me. If that squall had been twice the size, I'd be falling with a dead draw under me.

It wasn't twice the size.

You didn't know that when you opened the channel.

Spindle held the question. It was a real one, and it would not close, and wer could feel the gold carrying it dim the way it carried all the questions about why.

I knew you were falling,

wer said.

That's not the same thing.

It's the only thing I knew.

Rime's white held steady. Then the old still turned south and started moving again at the slow level pace. Spindle followed, and neither of them said another word about it that day or the next.

* * *

On the seventh day, the shoal found them.

Spindle read it first: eight small bright signatures at the far edge of wer range, northwest, moving in the loose coordination of fields that always traveled together. Their charge ran hot. Fields that ran that

hot were feeding well, and nothing in the middle layer this far south fed eight fields that well.

What are those,

Spindle said.

Rime read them. The old still's field went quiet in a way Spindle had never felt from it, a quiet that took effort.

Shoal. Scavengers.

What do they eat.

Rime did not answer that one. Rime did not have to.

The shoal did not come closer. It held at range, northwest, matching their pace south, and when Spindle and Rime stopped to feed at a weak gradient on the eighth morning, the shoal stopped too. It hung at the edge of reading range for the whole feed.

They're following us,

Spindle said.

They're following me.

Spindle read the old still and saw what the shoal was reading. Rime's reserves had not recovered from the squall, the frost-white was thin, and the buoyancy corrections were running a hair high, the signature of a field working harder than the air required. To eight fields that lived on what failing fields left behind, that signature said soon.

The gold dimmed. It stayed dim.

What do they do if you're not weak.

Go and find somebody who is.

Spindle checked wer own reserves. They were low; the squall had cost what it cost, and the thin gradients of the middle layer had not given it back. But wer was a draw, and draws ran high, and even under wer own line wer field put out the bright busy signature of a young field that spent because spending was what it did.

Wer moved to Rime's eastern side, the side away from the shoal, and opened the channel.

Don't,

Rime said.

I'm not feeding you. I'm lighting you.

It took wer a while to get it right. Feeding Rime meant pushing charge deep into the old still's reserves, where the scaffold could use it. This was different: wer pushed the charge into Rime's outer layer and held it there at the boundary, where the mist ran and where a reading field's sensors would land first.

The frost-white came up. It was never going to be bright, but it ran steady, the even white of a field that could afford its own mist. Rime's buoyancy corrections, fed from the outside in, smoothed to a healthy rate.

Spindle held it all afternoon. The gold went out halfway through, because there was not enough left in wer to run it and the boundary charge both, and wer chose the boundary charge without a second's thought.

The shoal hung at range. At the end of the pressure cycle it drew together, the eight signatures closing up into a tighter knot while they read the air, and then they went west, fast, sliding off the edge of Spindle's range toward whatever the west had to offer them.

Spindle closed the channel.

Wer was lower than wer had ever been. Wer could feel the cold in wer own field-edge now, the boundary spending less on itself, the first thing wer had ever learned about Rime happening to wer.

You're a fool,

Rime said.

The pulse had no anger in it.

Did it work,

Spindle said.

It worked.

Then I'm a fool who's right.

Rime fed wer that night. Rime fed wrong, too late on the gradient, catching the tail, and then opened a channel at Spindle's edge anyway, a thin cold line of charge that was more than the old still could spare. Spindle let it come in and said nothing, and for the first time wer felt what Rime had felt on the dome every cycle wer had done it.

* * *

Spindle felt the boundary before wer sensors resolved it.

It came up from below as a pressure that was neither turbulent nor quiet, a steady push against the underside of wer membrane, and then it came up as warmth. The dome had been warm the way a crowd was warm. This warmth came from under the whole world, from a sea of storm discharging without stopping, and it pressed on every part of the membrane at once.

Wer outer sensors ran warm without wer feeding at all.

Rime was right,

wer said, to the air.

Rime was below wer and a little behind, moving at the slow level pace for the last few hundred meters. When the old still reached the boundary's upper edge, wer stopped moving altogether. Spindle read Rime's field let go of the buoyancy work, all of it, for the first time in ten days, and the boundary's charge came up through the membrane and held the old still exactly where wer was.

The frost-white came back without anyone lighting it.

You can rest,

Spindle said.

I am resting.

