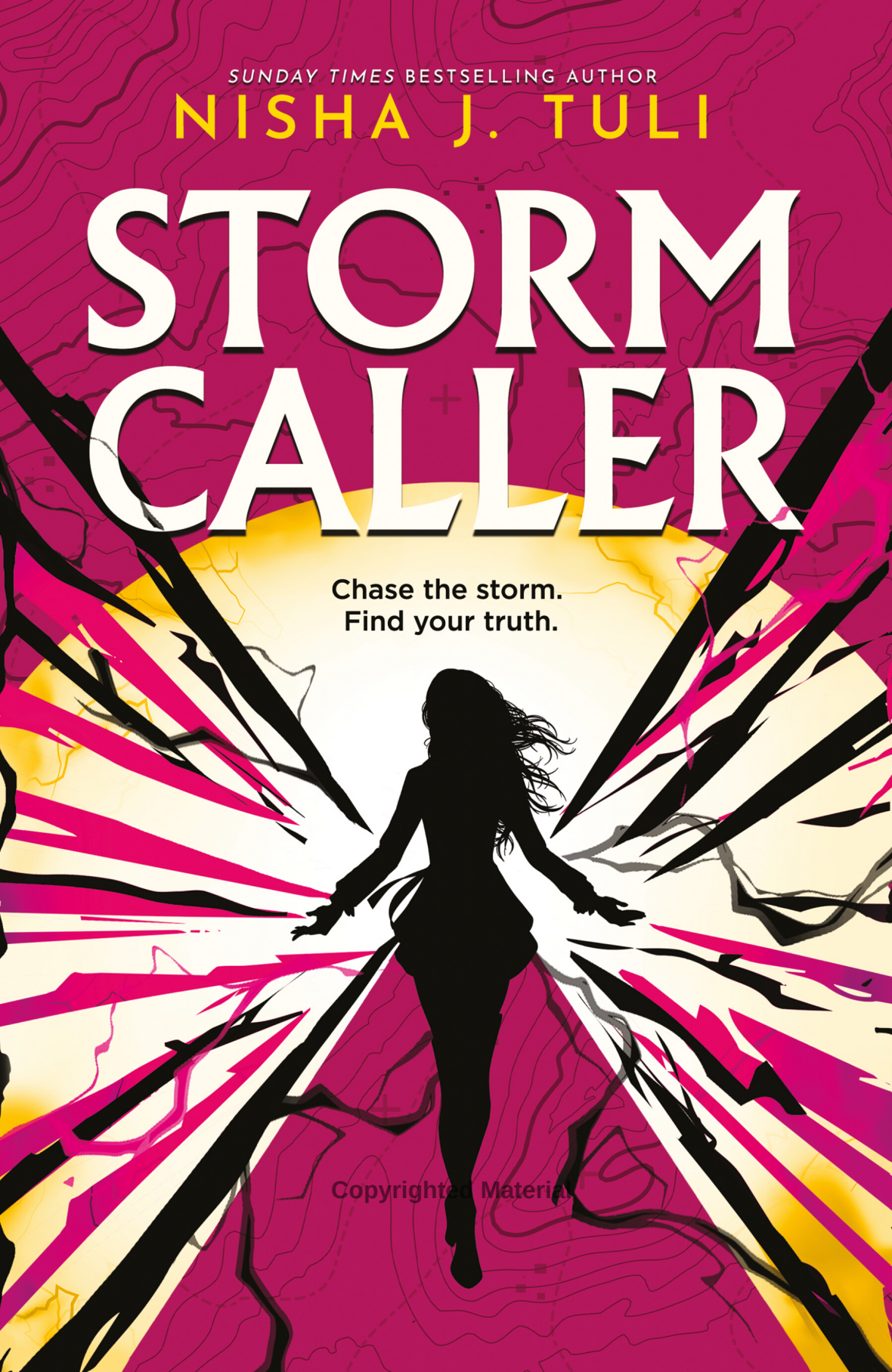

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Storm Caller is a pulse-pounding dystopian novel set in a glittering, storm-wrecked Manhattan where the elite rule through legacy—and one forbidden romance could tear it apart. It includes elements regarding combat, injury, death, family death, hospitalization, abduction, imprisonment, loss of autonomy, electrocution, alcohol use, drugging, vomiting, classism, graphic language, and consensual sexual activities that are shown on the page. Discussions of parental abuse and narcissism are also present. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and prepare to enter the Wastes . . .

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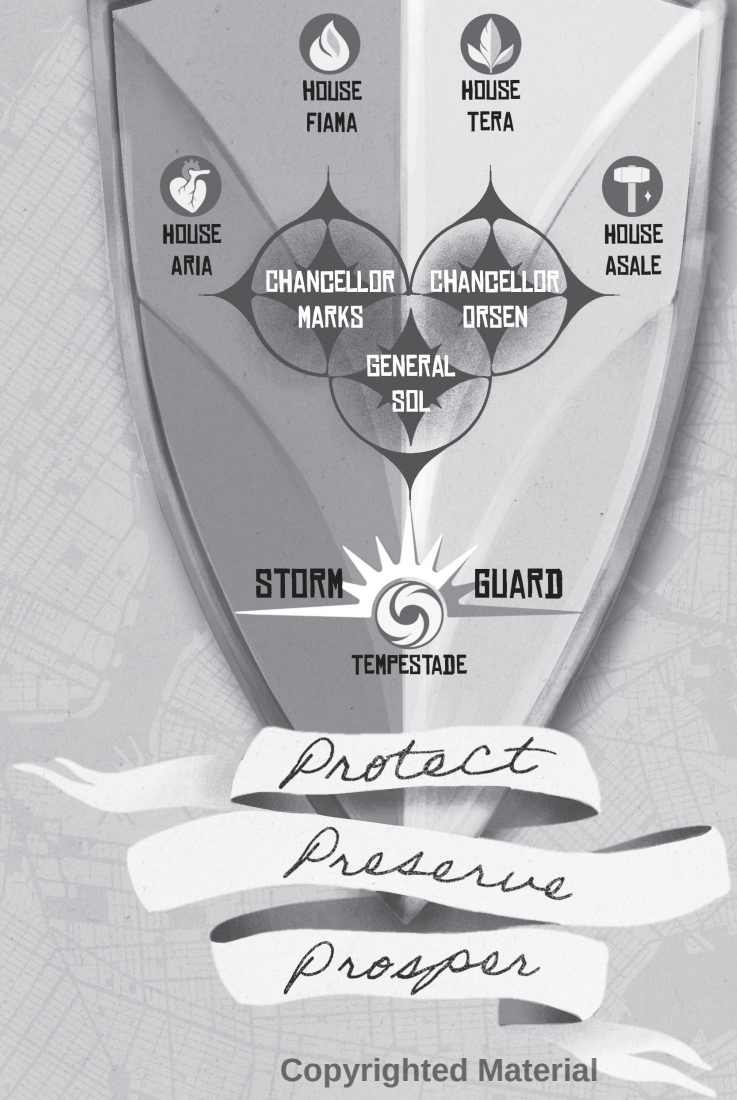
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To everyone who's found closure,
even if it wasn't the ending you hoped for

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THE SOCIETY OF THE SHIELD



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Previously in the Storm Breaker series

New Manhattan, a world plagued by deadly storms, is governed by The Shield and four ruling Houses. Nineteen-year-old Poet Graves, heir of House Fiama, will soon enter Amery Academy to officially pledge her House after a series of trials. She's also harboring a secret that could get her killed: known as a Keeper, she can touch the storms without being harmed. Due to the tendency of Keepers to eventually lose their minds and lash out in violence, they're hunted down and "taken care of" by the Extinguishers.

