

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH J.  
MAAS

HOUSE of SKY  
and BREATH

A CRESCENT CITY NOVEL

BLOOMSBURY

CRESCENT CITY

HOUSE  
of  
SKY  
and  
BREATH

*For Robin Rue,  
fearless agent and true friend*

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The Crescent City series

*House of Earth and Blood*

*House of Sky and Breath*



CRESCENT CITY

HOUSE  
of  
SKY  
and  
BREATH

SARAH J. MAAS

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# THE FOUR HOUSES OF MIDGARD

*As decreed in 33 V.E. by the Imperial Senate in the Eternal City*

## HOUSE OF EARTH AND BLOOD

Shifters, humans, witches, ordinary animals, and many others to whom Cthona calls, as well as some chosen by Luna

## HOUSE OF SKY AND BREATH

Malakim (angels), Fae, elementals, sprites,\* and those who are blessed by Solas, along with some favored by Luna

## HOUSE OF MANY WATERS

River-spirits, mer, water beasts, nymphs, kelpies, nøkks, and others watched over by Ogenas

## HOUSE OF FLAME AND SHADOW

Daemonaki, Reapers, wraiths, vampyrs, draki, dragons, necromancers, and many wicked and unnamed things that even Urd herself cannot see

*\*Sprites were kicked out of their House as a result of their participation in the Fall, and are now considered Lowers, though many of them refuse to accept this.*

## PROLOGUE

Sofie had survived in the Kavalla death camp for two weeks.

Two weeks, and still the guards—dreadwolves, all of them—had not sniffed her out. Everything had gone according to plan. The reek of the days crammed into the cattle car had covered the telltale scent in her blood. It had also veiled her when they'd marched her and the others between the brick buildings of the camp, this new Hel that was only a small model of what the Asteri planned to do if the war continued.

Two weeks here, and that reek had become etched into her very skin, blinding even the wolves' keen noses. She'd stood mere feet from a guard in the breakfast line this morning and he hadn't so much as sniffed in her direction.

A small victory. One she'd gladly take these days.

Half of the Ophion rebel bases had fallen. More would soon. But only two places existed for her now: here, and the port of Servast, her destination tonight. Alone, even on foot, she could have easily made it. A rare benefit of being able to switch between human and Vanir identities—and of being a rare human who'd made the Drop.

It technically made her Vanir. Granted her a long life span and all the benefits that came from it that her human family did not and would never have. She might not have bothered to make the Drop had her parents not encouraged it—with the healing abilities she would gain, it provided extra armor in a world designed to kill her kind. So she'd done it under the radar, in a back-alley, highly illegal Drop center, where a leering satyr had been her Anchor, and handing over her firstlight had been the cost of the ritual. She'd spent the years since then learning to wear her humanity like a cloak, inside and out. She might have all the traits of the Vanir, but she'd never *be* Vanir. Not in her heart, her soul.

Yet tonight ... tonight, Sofie did not mind letting a little of the monster loose.

It would not be an easy journey, thanks to the dozen small forms crouched behind her in the mud before the barbed-wire fence.

Five boys and six girls gathered by her thirteen-year-old brother, who now stood watch over them like a shepherd with his flock. Emile had gotten all of them out of the bunks, aided by a gentle human sun-priest, who was currently serving as lookout at the shed ten yards away.

The children were gray-skinned, gaunt. Eyes too big, too hopeless.

Sofie didn't need to know their stories. They were likely the same as hers: rebel human parents who'd either been caught or sold out. Hers had been the latter.

Pure dumb luck had kept Sofie out of the dreadwolves' clutches, too—at least until now. Three years ago, she'd been studying late at the university library with her friends. Arriving home after midnight, she'd spied the broken windows and shattered front door, the spray paint on the siding of their ordinary suburban house—*REBEL SHITS*—and begun running. She could only credit Urd for the fact that the dreadwolf guard posted at the front door hadn't seen her.

Later, she'd managed to confirm that her parents were dead. Tortured until the brutal end by the Hind or her elite squadron of dreadwolf interrogators. The report Sofie spent months working her way up through Ophion to attain had also revealed that her grandparents had been herded off upon reaching the Bracchus camp in the north, and shot in a lineup of other elders, their bodies left to crumple into a mass grave.