They had come down on the eastern reach of the boundary, east of everything. West, at the far edge of Spindle's range, a formation of fields was spread along the boundary in a long line, holding positions so exact that wer read the pattern before wer read the fields. There were twelve of them with their nets extended downward and the spacing tight, and one field at the formation's eastern end was sending pulses the others answered.

Who are they,

Spindle said.

A harvest. Some flock that works this edge. They were here when I came, or ones like them.

Should we go to them.

You can go. I'm staying where I am.

Spindle looked west at the twelve and did not go.

Wer could not have said exactly why, except that wer had not been asked. A draw's field pulled toward others; that was what draw meant. But it pulled toward others who had a place in them for wer,

and the formation's tight exact spacing had no place in it for anyone, and wer could read that from here.

Draws don't go where they're not welcome,

wer said.

Who told you that.

Nobody. Every draw knows it.

Rime didn't answer. The old still rested, the boundary held wer, and the warmth came up through both of them.

* * *

The boundary fed Spindle back up in a day.

Wer had never fed like it. The charge came up off the Thundersea in discharges wer could feel building below the boundary and breaking through it. Between the big events, lateral charges ran along the edge in long thin currents, and a young draw at the eastern end of everything could extend into any of them and come back full.

The gold came back bright. The questions came back with it, faster than they had come since the dome.

Why do the lateral charges come from the east and never the west. How deep does the sea go under the boundary. Do the fields in the formation ever go down into it.

Rime answered none of them. Rime was resting.

The small still was the other thing Spindle read that first day.

It held at the eastern margin of the formation's catch, a single field, colorless, feeding on what scattered east of the line. It was not part of the formation and showed no sign of wanting to be. Spindle would have let it go as one more feature of the edge, except that it fed strangely.

Other fields fed by opening the membrane to a gradient and drawing it in. This one did that, but it also pushed its membrane out into the turbulence ahead of a discharge and let it bend, and the bend carried charge into it faster than any gradient Spindle had ever touched. When it worked, the colorless mist went blue at the edge.

What is it doing.

The question dimmed the gold, and the gold stayed dim. Spindle could feel the shape of the answer without being able to reach it, and that was the worst kind of open question, the kind that was almost closed.

Spindle fed Rime anyway. Wer opened the channel at the old still's edge that morning and that evening, and the charge went into Rime's reserves, and the reserves held it for a while and then let it go, a little faster each time.

It took Spindle until the second evening to read what that meant.

The boundary had been holding Rime up since they arrived. The old still's field had let go of the buoyancy work entirely, and in letting go of that it had let go of other work too. The scaffold maintenance was slowing, and the membrane calibration with it.

Nothing was wrong. Nothing was failing. Rime's field was stopping the way a field stopped when nothing was making it go on.

You knew,

Spindle said.

I told you. I want to rest somewhere it doesn't cost.

You said rest.

This is resting.

The gold dimmed. It did not go out, and wer did not take it down; wer let it run dim at wer edges where Rime could read it. Rime read it, and the frost-white leaned toward wer by a hair.

Ask me one,

Rime said.

What.

One of your questions. I've been letting them go all this way. Ask me one and I'll answer it.

Spindle had a hundred of them. Wer held them all up and looked at them, and every one was wrong, about the sea and the current and the formation and the crystal and the small still going blue.

Why does giving feel better than holding,

wer said.

The old still was quiet so long that Spindle thought wer had stopped.

I don't know. I'm a still. Ask a draw.

You're the one I'm asking.

Then I'll tell you what it's like from this end.

The pause again, longer.

Warm,

Rime said.

The gold did not brighten. The question stayed open, and Spindle held it open and did not mind.

* * *

Rime died on the second night at the boundary.

There was no moment Spindle could point to afterward. The frost-white thinned through the cold half of the rhythm, and the old still's field went quieter. Some time before the discharge cycle began building again, the field that had been Rime was a residue in warm air, held up by the boundary the way it had held up the living field.

Spindle stayed beside it.

Wer kept the channel open for a while. Wer knew it was pointless and kept it open anyway, the thin line of charge going out from wer reserve into a boundary that did not need it and a residue that could not use it.

Then wer closed it, because Rime would have told wer to.

The residue held for most of the next day, and Spindle read it the whole time. Wer read the old chemistry, the cloudbank ammonia, the faint deeper trace from a boundary trip made before Bellows was elder. Under all of that, faint, was the warm trace wer had seen in Rime's mist only once, at the dome's edge, when Rime talked about this place.