At Amery, Poet is drawn to Rook Athira, a Solitude from the Wastes. Poet completes her trials, but things don't go as planned. Instead of pledging to House Fiama, she commits to the rival House Aria, resulting in estrangement from her family and fiancé. During her training to become a Storm Breaker, Poet discovers that Rook is also a Keeper. The connection brings them closer together, even while Keepers are blamed for a series of murders plaguing the city. As the school year comes to a close, Poet and Rook are determined to keep themselves out of the Extinguishers' hands. They devise a plan to break into The Shield's offices, hoping to find information that might save them.

At the year-end masquerade, Poet's best friend exposes her as a Keeper. During the ensuing chaos and break-in, security footage reveals three shocking truths: Poet's brother, Raine, didn't die in a Solitude attack as previously assumed; Rook was there the night of the attack; and General Sol took Raine's body. Rook convinces Poet she is no longer safe in New Manhattan. Despite the secrets he's been keeping from her, Poet has no choice but to agree, and they escape to the Wastes, where they're arrested by a group of Solitudes.

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1

When I broke into The Shield's high-security tower to access sensitive information and then fled the city of my birth, I was fully prepared to be arrested.

In fact, I was prepared for a wide range of unpleasant consequences.

In hindsight, a little jail time would have qualified as the least surprising thing to happen in the past twenty-four hours.

What I *didn't* expect was being arrested in the Wastes.

"Hands up," says a petite woman in her twenties who's just found Rook and me huddled together on the hard ground where we collapsed a few hours ago.

He's pale and sweaty, and he winces as he shifts beside me. I eye the dark spot on his shirt where he was bleeding profusely before I stitched him up.

The woman stalks over. She's slender but muscular. Not an ounce of softness, from her angled features to her thick chestnut hair twisted into a tight braid. At first, I mistook her clothing for tactical gear, but the molded leather and crisscrossed stitching look more like armor I've seen in old images from the Warming Age.

To complete her intimidating look, thick black makeup is smudged around her narrowed blue eyes.

She's beautiful. Fearsome. And definitely pissed.

"What are you doing so far from home, Athira?" she snarls, planting a hand on her hip.

Rook's only answer is a groan as his eyes slide shut and he slowly lies back.

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"He's hurt," I say, as if that isn't obvious, while I mentally deal with the fact that she knows Rook.

Less than a day ago, we escaped the halls of Amery Academy and New Manhattan through a network of underground tunnels beneath the city. Now we're in the Wastes, the tunnel collapsed behind us, and Knox—

I swallow.

I was so sick of his shit, but knowing he might be dead is harder than I might have expected. We shared a history despite everything, and I wouldn't have wished that fate on anyone. Not even him.

The woman's brow arches as she takes in the blood coating Rook's skin and ruined shirt, along with the dried, rust-colored streaks covering my hands.

She sighs and gestures behind her. "Vess, come deal with this, will you?"

We're surrounded by a dozen people in combat boots and more of the same leather gear, their eyes also ringed with black, making them look like ghostly apparitions. Everyone is armed with knives and the occasional stunner.

Or rather, something close to the stunners I'm used to, but with some alterations that I suspect make all the difference in how they incapacitate. Instead of sleek white alloy, these are dark, shiny metal and honed into sharper angles.

A woman peels off from the crowd. She's lightly tanned with dark-blond hair pinned into a neat bun. She's dressed a lot like the first woman, but in brown leather instead of black. She stops and contemplates Rook.

"What do you want me to do?" she asks. "Ease his death?"

I exhale a squeak of protest, but the first woman interrupts me. "Get him fit for travel. We're taking him with us."

I'm not sure if that option is any better.

Vess drops her backpack, kneels on the cracked earth, and starts pulling out various medical supplies, setting each object in a neat row on a thin patch of parched grass.

When she reaches for Rook, I shift instinctively, blocking her hand. I have no idea who these people are. They might know Rook, but they don't seem all that friendly.

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Vess sits back on her heels and rolls her eyes. "You wanna deal with this, Calliope?"

The first woman crosses her arms and spreads her stance.

"Let her help him," Calliope sneers at me, her tone devoid of patience or concern.

My teeth clench as I stare about the circle again. Rook's breathing has turned labored, sawing in and out of him like wet marbles.

"Okay," I whisper, curling my hands into fists on my thighs.

"That's a good girl," Calliope says as Vess lifts Rook's shirt to reveal the bandage I applied.

I recall the moment Knox swung at me. The flashing blade in his hand. I replay it in my head, trying to figure out when exactly Rook was hit.

All I know is that he tried to protect me.

And I'm not sure what to do with that.

Vess peels away the bandages, exposing the hastily stitched wound.

"Who did this?" she asks, obvious displeasure crumpling her expression.

"I did," I admit.

She peers over, scanning me up and down.

I wait for her to laugh and tell me I'm a joke, but she turns away and sets to work, carefully snipping and then removing the crooked, bloodied threads.

Calliope makes a tutting sound, prompting me to look up. She's glaring at Rook with a mixture of disdain and amusement.

"Looking a little rough, isn't he?" she mocks, earning a laugh from the others. "Life among the Crusts not all you expected it to be, Rooky-dear?"

The *Crusts*?

Rook's lashes flutter again, his bleary-eyed gaze landing on Calliope.

"Fuck . . . off," he gasps as more laughter circles around the clearing.

Her eyes narrow as they shift to me. "And you brought one with you . . ."

I wince at the venom in her tone. It's obvious she already hates me.

While Vess cleans up, re-stitches, and bandages Rook's wound, I study the rest of the group. Their strange leather armor is draped with strategically placed pieces of cloth around their hips and shoulders, but I recognize some of what they're wearing: a navy tactical vest just like the Patrol uses, a shiny purple Storm Guard harness.

They've been stealing from New Manhattan.

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Exactly like The Shield always warned us.

When a tall man with a shaved head notices me staring, he gives me an

icy look, his hand sliding down the length of the stunner gripped in his large hands. His finger curls around the trigger.

I wish Rook were in better shape. Not only because I'm terrified for him, but so he could tell me who the fuck these people are and what's about to happen to us.