And her brother ... Sofie hadn't been able to find anything on Emile until now. For years, she'd been working with the Ophion rebels in exchange for any snippet of information about him, about her family. She didn't let herself think about what she'd done in return for that information. The spying, the people she'd killed to collect whatever intel Ophion wanted—these things weighed on her soul like a leaden cloak.

But she'd finally done enough for Ophion that they'd informed her Emile had been sent here, and survived against all odds. At last, she had a location for him. Convincing Command to let her come here ... that had been another labyrinth to navigate.

In the end, it had required Pippa's support. Command listened to Pippa, their faithful and fervent soldier, leader of the elite Lightfall unit. Especially now that Ophion's numbers had taken such steep hits. Sort-of-

human Sofie, on the other hand ... She knew she was an asset, but with the Vanir blood in her veins, they'd never fully trust her. So she occasionally needed Pippa. Just as much as Pippa's Lightfall missions had needed Sofie's powers.

Pippa's help hadn't been due to friendship. Sofie was fairly certain that friends didn't exist within the Ophion rebel network. But Pippa was an opportunist—and she knew what she stood to gain should this op go smoothly, the doors that would further open to her within Command if Sofie returned triumphant.

A week after Command had approved the plan, over three years after her family had been snatched from their home, Sofie walked into Kavalla.

She'd waited until a local dreadwolf patrol was marching by and stumbled into their path, a mere mile from here. They immediately found the fake rebel documents she'd planted in her coat. They had no idea that Sofie also carried with her, hidden in her head, information that could very well be the final piece of this war against the Asteri.

The blow that could end it.

Ophion had found out too late that before she'd gone into Kavalla, she'd finally accomplished the mission she'd spent years preparing for. She'd made sure before she was picked up that Pippa and Ophion knew she'd acquired that intel. Now they wouldn't back out of their promises to retrieve her and Emile. She knew there would be Hel to pay for it—that she'd gone in secret to gather the information, and was now using it as collateral.

But that would come later.

The dreadwolf patrol interrogated her for two days. Two days, and then they'd thrown her into the cattle car with the others, convinced she was a foolish human girl who'd been given the documents by a lover who'd used her.

She'd never thought her minor in theater would come in handy. That she'd hear her favorite professor's voice critiquing her performance while someone was ripping out her fingernails. That she'd feign a confession with all the sincerity she'd once brought to the stage.

She wondered if Command knew she'd used those acting abilities on them, too.

That wasn't her concern, either. At least, not until tomorrow. Tonight, all that mattered was the desperate plan that would now come to fruition. If she had not been betrayed, if Command had not realized the truth, then a

boat waited twenty miles away to ferry them out of Pangera. She looked down at the children around her and prayed the boat had room for more than the three passengers she'd claimed would be arriving.

She'd spent her first week and a half in Kavalla waiting for a glimpse of her brother—a hint of where he might be in the sprawling camp. And then, a few days ago, she'd spotted him in the food line. She'd faked a stumble to cover her shock and joy and sorrow.

He'd gotten so tall. As tall as their father. He was all gangly limbs and bones, a far cry from the healthy thirteen-year-old he should have been, but his face ... it was the face she'd grown up with. But beginning to show the first hints of manhood on the horizon.

Tonight, she'd seized her chance to sneak into his bunk. And despite the three years and the countless miseries they'd endured, he knew her in an instant, too. Sofie would have spirited him away that moment had he not begged her to bring the others.

Now twelve children crouched behind her.

The alarms would be blaring soon. They had different sirens for everything here, she'd learned. To signal their wake-ups, their meals, random inspections.

A mournful bird's call fluttered through the low-hanging mist. *All clear.*

With a silent prayer of thanks to the sun-priest and the god he served, Sofie lifted her mangled hand to the electrified fence. She did not glance at her missing fingernails, or the welts, or even feel how numb and stiff her hands were, not as the fence's power crackled through her.

Through her, into her, *becoming* her. Becoming hers to use as she wished.

A thought, and the fence's power turned outward again, her fingertips sparking where they curled against the metal. The metal turned orange, then red beneath her hand.

She sliced her palm down, skin so blisteringly hot it cleaved metal and wire. Emile whispered to the others to keep them from crying out, but she heard one of the boys murmur, "*Witch.*"

A typical human's fear of those with Vanir gifts—of the females who held such tremendous power. She did not turn to tell him that it was not a witch's power that flowed through her. It was something far more rare.