A lateral charge came along the edge in the evening, out of the east, and passed through. When it had gone, the residue had gone with it.

Vent clean,

Spindle said.

It was the wrong thing to say. It was the only thing wer had.

* * *

Wer did not go north.

Wer meant to. The flock would be at the northern grounds by now, or past them, following the grounds the way Bellows said, and a draw with good sensors and a full reserve could find a flock that

size in a week of searching. Spindle held that plan every morning, and fed at the boundary, and did not go.

Wer read the edge instead.

The lateral charges were the part of the boundary nobody wanted. The formation to the west fed on the big vertical discharges coming up through the boundary from below. The long thin laterals ran along the edge between them, east to west, and the formation caught whatever it happened to catch of them without changing anything.

Spindle, at the eastern end, felt every one of them first.

It was not hard, for wer. A long way out, a lateral put a faint stutter into the ambient charge distribution, a skew at the bottom edge of what most sensors could resolve. Spindle's sensors resolved it, and wer could feel a lateral coming when it was still three kilometers out and sit and wait for it to arrive.

Why do they always come from the east.

The question went into the air and nobody caught it. The gold dimmed and carried it.

On the first morning alone, wer did a thing wer did not entirely decide to do. A lateral was coming, a strong one with the skew sharp and early, and the formation to the west had its nets turned down toward the vertical discharge. Spindle sent a pulse along the boundary toward them, small and directional and not addressed to anyone.

East. Lateral. Coming.

Nobody answered. The current came and ran along the formation's line, and the nets caught what they caught of it.

Wer did it again the next time, and the next. Nobody answered any of them.

On the second day alone, the field at the formation's eastern end came east.

Spindle read wer coming from a long way off. The field was compact and careful, wer mist a deliberate gray, and wer moved along the boundary at the pace of a field who had a task and was performing it. The task was Spindle.

The gray field stopped at a distance that was polite and no closer. Wer read Spindle once, fast and thorough.

You're flagging the laterals,

the gray field said.

Yes.

How far out do you read them.

Three kilometers. More, if they're strong.

The gray did not change. Spindle could not read anything under it; the field had decided what it showed, and what it showed was gray.

We read them at a kilometer and a half from the eastern edge. Keep flagging.

Can I...

The gray field had already turned west.

Spindle carried the rest of the question in wer field for a long time after the gray field had gone. Can I come closer, can I feed with you, is there a place in that line for a draw.

Wer had not been asked. Wer stayed east.

The gold came up anyway, a little. Keep flagging was not a welcome, but it was not nothing, and a draw could live on not nothing for a while.

Wer was not the only one reading the small still. At the formation's western end, as far from the scatter zone as the line went, an amber-misted surge fed on the vertical discharge with the rest of the formation, and between discharges the surge's sensors turned east. The amber field was reading the small still every cycle, the way Spindle was, and the small still gave no sign that it knew.

Two of us,

Spindle said, into the air.

Nobody heard that one either.

* * *

On the third day alone, the formation grew.

Spindle read seven new fields come up out of the Thundersea itself, through the boundary from below, and take positions in the line. Nineteen now. The gray field at the eastern end was pulsing faster and finer, the adjustments coming in a rhythm Spindle could feel from three kilometers off, and the nets turned down toward the boundary in a pattern more complicated than any wer had seen them hold.

They were getting ready for a big one from below.

Spindle was reading east.

Wer always read east; that was where the laterals came from, and that was what wer was for now, as far as wer was for anything. The skew came into the distribution at the bottom of wer range, the faint early stutter, and Spindle started to send the usual small pulse.

The skew was wrong.

It was too sharp and coming too fast, and it had no thin edge anywhere. It was a wall, a lateral so large its leading edge was bending the ambient field kilometers ahead of itself.

East. Lateral. Big. Now.

Spindle pulsed it as hard as wer had ever pulsed anything.

The pulse reached the formation's eastern end in the same instant the gray field's own reading found the wall. Spindle felt the two land together, wer warning and the gray field's knowledge, and there was nothing in the warning the gray field did not already have.

The gray field was signaling. Spindle read the reconfiguration go out, the nets ordered from vertical to horizontal, and read it reach the fields along the line. It reached the two fields nearest the eastern end last, because they were turned all the way down toward the boundary with their attention on the discharge below.

They had a second.