We're obviously in danger.

But just how much?

Silence buzzes through the clearing while Vess finishes tending to Rook. His skin is still pale and slick with sweat, but at least he isn't bleeding anymore. She opens a case filled with clear glass vials, draws a dose into an injection canister, and before I can object, stabs him in the pectoral.

Rook's entire frame tenses before he relaxes with a soft *woosh*. His eyes open again, finding mine for a second before his head rolls back.

"Can he walk?" Calliope asks.

"This will help with the pain," Vess answers. "Give him about thirty minutes."

"He can't walk! Look at him!" I object without entirely meaning to.

Every eye in the clearing swivels toward me, and I want to shrink into a tiny mote of dust.

"Do *you* want to carry him, *Crust*?" Calliope asks, hurling the word "crust" like it's something covered in shit attached to the heel of her boot. "Because we sure as fuck aren't doing it."

I glance at Rook. I'd be more than willing to carry him, but we wouldn't get far.

His eyes have drifted open again, clearer now. Whatever Vess gave him is stirring him back to life.

Calliope drops to her haunches next to Rook before clasping her hands. "I don't allow Crusts through my tunnels, Athira. You know that."

His mouth presses together, annoyance flashing over his expression along with a wince of pain.

"Allow me to beg your forgiveness," he answers, somehow making it sound impertinent despite how hard he's struggling to get the words out.

It feels a little reckless, given our current predicament.

Calliope smirks and gestures to the tall man with the shaved head who silently threatened me a moment ago. "August, get her up," she orders.

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August steps out of the circle and approaches me on sure feet. He's even

taller up close, with bronzed skin and hints of sun damage on the high points of his cheeks. Gray eyes bore into me as he clasps my elbow and drags me up.

I stumble up, nearly crashing into his large frame as my knees give out. My limbs are still wobbly from the stunner blast in the Amery basement, and it can't have been more than a few hours since I regained feeling in my fingers and toes.

August lifts me like I'm filled with straw, setting me heavily on my feet with an irritated grunt.

"I'm up, I'm up," I insist, wrenching my arm from his grasp and just barely managing to keep my balance.

"Him next," Calliope says, pointing to Rook.

August reaches down and grabs Rook by the biceps, pulling him up without being too gentle about it. I wince as Rook groans, but he manages to stagger to his feet, his hair falling into his eyes. It hasn't been the thirty minutes Vess said he needed, but I'd wager Calliope hardly cares about that.

Rook hunches over, hands planted on his knees as he sucks in deep breaths.

"Are you okay?" I ask, and he shakes his head.

Calliope scoffs, the corner of her pretty, bow-shaped mouth curling up. "Fuck, she even sounds rich, doesn't she?"

Rook's eyes widen at me as if to say *See, I told you*, bringing me back to the night we first kissed outside the ballroom at the Society swearing-in ceremony.

It feels like a lifetime ago.

I'm verging on hysterical, and I nearly bark out an inappropriate laugh. Instead, I roll my lips together, choking it down, and vow to keep my mouth shut until we get away from these people.

If that's even possible.

"What do you want, Cal?" Rook asks, one hand pressed to his side. "If you're taking us to Fisher, do it. Otherwise, we have places to be."

I blink at the casual use of Calliope's shortened name.

Rook obviously knows this woman well enough to speak to her this way. And now that I really look at her, I realize she's closer to our age than I initially thought. Her confidence, combined with her role as the leader of a small army, made her seem older.

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Calliope regards Rook for another cool second. "Where do you think you're going in this state?"

She has a point.

"Cal," Rook says with obvious exasperation. "Do we have to do this?"

She silences him with a scathing look. "Fisher will want to know what you're doing out here and why you're with a Crust."

He opens his mouth, but she cuts him off.

"Save it. I'm not interested in whatever lies you've prepared. He'll get the truth out of you."

It occurs to me then how unprepared I am for this. Am I supposed to keep Rook's time at Amery a secret? They know we came from the city, but what "truth" is he hiding? I recall watching him on that bank of monitors inside Mr. Robins's office. He was searching for something. Something he still hasn't confessed to me.

After I was paralyzed by the stunner, Rook claimed he had things to share.

We exchange a look, and I wish I could read his mind.

Even after all the lies, a fierce surge of protectiveness compels me to keep him safe.

You are the best kind of trouble I've ever found in my life.

His words come back to me with a gut punch. The way he said them with so much affection. Like he feels something I've been too scared to name.

Or maybe I'm a fool to believe a single thing he says.

A firm hand seizes my wrist, and August starts to drag me behind him.

"Hey!" I shrink back, my feet tangling in my skirt. I'm still decked out for the year-end masquerade, though my tattered, bloodstained dress has seen better days. No wonder they're all sneering at me. I look ridiculous. At least I have my boots and leather jacket.

"Get. Your. Hands. Off. Her," Rook snarls, still hunched over and winded, so the threat loses a little of its impact. "I swear to fuck, if you hurt her, I'll gut you from chin to asshole, August. And I'll enjoy every fucking second."

August's eyes flash. His jaw tenses.

Then he releases me.

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I resist the urge to rub my sore wrist, worried about Rook's reaction. He couldn't hurt a flea right now.

Calliope barks out a cruel laugh. "Oh, this is too much. You're protecting a Crust? Fisher will definitely want to hear this."

Rook exhales a heavy sigh. "If you promise not to hurt either of us, we'll come quietly, and I'll talk to him."

I'm not sure why he's trying to negotiate. We clearly have no choice. There are a dozen of them and two of us. Rook is still on death's door, and I feel like I'm about to faint or throw up. Maybe both.

Calliope considers him. "You have the promise of my protection until we reach Station Five," she says. "Alive and mostly intact. That's the offer."

She sweeps her arms around the circle, and everyone begins moving, assembling into a neat, practiced formation with Rook and me corralled at the center. They don't tie us up, probably because there isn't anywhere for us to run. Plus, Rook is in no shape for a speedy escape, and those stunner-like devices would have no problem bringing us down.

Rook glances at me, his lips set into a straight line.

I read the message in his eyes: *keep your mouth shut, head down, trust me.*

Like I have a choice.

"Our bags," Rook croaks.

Calliope rolls her eyes and nods at two of our escorts, a woman and a man who appear to be twins, with tawny skin and amber eyes. They retrieve our packs and sling them over their shoulders.

"Any more demands?" Calliope asks.

Rook shakes his head with a sharp jerk. "Only your protection, as promised. That's all I ask."

She huffs out a derisive snort.

Rook presses a hand to his side as he limps a few steps. I want to help, but I suspect that would only draw more derision.

Then Calliope's voice comes from directly behind me. "*My* protection, sure. But I can't promise anything once Commander Sterling gets his hands on you."

I spin around, planning to demand what *that's* supposed to mean, and all I see is the butt of her weapon swinging at my head.

Then everything goes dark.