The cold earth met her hand as she rent the last of the fence and peeled the two flaps apart, barely wide enough for her to fit through. The children

edged forward, but she signaled for them to halt, scanning the open dirt beyond. The road separating the camp from the ferns and towering pines lay empty.

But the threat would come from behind. She pivoted toward the watchtowers at the corners of the camp, which housed guards with sniper rifles forever trained on the road.

Sofie took a breath, and the power she'd sucked from the fence again shuddered through her. Across the camp, the spotlights ruptured in a shower of sparks that had the guards whirling toward it, shouting.

Sofie peeled the fence apart wider, arms straining, metal biting into her palms, grunting at the children to *run, run, run*—

Little shadows, their light gray uniforms tattered and stained and too bright in the near-full moon, hurried through the fence and across the muddy road to the dense ferns and steep gully beyond. Emile went last, his taller, bony body still a shock to her system, as brutal as any power she could wield.

Sofie did not let herself think of it. She raced after him, weak from the lack of food, the grueling labor, the soul-draining misery of this place. Mud and rocks cut into her bare feet, but the pain was distant as she took in the dozen pale faces peering from the ferns. "*Hurry, hurry, hurry,*" she whispered.

The van would wait only so long.

One of the girls swayed as she got to her feet, aiming for the slope beyond, but Sofie gripped her beneath a bony shoulder, keeping her upright as they staggered along, ferns brushing their legs, roots tangling their feet. Faster. They had to be *faster*—

A siren wailed.

This one, Sofie had not heard before. But she knew its blaring screech for what it was: *Escape*.

Flashlight beams shot through the trees as Sofie and the children crested the lip of a hill, half falling into the fern-laden gully. The dreadwolves were in their humanoid forms, then. Good—their eyes weren't as sharp in the dark this way. Bad, because it meant they carried guns.

Sofie's breathing hitched, but she focused, and sent her power slicing behind her. The flashlights went dark. Even firstlight could not stand against her power. Shouting rose—male, vicious.

Sofie hurried to the front of the group and Emile fell to the back to

make sure none were forgotten. Pride swelled in her chest, even as it mingled with terror.

She knew they'd never make it back to the camp alive if they were caught.

Thighs burning, Sofie sprinted up the steep side of the gully. She didn't want to think what the children were enduring, not when their knobbly-kneed legs looked barely able to hold them up. They reached the top of the hill just as the dreadwolves howled, an inhuman sound breaking from humanoid throats. A summons to the hunt.

She pushed the children faster. Mist and ferns and trees and stones—

When one of the boys collapsed, Sofie carried him, focusing on the too-delicate hands gripping the front of her shift.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry—*

And then there was the road, and the van. Agent Silverbow had waited.

She didn't know his real name. Had refused to let him tell her, though she had a good idea of what—who—he was. But he'd always be Silver to her. And he had waited.

He'd said he wouldn't. Had said Ophion would kill him for abandoning his current mission. *Pippa* would kill him. Or order one of her Lightfall soldiers to do it.

But he'd come with Sofie, had hidden out these two weeks, until Sofie had sent forth the ripple of firstlight last night—the one signal she'd dared make with the Vanir prowling the death camp—to tell him to be here in twenty-four hours.

She'd told him not to use his powers. Even if it would've made this far safer and easier, it would have drained him too much for the escape. And she needed him at full strength now.

In the moonlight, Silver's face was pale above the imperial uniform he'd stolen, his hair slicked back like any preening officer. He grimaced at Emile, then at the eleven other kids—clearly calculating how many could fit into the nondescript white van.

“All,” Sofie said as she hurtled for the vehicle, her voice raw. “All, Silver.”

He understood. He'd always understood her.

He leapt out of the car with preternatural grace and opened the rear doors. A minute later, squeezed against Silver in the front of the van, his warmth heating her through her threadbare clothes, Sofie could hardly



draw breath fast enough as he floored the gas pedal. His thumb brushed over her shoulder, again and again, as if reassuring himself that she was there, that she'd made it.

None of the children spoke. None of them cried.

As the van barreled into the night, Sofie found herself wondering if they still could.

It took them thirty minutes to reach the port city of Servast.

Sofie leaned on Silver, who saw to it, even while racing down the bumpy, winding country road, that the children found the food in the bags he'd stashed in the back. Only enough for three, but the children knew how to stretch a scant spread. He made sure Sofie ate, too. Two weeks in that camp had nearly wrecked her. She didn't understand how these children had survived months. Years. Her brother had survived *three years*.

