

Excerpt from Storm Caller

Book 2 of Storm Breaker

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One

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.

"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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.