

Chapter 1

My fiancé smells like feet.

Knox slings an arm around my neck and yanks me closer, causing me to trip. My hands slam into his chest to stop myself from falling, and I inhale another whiff of that sour smell.

I recognize it as the distinct residue of the boiled cabbage stew served in the tunnel markets running below the streets of New Manhattan. He must've paid a visit to the underground today. A shower would have been nice.

Knox doesn't notice my stumble as he lifts his glass and bellows, "To our last night of freedom!"

He's met with a resounding chorus of cheers before he tips his head back and takes a long pull of his drink.

With the wind howling outside, we stand fifty stories up, inside a sprawling apartment owned by Knox's father, Trey Arden. The massive living room is lined with reinforced floor-to-ceiling windows and filled with creamy, ornate furniture and golden tables.

His mother permits only clear liquids, lest anything get stained. I'll never forget the party Knox threw in ninth grade when someone had the bright idea of smuggling in a pilfered bottle of red-tinted cinnamon gin to pass around. The lid hadn't been properly secured and...well, I don't think I've ever heard Mrs. Arden scream that loud.

The remnants of that day have long since been cleared away, leaving off-white, brocade-silk-covered walls and crystal chandeliers dangling overhead, casting us in a soft yellow glow.

All the Fiama Society kids from our year are here, dressed in their most sparkling club attire, including short skirts and slashed shirts, showing off taut young bodies and miles of skin.

High school is over, and we're headed to university, ready to embark on the next chapter of our lives when we report to Amery Academy first thing tomorrow.

I've been anticipating this day for a very long time.

I watch my best friend Trinity across the room take a long gulp of her drink and toss her arms around her boyfriend's neck before they go in for a sloppy kiss. They make out furiously, their bodies pressed together, fueled by the heated charge in the air and a little liquid encouragement.

My chest tightens. I'm not jealous. I'm thrilled Trin found someone who loves her the way Edward does. I want the world for her.

But as Bethany Fawkes sidles over, pressing herself to Knox's other side, my gaze returns to Trinity and Edward, and I can't help but want what they have, too.

Knox's arm tightens around me before he thrusts his cup in my face. "Have a sip, Poet."

I nearly gag on the potent fumes of moonshine brewed by the Hollows, New Manhattan's underground citizens. It's cheap as dirt and packs several punches. No thank you. My preferred poison doesn't taste vaguely of paint thinner.

I knock his hand away as he leans in and presses his open mouth against my temple, almost like he's eating my hair. His hot, stale breath sends a shiver creeping over my scalp. And not in the good way. Those days are long over.

"*Stop,*" I bite out as I attempt to shove out of his headlock.

Knox Arden. New Manhattan's resident fuckboy. My betrothed.

Definitely not by choice.

Finally, I manage to extricate myself from his grasp, sacrificing the band around my ponytail. He's handsome by all measures of the word. High cheekbones. A strong jaw. Tall with a narrow but stacked frame and platinum hair streaked with bright shocks of lilac.

His sleeveless white T-shirt clings to his chest, and his fair skin is slightly flushed. His black leather boots are heavily scuffed, no doubt purchased from a scavenger. New clothes are easy enough for families like ours to access, but there's a certain cachet in "slumming it" with a rare and expensive scavenger treasure.

"*Poet*," he whines as I fix my ponytail. Then I spin on my heel to walk away, shoulders set and head high. "Poet, come back! You're being weird."

Weird.

He isn't wrong.

Any time a storm is brewing, I'm definitely weird.

"Ew," Trinity says, catching me as I pass and looping an arm through mine. "I can't believe Bethany's rubbing herself all over him like that. Everyone knows you're getting married after we graduate." She lowers her voice. "Even if you don't want to, *she* doesn't know that."

Her words claw through my chest as we look back at Knox. Bethany is now wrapped around him, his hand creeping up her bare thigh, his mouth pressed to the curve of her offered jaw. Three other girls already surround him, draping themselves like languid pieces of silk. As though his very presence makes their arms and knees go limp.

I try not to blame them. In our House, proximity to the right man means security, and that can be worth everything.

"Want me to kick her ass?" Trinity asks, her freckled white cheeks flushing with anger on my behalf. She's petite and half a head shorter than my average height, but only because she's

“towering” in heels. She wears a fitted white dress that clings to her curves and a necklace of sparkling amethyst. Bangs fall over her eyes, and her hair is highlighted with a deep streak of purple, contrasting with her fiery orange locks.

It’s the height of Society fashion to dye one’s hair with a touch of purple in various hues. General Nyxia Sol started the trend with her midnight-black hair, streaked with a single shock of bright purple down one side. It’s also the same shade of the cloud bursts that signal an Empire Storm, named after the color of royalty from the old world.

My own hair is a purple so deep it’s nearly black and peppered with brighter streaks of amethyst.

Only mine is natural, a secret I keep to myself.

“Nah,” I say, focusing on Knox and his groupies. “He invites it. If anyone needs an ass-kicking, it’s *him*.”

“But—”

I raise my hand. “I don’t care. Let her have him.”