Silver said quietly as they rounded a sharp curve, "The Hind is close by. I received a report this morning that she was in Alcene." A small city not two hours away—one of the vital depots along the Spine, the north-south network of train tracks that provided ammo and supplies to the imperial troops. "Our spies indicated she was headed this way."

Sofie's stomach tightened, but she focused on donning the clothes and shoes Silver had brought for her to change into. "Then let's hope we make it to the coast before she does."

His throat bobbed. She dared ask, "Pippa?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw. He and Pippa had been jockeying for a promotion into Command's inner ranks for years now. *A crazed fanatic*, Silver had called Pippa on more than one occasion, usually after her Lightfall squadron had led a brutal attack that left no survivors. But Sofie understood Pippa's devotion—she herself had grown up passing as fully human, after all. Had learned exactly how they were treated—how Pippa had likely been treated by the Vanir her entire life. Some things, some experiences, Silver could never understand.

Silver said, "No word yet. She'd better be where she promised to be." Disapproval and distrust laced every word.

Sofie said nothing else as they drove. She wouldn't tell him the details of the intelligence she'd gathered, for all that he had done and meant to her, despite the silent hours spent together, bodies and souls merging. She wouldn't tell anyone—not until Command came through on their

promises.

The Asteri had probably realized what she'd discovered. They'd no doubt sent the Hind after her to stop her from telling anyone else.

But the more immediate threat came from the dreadwolves closing in with every mile they hurried toward Servast, hounds on a scent. Silver's frequent glances in the rearview mirror told her that he knew it, too.

The two of them could take on perhaps a handful of wolf shifters—they'd done so before. But there would be more than a handful for an escape from Kavalla. Far more than they could face and live.

She'd prepared for that eventuality. Had already handed over her comm-crystal to Command before entering Kavalla. That precious, sole line of communication to their most valued spy. She knew they'd keep the small chunk of quartz safe. Just as Silver would keep Emile safe. He'd given her his word.

When they emerged from the van, mist wreathed the narrow docks of Servast, writhing over the chill, night-dark waters of the Haldren Sea. It wended around the ancient stone houses of the port town, the firstlight in the few lampposts above the cobblestone streets flickering. No lights shone behind the shuttered windows; not one car or pedestrian moved in the deep shadows and fog.

It was as if the streets of Servast had been emptied in advance of their arrival. As if its citizens—mostly poor fisher-folk, both human and Vanir allied with the House of Many Waters—had hunkered down, some instinct bleating that the fog was not to be braved. Not this night.

Not with dreadwolves on the prowl.

Silver led the way, hair peeking from beneath the cap he'd donned, his attention darting this way and that, his gun within easy reach at his side. She'd seen him kill efficiently with his power, but sometimes a gun was easier.

Emile kept close to Sofie as they crept down the age-worn streets, through the empty markets. She could feel eyes on her from behind the closed shutters. But no one opened a door to offer help.

Sofie didn't care. As long as that boat waited where she'd been told it would be, the world could go to Hel.

Mercifully, the *Bodegraven* was idling at the end of a long wooden dock three blocks ahead, silver letters bright against her black hull. A few firstlights glowed in the small steamer's portholes, but the decks remained quiet. Emile gasped, as if it were a vision from Luna.

Sofie prayed the other Ophion boats would be waiting beyond the harbor to provide backup, exactly as Command had promised in return for the valuable asset she'd gone into the camp to retrieve. They hadn't cared that the valuable asset was her brother. Only what she told them he could do.

She scanned the streets, the docks, the skies.

The power in her veins thrummed in time to her heart. A counter-beat. A bone-drum, a death knell. A warning.

They had to go *now*.

She started, but Silver's broad hand clamped on her shoulder.

"They're here," he said in his northern accent. With his sharp senses, he could detect the wolves better than she could.

Sofie surveyed the sloping rooftops, the cobblestones, the fog. "How close?"

Dread filled Silver's handsome face. "Everywhere. They're fucking everywhere."

Only three blocks separated them from salvation. Shouts echoed off the stones a block away. "*There! There!*"

One heartbeat to decide. One heartbeat—Emile halted, fear bright in his dark eyes.

No more fear. No more pain.