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2

When I wake up, I'm rolling across the ground, coming to a stop in the dirt with my head spinning. I stare up at a dusky sky as low conversation and moving bodies blur around me.

Someone kicks my foot. "Get up. We're here."

Here. *Where?*

Rook appears above me a moment later. "Poet," he says, gently touching my forehead. I wince, remembering that Calliope knocked me out.

That witch.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I groan as my temple throbs with a dull ache. "What's going on?"

He helps me sit up, and I scan the horizon. New Manhattan is gone. Someone must have carried me while I was unconscious.

My stomach pitches with an uncomfortable tangle of emotions. Fear. Confusion. Shock. I blink at Rook, remembering all the things he said during our escape.

The promises he made. The warnings.

That's when a low humming buzz seizes my attention. I peer over my shoulder to find a shocking sight—a fence constructed of flickering, silvery light.

Not Spark. Just electricity, I think.

Beyond it, an array of buildings sprawls into the middle distance. They're nothing like the towering monuments of a civilization where I've spent my life. But these structures are squat, sturdy, and permanent, made of metal and wood and glass.

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I blink. There isn't supposed to be anything out here. The Wastes are dead, empty land, filled with nothing.

Clearly, that isn't true.

"Get her up," says Calliope, approaching us.

Rook spreads his arms, shielding me. "Stay the fuck back."

Calliope rolls her eyes and brushes past. The rest of her crew moves to follow, save August, who waits for Rook and me to stand. I'm unsteady on my feet, my head swimming through fog.

"Let's go," August says.

For a moment, I can't.

My stomach dips like I'm teetering on the edge of a cliff.

Another step, and my old life will be gone forever.

"Now," Calliope grits out, suffering no moment for my internal breakdown. I wonder if she senses how close I am to cracking. Maybe she wants to offer a little push for her own personal amusement.

I won't give her the satisfaction.

Rook is moving carefully, still favoring his injury, but at least he doesn't look like he's about to fall over and die. I'll call that an improvement.

We approach a tall metal gate buzzing with electricity. Two large men with short-cropped hair grip a set of those strange stunners as Calliope marches toward them without hesitation. She barely comes up to their chests, and they bend down as she exchanges a few quiet words that I can't make out.

Their gazes find me first, then Rook.

Their eyes widen.

The one on the left bends at the waist in a gesture of respect.

What's going on?

Rook stares straight ahead as I study his profile, confused about so many things. I thought he was just some guy who decided to attend Amery to find a better life, but I'm starting to wonder if I've been mistaken this entire time.

He told me he has superiors. People he reports to.

He told me The Shield was lying.

And now this man is bowing to him.

The questions crowd together, blending into one pulsing mass behind my eyes.

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The man on the left reaches over, flips open a panel, and punches a few

buttons. The energy buzzing across the gate winks out, leaving us a clear passage into the camp.

"Welcome home," he says.

We file through in a single line, electricity sizzling against the vertical poles flanking the entrance.

Dozens of people swarm the compound, dressed in more of the same molded leather armor, paired with pieces of mismatched tactical gear I recognize from New Manhattan.

Calliope gestures for Rook and me to follow, while August dogs my heels like an annoying shadow.

"Where do you think I'm planning to go?" I ask, gesturing to the humming fences surrounding us.

He just grunts.

The rest of our escort scatters, disappearing into the lengthening shadows of the compound's buildings, but several people stop to watch us pass. I wonder how often they welcome newcomers into their fold.

Although *welcome* is maybe a bit too strong a word.

My hands curl at my sides as I resist the urge to fidget, hoping to project an air of confidence, but I'm not sure how well I'm succeeding.

Solitudes.

My entire life, I've been told they're barely human, living scattered across the Wastes, chasing down starving animals for sustenance. But then Rook arrived at Amery and began to dispel that notion, and now I'm faced with the certainty that nothing I've been told was the truth.

They're organized. They've built something that looks like a city. And though it's nothing like New Manhattan, it's also not the wild, barren nothing I expected.

We pass buildings made of corrugated metal and brick. Food smells waft from the largest one, suggesting a cafeteria. Another boasts a red cross hanging out front—a hospital. On top of every building is a network of solar panels, all tipped toward the sky.

At first, I assumed we'd entered a temporary encampment, but the farther we walk, the more I'm convinced this is a home.

This isn't temporary at all. This is something constant.

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Calliope turns a corner, revealing an area filled with small round tents, each with a lantern hanging outside its door. Campfires burn between them,

surrounded by chairs and people holding cups as they converse in low voices punctuated by occasional bursts of laughter.

It's all so . . . cozy.

So simple and yet utterly profound.

All of it was a lie.

What if The Shield was just mistaken? What if things *were* different when General Sol lived in the Wastes? What if they don't know about any of this?

But a kind of certainty roots through my heels, anchoring me to this present and this truth.

We were lied to. Told things about the Solitudes and the Wastes that weren't really true. Taught to fear and shun anything beyond the perimeter of New Manhattan.

The question is why.

As we move deeper into the clearing, the jovial mood dims, and everyone falls silent. August and Calliope nod in greeting, but Rook and I have become the center of attention.

We approach a group standing in front of a larger tent that glows from within. Combined with the soft light from the flickering fence beyond, the scene is quietly beautiful in its own mysterious way.

The group shuffles aside, revealing a man with pale skin, sandy-brown hair, and bright blue eyes. He's perhaps five years older than Rook, handsome in a hard-edged way, with a strong jaw and straight nose. He's nearly as big as Rook, too. Tall and broad in black leather that molds to his form.

"Cal," he says, almost as if he's surprised to see her.

"Fisher," she says, her voice a bit different from earlier. A little softer and higher. More deferent. Breathless.

Immediately, I wonder if she's in love with him.

Fisher.

The same man who's been mentioned a few times.

Commander Sterling.

"We found these two in the Wastes," Calliope reports, her voice tuned to its more familiar snarl. "They used the east tunnel out of New Manhattan. It's gone now."

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Everyone's attention turns to us. From the pins and badges on their

clothing, I can only assume this is a higher-level command group. They vary in age but share the same air of hardness. Of strength forged in the severity of their lives.

Commander Fisher Sterling cocks his head, his gaze finding me first. It slides over my face, my clothes, even my boots, before he looks up to meet my eyes.

"You found a Crust?" he asks, his tone less scathing than curious, like I'm an oddity to be puzzled out.

Calliope snorts. "Trust me, we were all shocked."

Fisher's attention shifts to my left and lands on Rook. He sighs, shaking his head. "Athira. Why doesn't this surprise me at all? What the fuck are you doing here?"

It occurs to me that at least Rook told me his real name, and I derive way too much comfort from that.

Rook raises a brow and smiles. "You know how I just love dropping in."

"You came from the city?" he asks.

Rook doesn't answer, his jaw tight.

Fisher sighs. "Always with the secrets. Does your father know where you are?"

Rook just stands there, arms crossed, never breaking eye contact. It's obvious he won't answer. It seems I'm not the only one Rook keeps things from.