A snort behind me draws our attention to queen-bitches Winter Jenkins and Lacey Turner, both wearing acidic sneers.

“Poor little Poet,” Winter says, twirling a lock of her long chestnut hair. “She just *can’t* keep the attention of her man.”

She thrusts out her lower lip as Lacey dissolves into giggles.

“Don’t worry,” Winter adds with a wink. “After you’re married, I’ll see that he’s always satisfied.”

“Sounds about right,” I counter. “The only way to get *someone* to fill that dusty, dried-out hole is to fuck another woman’s husband.”

Trinity snorts so loud I'm surprised she doesn't blow a nostril. She slaps a hand over her face, trying to contain her laugh. It doesn't work.

Winter's mouth drops open, and Lacey's eyes go wide.

"How dare you!" Winter hisses.

"Get out of my face," I hiss back.

Winter's gaze narrows on mine, but I know from experience that she doesn't have the guts to make a move.

She straightens, huffs, and then takes my suggestion, trying to look dignified as she walks away. Trinity latches onto my arm, gasping for breath. I don't think she notices how hard I'm trembling.

"*Skies*, Poet," she wheezes. "I can't believe you just said that."

I smooth down the front of my sparkly black crop top, trying to conceal my shaking hands. I lift one corner of my mouth in a smile that feels like a grimace. "That actually felt pretty good."

"You're so badass," Trinity says as our attention once again drifts to Knox. Winter and Lacey have now found their way over to him, scattering my short-lived flare of satisfaction.

Edward appears behind Trinity, bearing a fresh drink, and notices the direction of our stares. His straight black hair falls over a pair of dark, angled eyes. He gives me a sympathetic look.

"You deserve better than that," he says so sincerely that my throat tightens.

I roll my shoulders, trying to shake off the fog of Knox's ever-present shadow. "Well, he's what I'm stuck with."

My father is the scion of House Fiama, but leadership is tenuous thanks to infighting between our most powerful families. When Knox and I were born, he formed an alliance with Knox's father to help strengthen his bid for power. It paved the path to his current reign, and thus, our marriage has been a foregone conclusion ever since.

I've made peace with it as much as I can. This is my duty to my city. As members of Society, our union is also part of the greater plan to keep us all safe, fed, and protected from both the threats that surround us and the mistakes of the past.

At least I'll have three years at the academy before I need to face it.

A flash of light catches my eye. I glance out the window as the wind gusts with a powerful blast, tilting the floor beneath us ever so slightly. My palms start to itch, and I scratch them absently.

New Manhattan boasts dozens of Society-owned apartment towers that stretch into the clouds and are prone to swaying in the high winds, but no one bats an eye.

We're used to this.

Another flash, and the sky lights up with a shocking flare of ultraviolet light.

I swallow a gasp as the clouds tumble and roll, swelling in great puffs of lilac and indigo, flashing with hot spots. Soon they'll explode in pulses of galvanic force known as Spark, jagged streaks of energy that spread in every direction, sometimes shattering our protective barriers and killing anyone they touch.

An Empire Storm is coming, and it's coming fast.

As the wind picks up, I shiver.

I can *feel* the storms.

We have two less-common types: Emerald Storms that bring torrential downpours and Blood Storms, which rain down deadly fire.

But Empire Storms pose a constant threat, always on the verge of striking.

My temperature is already climbing, and I continue to scratch my hands and my arms.

My exhales turn short as I carefully regulate my shallow breaths.

It feels like I'm coming undone. Like my skin is too tight and starting to split.

This is my curse. A burden. A test of my sanity.

And yet I crave it, too.

I know I shouldn't. I know it makes me a monster.

But it's an addiction waiting to destroy me.

My breaths come faster and sharper, my pulse pounding as the storm outside screams in my ears. Everyone else in the room continues chatting and drinking, unconcerned.

I'm almost positive I'm the only one here affected this way.

When the amethyst clouds start to roll, everyone runs for cover, seeking the relative safety of their homes. Our only true protection is General Nyxia Sol and her army of Storm Breakers, who do their best to shield the city.

But even their methods are fallible, and the storms are often unpredictable.

CRASH

A window smashes, and everyone screams as we're plunged into the luminescent glow of neon light. A small plasma arc ricochets from the floor, forming a dome, transparent like a soap bubble and filled with jagged sparks of pulsing energy.

It lasts for only a second before it winks out.

Wind gusts into the room, tossing napkins and tugging at hair and clothing. People jump up, drinks spilling as they search for cover, trying to escape a hailstorm of glass, sharp stones, and bits of debris.

I'm shoved to the side with Trinity's arm still linked to mine. We slam into a wall, my elbow connecting with a sharp *crack* that radiates into my shoulder. As we're pushed left and right, I instinctively search for Knox. How close was he standing to the window?

A moment later, I spy him at the far end of the room, brushing splinters off his shirt and shaking out his hair.

My stomach twitches with a conflicted dip because I don't understand how I feel. I don't want to marry him, but I also wouldn't want him to die this way.

I think.

It takes me a moment to register the screams.