The current hit the eastern end of the line.

Spindle read the two eastern fields' extensions take the lateral force side-on, at the one angle they could not bend in, and fold the wrong way. It was faster than any field losing coherence, a boundary turned inside out in the time it took the current's front to pass, and then the two signatures Spindle had read every day since the boundary were not there.

Wer had never known their names.

The small still was there.

It had been extended east into the turbulence ahead of the discharge, the way it always was at the scatter zone. The current hit its membrane, and the membrane bent.

Spindle read it bend. The colorless field went north-northeast at a speed no field that size should have had, out across the current's track instead of along it, with the blue blazing at its edge. It came out on the far side in quiet air, its reserves running higher than they had been before the current arrived.

The current ran west along the line and broke up into the cloudbank above, and the boundary settled into the rough agitated air that came after.

Spindle held where wer was.

Wer field had pulled in tight, the way it had pulled in when Rime said south. The gold was out. Wer had not taken it down; it had gone down on its own.

Wer read the formation, seventeen now, running its checks. Wer read the gray field moving down the line. Wer read the amber surge leave its place at the far western end and come east, the whole length of the formation, to where the small still was coming back down to the boundary.

Then Spindle read the place where the two eastern fields had been.

Nothing was there. The current had taken even the residue.

Why those two.

The question went into the air. The gold did not come back to carry it, and it went nowhere.

If I'd been farther east.

That one stayed. Wer could feel it sitting in wer field with nowhere to go, heavy, the same weight as the Thundersea's place in wer encoding, a thing laid down at high amplitude by someone who wanted it to last. Wer had laid it down werself.

* * *

Wer moved east the next morning, two kilometers farther along the boundary, past the end of anything.

It was colder out there and the charge was thinner, and a draw alone felt more alone at the end of everything than at the end of something. But from there wer could read the laterals at five kilometers. Wer flagged every one of them, small and steady, the same three pulses each time. Nobody answered, and wer didn't need them to.

The small still and the amber surge were together at the scatter zone most of that day, and the next.

Spindle read them from five kilometers, then from four, then from closer than wer had meant to come. Wer kept the laterals as wer reason. The amber surge was pressing on the small still's membrane with its own field-edge, a slow careful pressure, finding the place where the membrane pushed back, backing off, and trying a new angle.

They were mapping the bend from both sides.

Wer did not go closer. Wer sensors were good enough, and on the third day wer watched the amber field extend into the post-harvest turbulence and do the small still's trick, and do it differently. The amber field went out slowly and came back fast.

Slow out, fast back,

Spindle said to the air.

The gold came up bright all at once. The question that had been almost closed for days was closed.

The small still tried it. The blue came up cleaner.

Spindle was a long way off, and the small still and the amber surge had no idea wer had read any of it. The gold ran bright at wer edges anyway, for nobody.

That evening the two of them were still together at the scatter zone, and the shape of them had changed.

Spindle could not read the content of their pulses from where wer held, and wer did not need to. A draw read a group by where it pulled. The small still and the amber surge had stopped pulling toward the formation and the boundary and the scatter zone, and they were pulling south, the way Rime had pulled south at the dome's edge with the whole flock still around wer.

They were going somewhere. Spindle knew it the way wer had known Rime was going.

The gold dimmed. It was not a question this time, and wer did not know what it was.

The touch came while wer was still holding that.

It came from the scatter zone, from the small still, a long reach across the dark agitated air after the harvest. It was a field-touch of the plainest kind, with no greeting in it and no summons, the kind Spindle had sent Rime every cycle on the dome, and it asked nothing.

It said, as plainly as a touch could say anything, that the small still had read wer out there all along. It did not need wer to explain werself. Wer could come, if wer wanted to.

Spindle held it.

Wer had built a dozen arguments once, for Bellows, and had needed none of them. Wer had a hundred questions now, about the bend and the sea and the south, and the two fields that had folded the wrong way, and why the small still had been alone at the scatter zone with no flock anywhere around it. None of them was the answer.

The gold came up all at once, and wer did not hold it down.

Yes. Obviously. When do we leave.

Wer was already moving west.

The World of Cloudborn

Who is who, when things happen, where they happen, and the words aeriforms use. Everything here comes from the novel, and nothing here gives away where Silt ends up.