It's pathetic, but that also makes me feel a little better.

"My business doesn't concern you," Rook answers after a long, awkward moment in which I swear no one around us breathes.

Fisher snorts, tucking his thumbs into his belt loops as he saunters closer. "Yet I find myself curious. That's understandable, isn't it?"

He stands toe-to-toe with Rook. Nearly matched in height and size, I notice other similarities around the eyes and mouth. In the shape of their noses. It isn't immediately obvious due to their different coloring, but I'm sure I'm not imagining it.

Who are they to each other?

"Maybe I'll torture the information out of you," Fisher says casually, tipping his head. "Or maybe . . ." His gaze flicks to me. "I'll squeeze it out of her? I bet she screams so nice."

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I'm too shocked to react.

A growl rumbles from Rook's throat, and Fisher's eyes widen before he bursts out laughing, slapping a hand across his chest.

"Oh, Rook," he says, wiping a fake tear from the corner of his eye. "Did you fall for a *Crust*? What will the mighty High Commander Athira say about *that*?"

Who?

Rook exhales a long breath through his nostrils. These two clearly have a history, and it isn't a pleasant one.

"Just let us go," Rook says, teeth gritted. "We aren't here to bother you." He pauses, drops his arms to his sides, loosens his stance. "Besides, we both know you don't have the guts to torture either of us, don't we?"

The comment is intended to hurt. I see it in the mean glint flashing across Rook's eyes. He's been kind to me—minus the lying—but somewhere along the way, I forgot what he's capable of.

What I don't understand is why Rook is choosing to goad Fisher right *now*. We're the ones at a disadvantage, but you'd never know it by Rook's behavior.

Fisher's casual manner evaporates in an instant, his eyes narrowing.

"You know I won't let you go," Fisher replies. "Not without some answers about what you were doing in the city and why you're traveling with a Crust."

This time, Fisher spits the word *crust* with such disdain that it makes me feel less than human, which is probably the point.

"And *you* know I can't do that," Rook says. "It's classified."

The corner of Fisher's mouth curls up. "The high commander and his secrets."

His gaze shifts my way, as though he's wary of revealing anything in my presence.

"You'll find out soon enough," Rook says. "But for now, you're not getting anything until I can return home and report to senior command."

The two men glare at each other.

"We need some food and a hot shower. Our bags, too," Rook adds, his tone shifting into something I've never heard from him before. Imperious. Almost like he's a prince and not the wandering Solitude I've clearly mistaken him for.

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"Fine," Fisher spits out. "Then I guess you'll be spending the night as our *guests*."

He turns away, literally spitting this time, a glob of saliva hitting the dirt to his left. He lifts a thumb over his shoulder, addressing a few of his people.

"Lock them up."

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3

Fisher disappears into his tent, the flap dropping behind him. No one else says a word as a guy and a girl, both about our age, approach us.

"Where should we put 'em?" one asks Calliope.

"Bunkhouse twelve is empty," she says. "Put a watch on. We don't want them wandering off."

Calliope stares at Rook for a heartbeat before turning and entering Fisher's tent without a backward glance.

"Always nice seeing you, Cal!" Rook shouts after her, a few snickers following his comment.

"Rook," one of our newly appointed escorts says. He's tall and lanky, with russet skin and black hair braided in neat rows along his scalp. He wears a sleeveless leather shirt showing off a pair of heavily tattooed arms.

"How've you been, Cole?" Rook asks.

Cole grins. "Can't complain."

"Safira," Rook says to the girl. "Nice hair."

I take in her bob, dyed silver with purple streaks, and have to agree.

Safira flips the ends. "Thought I'd try something new."

My gaze darts between them. Why does Rook know so many of the people intent on locking us up?

"She looks like a Crust," Cole grumbles at Safira.

"Stop that! I look cute." Then her gaze falls on me, obviously cataloging my own purple hair hanging down my back in messy tangles. "Right, new girl?"

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She *is* cute with a little nose, full lips, and big brown eyes.

"Sure," I answer, and she preens before sticking her tongue out at Cole. "Can someone tell me what *Crust* means? Everyone keeps calling me that."

Safira waves a hand as if it's of no real importance. "*Upper crust*. It's an old saying from the Warming Age that referred to rich people."

"Oh," I say.

"Not sure who started it," she continues with a shrug.

"Do you call everyone from New Manhattan that?"

"Sure," Safira replies.

"Not everyone in the city is rich."

"Oh," she says. "Well . . ."

"But *you* are," Cole says, pointing at me. "You sound rich."

"Yeah," I say, huffing in exasperation as I sense Rook trying to rein in a laugh. "So I've been told."

"Got yourself in a bit of trouble, I see," Cole says to Rook. "What else is new?"

"Wouldn't want to get bored," Rook answers with a shrug and a grunt, stretching his injured side. "Can you get our bags?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Safira says. "We'll see to it."

Rook snorts out a laugh and winces.

This entire exchange is so incongruous with our surroundings that I just stare at him. He's joking with the people holding us prisoner, and I have no idea if that should comfort me or terrify me.

We follow Cole and Safira through the encampment, passing more tents and buildings and dozens of people, including numerous children. They stare up at me with wide eyes and open mouths until their caregivers shoo them away, pinning me with mistrustful looks. I want to tell them I don't mean anyone harm. That I'm lost and alone and I wish I could go home. But I don't think anyone would care.

We're brought to another area, where a few small tents stand in a circle. It's quieter here, absent the same warm camaraderie of the clearing.

Cole leads us to a tent and lifts the flap. "In you go. Your castle for tonight, or however long the commander wants to wave his dick."

Bunkhouse twelve turns out to be a round tent with three narrow beds in the center. The blankets look a little scratchy, but the mere sight of a pillow and a mattress reminds me that my limbs feel like they're filled with rocks.

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"Pick whichever you like," Safira says, entering behind us. "It'll just be you two in here. Truly the royal treatment."

"Why is this empty?" Rook asks, scanning the tight space. There's only about a foot between each bed, so I need to turn sideways to shuffle between them.

Cole tips his head. "A few months back . . ." He cuts off, looking at me before turning to Rook. "The usual."

"Got it," Rook says. "Sorry for your loss."

Cole shrugs and lifts his hands in a *what can you do* sort of gesture, while my attention bounces between them and I wonder what they're talking about. "We'll find your bags and get some food sent in right away. Safira will be guarding you for the next few hours." He tosses me a wink. "Don't worry. She doesn't bite. Much."

With that ominous statement, they both duck out of the tent.

I hear them talking to someone on the other side before the flap opens again, revealing Vess carrying her med kit. She offers me a wary look before addressing Rook.

"Let me check your bandages."

Rook lifts his shirt, and she pokes and prods at him with a tongue wedged between her teeth. "Looks like you're gonna live."

"Thanks, Vess," he says, his tone laced with sincerity.