Someone else wasn't so lucky.

Through a wall of shifting bodies, I spot someone lying on the floor, their skin charred to a black husk. Smoke curls off them in small puffs of white.

Someone won't be starting at Amery Academy tomorrow.

My stomach turning, I huff out a shaky breath as the clouds flash with more swelling points of light.

If I don't hurry, I might miss it.

The room descends into chaos as people simultaneously try to squeeze closer to the body and also move away. I push through the crowd, sliding between the spaces until I find myself at the door.

I look back. I shouldn't be leaving at a time like this, but someone will deal with it. We have sweepers for these types of incidents, and too many people are already in the way.

After quietly slipping out, I pound up several floors and toss open the door to my parents' penthouse, only to find it empty. They must have gone out to one of their favorite swanky restaurants with their friends. At least I don't have to explain why I'm home already.

I head for my bedroom, still decorated like it was when I was ten years old, with frilly white sheets and pillows and a ruffled canopy. At least I donated the stuffed animals, though I kept my favorite brown bear, Teddy, to sit on my dresser to watch over me.

I just turned nineteen, but he makes me feel safe.

I lock the door behind me and kick off my shoes before tiptoeing carefully across the plush white carpet. Even in my own home, I try never to take up too much space.

Clinging to the window frame, I focus my gaze on the distant spot where I know General Sol will be waiting.

The wind howls, shaking the foundations. I spot a figure scurrying across the plaza far below and press a hand to the glass, urging them to run for cover.

A moment later, another cloudburst illuminates the sky. Lines of energy radiate out, coalescing as they hit the pavement and rebounding into its characteristic plasma arc. It spreads, engulfing the figure in a hailstorm of Spark before they stumble, landing face down on the pavement, dead.

I choke on a quiet sob before looking up to witness General Sol gilded in amethyst light.

She stands atop the Citadel, her long hair tossing in the wind.

She's too far away to make out the details, but I know she's wearing her usual uniform. Fitted black leather from head to toe with tiny buttons running up the sides of her boots and a crisscross tie cinched at her back.

Her darkened silhouette reveals her standing with her arms spread and her face tipped up, as if she's offering herself to the sky. Bursts of Spark slam into her outstretched hands and crackle over her body, briefly illuminating the vibrant streak in her hair.

She is New Manhattan's only official Spark Keeper. Centuries of evolution living in a world plagued by violent electromagnetic forces have immunized people like her to its deadly effects.

More Keepers like her once lived within our borders, but their connection to Spark drove them to madness and violence. They proved too dangerous to exist.

Without General Sol, we would be lost.

Any time the weather turns, she races to her perch, gathering the storm's power to fuel the city's generators.

Another cloud bursts across the sky, but the general is ready. I watch as she gathers the next strike and then touches the dozens of glowing nodes surrounding her in a circle. Lights power on in a distant part of the city that doesn't enjoy the luxury of constant electricity.

Here in one of the Fiama House towers, we receive steady power until the generators run out. But it never takes long before the next storm comes along.

I open the window, bracing myself for a gust of wind.

It tugs at my hair as I lean forward, peering down at the illuminated windows of the Ardens' apartment, but here I'm safely concealed in shadows. Reaching forward, I hold out my hand and stretch my fingers to the sky.

I peer up, waiting, hoping. The wind burns my cheeks and makes my eyes water, but I must be patient.

Then it comes.

Another bright flash sends a burst of Spark careening toward me, almost as if in slow motion.

It strikes my palm, and I attempt another deep breath as my body absorbs the charge. A transparent plasma arc engulfs me as Spark crackles up my arm, circling my shoulders, chest, hips, and legs.

My eyes flutter closed, while electricity rips through my body, cooking my organs, burning my veins, searing my nerves. My mind warps and my teeth rattle, thoughts muddling as I hang on, willing myself through the pain.

I never know how long it takes. Sometimes it feels like hours. Sometimes years.

But no more than a minute or two pass before I can open my eyes. My bones and skin throb. The roots of my hair and the backs of my teeth ache.

The bubble is gone, but I'm still trembling as I look down to admire the purple sparks dancing over my clothing and skin. I approach the mirror on unsteady legs to enjoy the effect. It's like I'm surrounded by dancing fireflies. Like I'm a faerie from another world. It isn't magic, but it *feels* like it.

Twisting left and right, I continue watching the sparks dance up and down my arms and twinkling in my hair. Eventually, my breath evens out. I stop shaking as the effect melts from resonant pulses into the euphoria I crave. I'm floating now.

Every time I do this, it strips a little piece of me.

I can't explain it, but I sense it slowly chipping away at some fundamental part.

It's wrong to embrace this.

But resisting it would be like deciding not to breathe.

I wish I could share this with *someone*. But I can't.

In fact, it will be a few hours before I'm ready to show myself to anyone at all, so I settle back at the window, checking on the sparks every few seconds.

While I wait, I gaze outside to watch our leader and her awesome strength.

The truth is, General Nyxia Sol *isn't* New Manhattan's only living Spark Keeper.

But that's a secret no one can ever know.