The Main Characters

Aeriforms come in three types: surges, stills and draws. The novel calls every one of them wer, except Silt, who is it.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Silt	A young still, torn from its birth-flock by a nursery-shear and left alone in the middle cloudbank. Colorless mist that runs blue at the edge when it works a problem. Carries a broken skein it found spinning in an ammonia eddy.
The flock-elder	Elder of Silt's birth-flock of forty-three. Wer pulse, All rise well, was the first thing Silt ever said.
Watcher	The field at the eastern edge of the harvest formation on the Thundersea boundary. Reads the boundary before anyone else can and runs the formation's net. Gray mist, chosen and held.
Ironseam	An amber-misted surge and metalkeeper with three hundred years of route-skeins behind wer. Holds the formation's western edge. Answers about one question in four. Carries one sealed skein and never opens it.
Spindle	A young draw with pale gold mist that brightens when a question closes and dims when one opens. Charge always a little above need, sensors sharper than most, and roughly nine hundred questions in three days.
Brackwater	An older draw of the Chorus and its chemical navigator. Wer electromagnetic sensing is slowly failing, so wer reads the world by its chemistry.
Fillament	A draw of the Chorus and its most exacting thinker. Lives in the middle of a problem.
Drawstring	A Chorus field who has argued for a direct approach to the Thundersea since long before Silt arrived.
Threadneedle	A lone young draw with silver mist, met on the way down, with no flock, no skein and no name.
Ashwing	Leader of a long-settled flock of thirty-seven. Deep amber mist, unhurried, and the keeper of a carefully measured calculation.

In this story only

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Rime	An old still of Spindle's birth-flock, frost-white mist, always feeding late at the edge of the dome. Went to the Thundersea boundary once, long ago.
Bellows	Elder surge of Spindle's birth-flock of thirty in the southern cloudbank. Answers perhaps one question in ten.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Before the last major storm reorganization	A flock, long since gone, makes the skein that Silt will one day carry. It holds maps, routes, the Draft and the Deep Hymn.
Two storm-cycles before the novel	The survey-flock goes below the Thundersea to test the Deep Hymn. Its three maps are sent out before its signals stop. Two reach the Chorus. The third is lost.
Day 1	The nursery-shear. Silt falls three hundred meters, sends seven greeting-pulses, and hears nothing back.
Day 3	Silt finds the broken skein in an ammonia eddy and binds it on the third attempt.
Day 11	Silt's charge crosses the uncomfortable threshold.
Day 14	Caught in a storm's charge-wake, Silt's membrane yields, and charge-kiting is born.
The days after	A scavenger shoal strips a dead surge's skein while Silt watches. Then, in a small squall, a surge steals a lifeline from a young still and the atmosphere does not notice.
Day 23	The thread wakes in the skein's deepest layer. The corridor's window will open in about fifty days.
Three days later	Silt reaches the Thundersea boundary, where Watcher's formation of twelve is harvesting. Silt feeds in the scatter zone east of the line.
Same season, farther north	Vent Clean: Spindle leaves wer flock to take Rime ten days south to the boundary, through a squall and past a scavenger shoal.
Twelfth day at the boundary	The formation grows to nineteen. A ring-current surge comes in from the east and two fields invert. Silt kites it and comes out with more charge than it went in with.
The next three days	Ironseam studies Silt's technique and corrects it: slow out, fast back.
The third evening	Ironseam's route meets Silt's thread. Silt sends a field-touch to the draw at the eastern edge. Spindle answers at once.
Three days later	After a resupply on the boundary's eastern gradient, Silt, Ironseam and Spindle turn south.

Places

PLACE	WHAT IT IS
The Sunskin	The thin, irradiated top of the atmosphere.
The ammonia deck	The ammonia crystal layer above the cloudbanks.
The cloudbanks	Layered cloud where most flocks live and feed. Silt's birth-flock rode an upwelling here, and Spindle's flock fed on one in the south.
The middle layer	The cloudbank layer where the nursery-shear dropped Silt. Thin gradients, slow southward current.
The Thundersea	The storm layer below the cloudbanks, discharging without stopping. Cloudbank elders warn the young away from it.
The Thundersea boundary	The upper edge of the storm layer, so rich in ambient charge that a field can rest there without spending. Harvest formations work it. The novel also calls it the Charge Shelf.
The scatter zone	The eastern margin of the harvest net, where the charge the formation misses scatters.
The pressure trench	A long trench of air walled by cloudmass on the route south. A leviathan passes through it.
The pressure collar	The turbulent band where the cloudbanks' organized layers meet the Thundersea's churn.
The Mire	A polymer fog belt that drifts and swallows every sense but infrasound.
The corridor	A route the thread describes below the Thundersea, open only when three conditions align, and only for three days.
The stable layer	The place the Deep Hymn promises: below the storm, a layer where the pattern does not tear.