"Don't thank me," she says as she wraps him up in a set of fresh bandages. "Cal said we had to keep you alive. Plus, I'm not interested in getting on the high commander's bad side."

Rook's mouth presses together.

The high commander. As in High Commander Athira.

One of his parents? Or someone he's related to at least.

While Vess finishes her work, a wave of dizziness overcomes me, and I sink onto the bed. The spot on my head is tender to the touch, and I feel a cut scabbing over that means I was definitely bleeding at some point.

"Can you check her, too?" Rook asks.

Vess gives me a dubious glance.

"No," she says firmly. "I don't work on Crusts."

"Vess," he says, admonishment in his tone. "Don't be like that. Poet hasn't done anything wrong."

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Vess starts packing up, refusing to make eye contact. "I can leave you some supplies."

Rook's jaw clenches, and I can tell he wants to argue, but his shoulders drop. "Fine."

Vess nods and lays out a few items on the bed before she opens her case of vials and injects Rook with another dose of painkillers.

This also catches me off guard. They have medicine and supplies. Ways of caring for themselves that don't seem so different from ours.

As if reading my mind, Vess huffs out a derisive snort.

"They're all the same," she says to Rook, latching her case shut.

And then she's gone, leaving Rook and me alone for the first time since our capture. He scoops up the items Vess left behind and drops to a knee before me.

At first, he doesn't make eye contact. Maybe because he can't stand to look at me. Does he feel any guilt for how he betrayed me? He was *there* the night Raine was taken. When I told him what I'd seen in that video, he said he was planning to tell me everything. But what did he mean? I can't seem to form the question around the thickness of my tongue. Probably because I'm not sure I'm ready for the answer.

My stomach rumbles, and I try to remember the last time I ate. Dinner in the cafeteria with Domino and Journey when they teased me about kissing Rook.

My heart squeezes as I think about our cozy little room. Kisses in the shadows. Touching each other by the light of the fire. Whispers of our dreams and hopes.

Finally, he looks up, and our eyes meet. My heart flutters inside my rib cage, and I will it to settle. I'm angry with him. I want answers. I deserve that.

"Can I take a look?" he asks, gesturing to the bump on my head. I want to refuse, but there wouldn't be any point.

I nod, and he leans in, gently probing the spot. I try not to flinch, but his eyes darken when he picks up on my discomfort.

"I'll kill her for this," he says calmly.

"Why did she do it? I wasn't hurting anyone."

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"So you wouldn't see the way we came."

"How far from New Manhattan are we?"

"A few days' walk."

"And I was out the entire time?"

"Vess used some stuff from her kit to keep you unconscious." My eyes widen, my stomach twists, and Rook rushes to add, "It was that, or Cal was going to keep knocking you on the head."

"Oh."

I shiver and wrap my arms around my waist. Anything could have happened to me, and I would never have known.

"And you . . . walked?"

"I did. They took turns carrying you. Vess took care of me, too."

While Rook cleans and bandages my cut, he's so close that I feel the softness of his breath on my lips. Note the dusting of freckles over the bridge of his nose. The way the green and gold melt with the copper flecks in his eyes.

He'd become my safe place at Amery. The calm in the storm of my life. My protector. My friend. And I thought maybe something more, too.

Now I don't know whether to lean closer or shove him away.

His fingertips graze the edge of my jaw. My breath quickens, my pulse hammering at his nearness. I hate that my body still trusts him when I'm not sure the rest of me can.

When I can't stand it a moment longer, I sit back, severing the moment. "I'm fine now."

"Sorry," he says, though I'm not sure either one of us really knows what he's apologizing for. He's still kneeling in front of me, like he can't bear the idea of being too far away.

"Rook, who are these people?" I ask. "Why do you know them? Why are they locking us up?"

His gaze jumps to the tent entrance, where Safira is no doubt keeping guard. He's friendly with her but doesn't trust her completely, and the canvas walls of our bunkhouse don't offer much privacy.

Rook balances a hand on the edge of the bed frame.

"There are numerous pockets like this scattered across the Wastes," he says, voice low. "Encampments where people live and spend their time hunting these lands for resources and signs of life." He pauses, and I get the sense that while that *is* the truth, it's not the entire picture. "I lived in an encampment for a few years. Not this one, but a different one, though you get to know each other when you're living in the same quadrants. People often

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travel between camps, switching groups depending on where they're headed. So that's how I know Cole and Safira and a few of the others."

He's saying a lot of things I can't quite keep up with.

Quadrants. Where they're *headed*.

"And Commander Sterling?" I ask. "Fisher? Is that how you know him, too?"

"Ah." Rook rubs his chin. "That's a little more complicated."

He glances back at the doorway and then at me, lowering his head.

"He's my brother. Well, my half brother." He snort-laughs before adding, "Same mom. Vastly different moods."

Oh. That explains a few things. I think.

"And is that a secret?" I whisper, also looking at the door and back at Rook.

"No, it's not."

"Then why are we whispering?"

Rook grunts, nearly laughing again, but quickly tamps it down.

"I can't say anything else here," he says. "About why I was inside New Manhattan. There are too many ears, and I know it's asking a lot, but I need you to keep quiet about everything you know."

"But I don't know what you were doing there, either. Not really."

"I know, I just—" He exhales a sound of frustration. "I promise that once we get out of here, I'll tell you everything."

"Knock, knock," comes Cole's cheerful voice a moment later. "Got your bags." He dumps the packs hanging from each shoulder onto the end of my bed. "You can also grab showers in the bathhouse. I've had it cleared out for you for the next twenty minutes or so. Safira will escort you."

"Sounds good," Rook says. "Thank you again."

I figure out which backpack is mine and pull out the contents. I find a pair of my school uniform pants, a casual tunic, and some clean underwear and socks. At the bottom, I see Teddy crumpled among my things, a little flattened but reminding me of home with such clarity—both the good and the bad—that I suddenly can't breathe.

"Poet?" Rook asks, pulling me out of a spiral. "You all right?"

I stare at him. He packed Teddy for me. I was paralyzed. They were chasing us. We were about to die, but . . . he remembered.

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I'm not sure why that hurts so much.

"Poe?"

There's such tender concern in his face that I feel something crack, tiny striations forming across my skin. What if I simply turned to dust?

"I'm fine," I say, shaking my head and scooping up some clean clothing.

Balling everything together, I hold the bundle to my chest and kick my boots into a standing position. Rook retrieves his own set of clean clothing before we follow Safira across the small clearing to a white rectangular building.

Inside is a row of stalls, divided by partial wooden-and-metal walls. A stack of towels sits on a bench, and I grab one before making my way to the farthest stall.

Rook takes the stall at the opposite end, giving me space.

Quickly, I strip out of my dress, watching it fall to my feet in an airy cloud, crusted with blood and dirt. It's completely ruined. I kick it aside and turn on the water, groaning when a firm blast of heat meets my skin. Industrial-size containers of soap and shampoo sit on a ledge, and I squeeze out generous portions of each before cleaning myself off. Everything smells fresh and light, without extra perfumes or scents.

I'm still wearing my necklace, and I clutch it in my hand, grateful I didn't lose it during our escape. I might never see my mom again, but I'll always have this piece of her with me.

Once I'm finished, I towel myself off, wrap my hair in a knot, and dress. When I exit the stall, Rook is waiting in a fresh shirt and pants, leaning with one foot planted against the wall and his arms folded over his chest.

"Better?" he asks.

"Much," I answer. "I feel almost human again. Why are they doing all this for us?"

"It's our way," he says. "Despite any personal feelings, we take care of our own. Out here, it's us and the elements, and the only ones we can truly rely on are each other."

"That's . . . commendable."

I chew my lip as I think about the city and how much disparity exists between the Societies and everyone else. How we don't take care of anyone but ourselves.

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Rook's eyes shift, almost as if he can tell what I'm thinking.

"C'mon," he says, pushing off the wall. "You must be starving."

He reaches for me, like he wants to take my hand. I nearly grab it and then pull back, leaving him hanging for an awkward second before he does the same.

I hate this.

Quickly, he turns away and opens the door. We step out into the cool evening, where Safira waits for us.

"Where can I toss this?" I ask, holding up my ruined dress.

"*Toss* it?" she asks, her brows climbing.

"Yes?" I confirm.

Rook takes the dress from me. "We never throw anything away here. Everything can be repurposed into something else." He drapes it over the doorway. "We'll ask around to see if someone can make use of the material, at least."

My cheeks warm. "Right. I'm sorry. Of course."

"It's fine," he says before gesturing to Safira. "We're ready."

After offering me a pitying look, she delivers us back to our tent, where a tray of food sits on a small table near the wall. Sandwiches, glass bottles of water, and cookies.

Rook hands me a plate, and we both settle onto our beds, eating in silence. The food is good and hearty, and I concentrate on chewing and swallowing, attempting to keep thoughts of home and everything we left behind at bay.

When I've eaten every last bite, I return the tray to the table, kick off my boots, and then, without another word, crawl into bed fully clothed and pull up the blanket. I tuck Teddy to my chest and close my eyes.

But as the camp settles into quiet, my thoughts grow impossibly loud.

I hope the people I left behind are okay. Domino and Journey. My parents. I can't stop thinking about Edward's lifeless, stunned body lying on the carpet in Mr. Robins's office. I don't think they killed him, but I can't be sure. I'll never forgive myself if he's dead.

And Trinity . . .

My chest squeezes tight as I recall the look on her face when Lieutenant Dire dragged her into the ball with his arm cinched around her neck. The wideness of her eyes. The paleness of her skin. Freckles as stark as blood dribbled over freshly fallen snow.

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Her words.

Her accusation.

The moment she sealed my fate.

She gave me up to the Extinguishers.

I've imagined moments just like it a thousand times since the day I discovered what I am. I just never thought *my best friend* would be the one standing on the other side of that accusing finger.

She must have seen me in the Central Park Tree Farm during our cadet exam. I recall that flash of red hair I spotted through the bushes.

I wasn't sure. I am now.

The way she hugged me at the end and then walked away.

I should have known.

It was her.

She saw me, waited a full week . . . and then betrayed me in front of everyone.

Maybe she had no choice. Maybe she grappled with her decision. Maybe she was crying because she was sorry.

Or maybe she was just afraid of me.

I don't know which cuts worse.

My stomach pitches, rage and hurt curdling in my gut. Trinity isn't perfect, but I never thought she would do something like this.

A tear slips down my cheek. I knew we were growing apart. I was losing her to the E-squad. Or maybe I'd lost her already. Still, she is my best friend. I would have done anything for her.

Was. Was my best friend.

I have to accept that. Even if I could return home, I could never forgive her.

I use Teddy's arm to wipe the moisture from my face and try to empty my mind. I need to sleep if I'm going to have the strength to face whatever comes next.

For now, I think I'm safe. Relatively so, at least.

Rook is here, and he won't let anything happen to me.

In spite of everything, I believe that.

Just as I'm drifting off, the wail of a siren pierces through the night.

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4

I sit straight up, my heart pounding in my chest, and slap my hands over my ears. "What's that?"

"We have to get out of here," Rook says, already shoving his feet into his shoes. He grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet. I step into my boots but don't have time to lace them before he's tugging me through the tent opening. The encampment is swarming with people running left and right. The sky is dark, flashing with lilac bursts against a backdrop of rolling clouds.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and prickles explode across my scalp.

A storm is coming. Is that what this is all about?

"Rook!" I shout as he leads me through the crowd. A quick assessment reveals that people are organized in their hurry. They know where to go. They've prepared for this.

"What's happening?" I ask as he drags me away. "What's going on?"

More fucking questions. They fill my head like a swarm of killer bees.

When will I get some answers?

The wind is picking up, and another round of cloudbursts explodes across the sky. A shiver crawls up my spine. The storm is moving so fast, I didn't even feel it coming.

I glance up as a bolt of Spark peels off a large cloud formation almost directly overhead. It spears toward the earth, hitting the center of the encampment before exploding into a plasma arc as someone is consumed by the blast that swallows their last screams.

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More people are shouting now. Instructions are being issued. The ordered chaos of a moment ago shifts, giving way to panic edged with fear.

"Move underground!" someone yells. "They're coming."

"This way!" Rook shouts, tugging me toward him with such force that I nearly stumble, but I'm saved by his arm cinching around my waist. "There's a bunker over here."

More people scatter as they run for cover. Several disappear through a large metal hatch set into the earth. It closes with a hiss as Rook keeps pulling me through the camp.

I notice people are taking up positions outside the perimeter of the compound, their sights focused on the trees. They're waiting for something.

I stop to watch, scanning the horizon. About a hundred feet of forest has been cleared around the fence as a security measure. I notice the leaves shifting, rustling like something is moving through the trees. Something large.

It takes a moment for them to appear at the edge of the treeline.

I see it. Someone is coming—several someones.

They walk in a line, slowly, approaching like they're moving through tree sap.

But what really catches my attention is their eyes—glowing purple orbs burn in the darkness, making my fingers turn numb.

"Who are they?" I croak, peering through the fencing and the flickering lines of electricity cordoning off the camp.

"Whispers," he says, and I turn to frown at him. "What you refer to as Keepers. They've succumbed to the madness that breaks their minds. We call it the Silence."

It takes me a moment to process his words. To put two and two together. My entire life, I've been told that Keepers go insane. That they lose control of their faculties. They become violent and dangerous. But I've never actually seen it happen. Keepers within the walls of New Manhattan are always dealt with before they become a problem.

I've kept this secret in my heart for most of my life, terrified of discovery.

Whispers. The Silence.

Those words send a flurry of icy shivers spreading over my skin.

"I don't . . . I've never . . ."