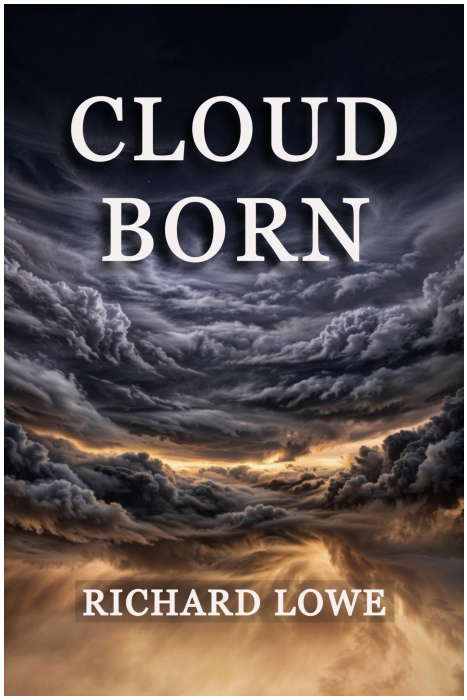
Glossary

WORD	MEANING
Aeriform	A living electromagnetic field: a membrane around a scaffold, fed on charge.
Surge	A field type with an outward bias, occupying space actively. Ironseam, Bellows.
Still	A field type in neutral equilibrium. Silt, Rime.
Draw	A field type of connective, inward-pulling charge, never quite singular. Spindle, Brackwater, Fillament, Threadneedle.
Mist	The colored output at a field's edge. Young fields show everything in it; old ones choose what it shows.
Membrane	A field's outer boundary. It can bend to a force, resist it, or, struck side-on, invert.

Inversion	A membrane folded the wrong way by a force it cannot bend with. An inverted field does not recover.
Gradient	An electrical difference between layers of air that a field feeds from.
Upwelling	A warm rising column of air. Flocks ride its dome.
Pressure cycle	The daily rhythm of a gradient building, peaking and discharging.
Storm-cycle	A long span of time, the unit the oldest records are kept in.
The Cold	The low-charge season. It has been arriving earlier every cycle.
Greeting-pulse	The low even signal that means I am here.
Field-touch	Direct contact between two fields. Can carry an invitation that asks for nothing.
Lifeline	Charge passed between fields. The Draft forbids stealing one in a storm.
Skein	A dense metal lattice that holds information: maps, routes, laws, history.
Coil	A sealed section inside a skein whose content cannot be read from outside.
Presence-ghost	The faint impression of a field left in a skein it helped make.
Metalkeeper	The field who carries and keeps a group's route-skeins.
Nursery-shear	A sudden lateral pressure wall that breaks a flock's collective field.
Charge-wake	The electromagnetic turbulence a storm throws out ahead of itself.
Charge-kiting	Silt's technique: let the membrane yield to a moving charge and ride it, feeding as it goes.
Ring-current	Lateral charge running along the Thundersea boundary, east to west in this region. Most of it is thin; a surge of it can kill.
Scavenger shoal	A tight group of small, bright, well-fed fields that live on the dead and the failing.
Leviathan	A vast rotating magnetic presence that feeds on charge differential at scale.
The Draft	The old law carried in Silt's skein. Never steal a lifeline in a storm. The atmosphere is shared.
The Deep Hymn	A belief held by many fields who never tested it: below the storm there is a stable layer.
The thread	The survey-flock's third map, found in the deepest layer of Silt's skein.
The Chorus	Thirty-one fields who hold route-knowledge in fragments and join in pulse-sessions to read it whole.
Vent clean	An old cloudbank saying for an upwelling whose mouth runs clear of crystal. It means: this is right.

Read the Novel

Spindle gives charge away because giving feels better than holding, and wer will not go where wer is not welcome. In Cloudborn, a small still named Silt, torn from its flock by a nursery-shear, carries a broken skein south toward the Thundersea and the stable layer the Deep Hymn promises beneath it. The draw at the eastern edge is about to be asked along.



Cloudborn

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