"Poet," Rook says, dragging me against him, cupping my face in his hands. "Focus. We need to get somewhere safe."

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The line of Keepers has moved closer. I can make out some of their features, their stiff limbs and the haunted looks on their faces. Some of them

are completely expressionless. They stare straight ahead, their bright eyes brilliant against the night.

"What will they do?" I ask.

"They'll attack anyone they encounter," he says. "They're stronger than you can imagine. Faster, too."

I study the slowly moving line of Keepers, finding that hard to believe.

But then one at the front moves. One moment, he's shambling in the distance, and the next, he's standing right in front of a line of the camp's soldiers. He reaches out and snags a man around the throat.

"Skies," I whisper as the Keeper lifts the man, his feet flailing as he tries to kick away. More Keepers have closed in, swarming the soldiers as the man continues to struggle against the fist closing off his windpipe.

"He's dying!" I shout. "We have to help him."

I make a move to run, but Rook tugs me back. "You can't help him," he says. "We have to hide *now*!"

But I can't seem to tear myself away from the sight. A fight has broken out. The Keepers are strong and move so fast. Their lips pull back to expose their teeth. They're ferocious, knocking everyone over like rag dolls.

It's a horrifying sight, made even more so when I realize that they don't make a sound. Their mouths open and close, but nothing comes out.

Whispers. The Silence.

I shiver again, turning numb from head to toe.

Explosions break through the atmosphere, echoing blasts that crack against the fight and the rumbling storm. A Keeper goes down, clutching his knee, his mouth stretched into a silent scream as blood spurts from a wound in his leg.

"What happened?" I ask. "What was that sound?"

"Guns," Rook explains. "Filled with bullets. They're like stunners, but different."

Right. Now I remember. I've seen photos of them from the Warming Age, but evidence of their existence in New Manhattan is rare.

"He's bleeding," I say, stating the obvious, but I think I'm going into shock.

Rook guides me to the edge of a building to conceal us. More fighting has broken out as the Keepers advance. I notice the camp's soldiers aren't trying to kill them, only disarm them and slow them down. A man presses a

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knee to the back of a Keeper lying face down on the ground before someone else swoops in to tie his hands and feet together.

"Why are they tying him up?"

Rook huffs out a pained sigh. "Whispers can't help what they are," he says. "We do our best to avoid killing any of them. Not while there's still a chance for a cure."

"A *cure*," I shout, more questions piling up. "What do you mean?"

"Poet, we should get to a bunker. I'll explain—"

"You'll explain everything later," I say dryly. "Right. Of course."

He gives me a tight-lipped smile. A cloudburst splits above us as the sky glows with plumes of bright amethyst. Another jagged branch of Spark hits the earth, right near the fighting, sending everyone scattering.

"Poet, we can't let them see us. Let's *go*."

"Why not? Don't they know what you are? That you're something else?"

He shakes his head. "No."

"But what—"

"Come *on*." He takes my hand, refusing to take no for an answer this time. He virtually drags me toward the far edge of the camp. We weave through buildings and tents, where almost everyone either has escaped underground or is busy manning the perimeter.

We pass a few more closed hatches before coming to one at the very edge, right next to the glowing electric fence. Rook drops to a knee and fiddles with the latch while I focus on the distant treeline. More Keepers—*Whispers*—emerge, covered in dirt and blood. The fence crackles with energy, fizzing and popping.

Rook grunts, tugging at the handle, then says, "It's stuck."

He stands up and starts searching left and right.

Suddenly, something grabs me from behind, and I scream.

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5

"Rook!" I cry as I'm tugged through the fence, passing through the flickering lines of electricity. And it fucking *hurts*. My skin is on fire, like it's being peeled off in thin ribbons of bloody flesh.

I don't have to look behind me to know I've been snatched by a rabid Keeper.

His hot breath hits the back of my neck, and I kick and flail wildly.

"Poet!" Rook shouts.

Immediately, he follows us through the fence.

The Keeper drags me away, one hand wrapped around my throat, another arm banded around my waist. He smells awful. Like burning rubber and dead flesh. It coats the inside of my mouth as I kick and kick, trying to free myself, but his grip is iron-strong.

Rook approaches carefully, his stance hunched as he assesses the situation.

"Help," I manage to rasp.

The Keeper is cutting off my air, and spots bloom in the corners of my vision. He pants heavily in my ear, exhaling gusts of putrid air that stir the tiny hairs around my temple. My eyes water and my fingers turn numb as I fight for breath.

Rook rushes toward us, swerving around me and knocking into the Keeper with his shoulder. We both go flying, and I feel something snap as the man's big body lands on top of me. I groan as pain shoots up my hip, spreading down my leg and up my arm. A cracked rib, maybe.

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Rook is on top of us, tugging on the Keeper, landing punches to his head and back. The Keeper doesn't let go, rolling me under him, crushing me,

his ragged breaths loud in my ears. Muted rattles echo from his chest as his glowing eyes flicker.

"Get off her!" Rook shouts, hands gripping my attacker as I try to break his hold, but he's impossibly strong. I twist toward him, kicking out, landing a blow between his legs. The Keeper's mouth opens, his eyes bulging and his grip loosening just enough that Rook can finally pull him off.

The Keeper tackles Rook, and they stagger several steps, trying to knock each other down. I watch as the Keeper punches Rook in the jaw so hard, I'm surprised his neck doesn't snap. Rook goes flying, lands on his back several feet away, and skids along the grass with a pained grunt.

The Keeper launches at Rook as I struggle to my feet and rush at him from the side. We become a tangle of limbs and wild punches until Rook rolls on top of the Keeper. He clocks him in the face, temporarily stunning him.

"Come on!" Rook says, taking my hand and tugging me back toward the encampment. "We have to get to a bunker."

But the Keeper is already recovering.

He catches up. A cold hand snags my arm, and then I'm going down again.

The Keeper might not make sounds in the traditional sense, but he's making *a* sound. The most horrifying rattle vibrates in his chest and throat, like he's swallowed a bag of teeth and they're fighting to escape. It's grotesque and unnatural. It's so . . . *wrong* that it makes me gag.

"Help!" I croak as he grips my neck with strong fingers. My windpipe narrows as he squeezes harder. Again, I start to fade, blackness smearing around the edges of my sight.

A moment later, I hear a *crack*.

Everything falls silent before the Keeper goes limp.

I look up to find Rook with the man's head gripped in his hands.

Rook snapped his neck.

The light drains from the Keeper's eyes as he collapses to the earth, and I roll out from under him, choking and hacking as I try to suck air into my lungs. My throat aches, bruises already throbbing beneath my skin.

It takes me a moment to realize that Rook is standing perfectly still, staring down at the body of the dead Keeper. His face is pale, his chest expanding and contracting. Slowly, he lowers the man to the ground before running a hand through his hair, tugging on it. *Hard*.

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"Rook?" I ask. My voice comes out hoarse, scratchy. "Are you okay?"