Sofie hissed at Silver, "*Run.*" Silver reached for his gun, but she shoved his hand down, getting in his face. "Get the kids to the boat and go. I'll hold the wolves off and meet you there."

Some of the children were already bolting for the dock. Emile waited. "Run!" she told Silver again. He touched her cheek—the softest of caresses—and sprinted after the children, roaring for the captain to rev the engines. None of them would survive if they didn't depart now.

She whirled to Emile. "Get on that boat."

His eyes—their mother's eyes—widened. "But how will you—"

"I promise I will find you again, Emile. Remember all I told you. *Go.*"

When she embraced his lanky, bony body, she let herself inhale one breath of his scent, the one that lay beneath the acrid layers of dirt and waste from the camp. Then Emile staggered away, half tripping over himself as he marked the lingering power building at her fingertips.

But her brother said softly, "*Make them pay.*"

She closed her eyes, readying herself. Gathering her power. Lights went out on the block around her. When she opened her eyes to the

newfound darkness, Emile had reached the dock. Silver waited at the ramp, beckoning beneath the one streetlight that remained lit. Her stare met Silver's.

She nodded once—hoping it conveyed all that was within her heart—and aimed for the dreadwolves' howls.

Sofie sprinted right into the golden beams of the headlights of four cars emblazoned with the Asteri's symbol: *SPQM* and its wreath of seven stars. All crammed full of dreadwolves in imperial uniforms, guns out.

Sofie instantly spied the golden-haired female lounging in the front of the military convertible. A silver torque glimmered against her neck.

The Hind.

The deer shifter had two snipers poised beside her in the open-air car, rifles trained on Sofie. Even in the darkness, Lidia Cervos's hair shimmered, her beautiful face passive and cold. Amber eyes fixed on Sofie, lit with smug amusement. Triumph.

Sofie whipped around a corner before their shots cracked like thunder. The snarl of the Hind's dreadwolves rumbled in the mist behind her as she charged into Servast proper, away from the harbor. From that ship and the children. From Emile.

Silver couldn't use his power to get her. He had no idea where she was.

Sofie's breath sawed out of her chest as she sprinted down the empty, murky streets. A blast from the boat's horn blared through the misty night, as if pleading with her to hurry.

In answer, half a dozen unearthly howls rose up behind her. All closing in.

Some had taken their wolf form, then.

Claws thundered against the pavement nearby, and Sofie gritted her teeth, cutting down another alley, heading for the one place all the maps she'd studied suggested she might stand a chance. The ship's horn blasted again, a final warning that it would leave.

If she could only make it a bit deeper into the city—a bit deeper—  
Fangs gnashed behind her.

*Keep moving.* Not only away from the Vanir on her tail, but from the snipers on the ground, waiting for the open shot. From the Hind, who must know what information Sofie bore. Sofie supposed she should be flattered the Hind herself had come to oversee this.

The small market square appeared ahead, and Sofie barreled for the fountain in its center, punching a line of her power straight for it, shearing through rock and metal until water sprayed, a geyser coating the market square. Wolves splashed into the water as they surged from the surrounding streets, shifting as they cornered her.

In the center of the flooded square, Sofie paused.

The wolves in human forms wore imperial uniforms. Tiny silver darts glimmered along their collars. A dart for every rebel spy broken. Her stomach flipped. Only one type of dreadwolf had those silver darts. The Hind's private guard. The most elite of the shifters.

A throaty whistle sounded through the port. A warning and a farewell.

So Sofie leapt onto the lip of the fountain and smiled at the wolves closing in. They wouldn't kill her. Not when the Hind was waiting to interrogate her. Too bad they didn't know what Sofie truly was. Not a human, nor a witch.

She let the power she'd gathered by the docks unspool.

Crackling energy curled at her fingertips and amid the strands of her short brown hair. One of the dreadwolves understood then—matched what he was seeing with the myths Vanir whispered to their children.

*"She's a fucking thunderbird!"* the wolf roared—just as Sofie unleashed the power she'd gathered on the water flooding the square. On the dreadwolves standing ankle-deep in it.

They didn't stand a chance.

Sofie pivoted toward the docks as the electricity finished slithering over the stones, hardly sparing a glance for the smoking, half-submerged carcasses. The silver darts along their collars glowed molten-hot.

Another whistle. She could still make it.

Sofie splashed through the flooded square, breath ragged in her throat.

The dreadwolf had been only half-right. She was part thunderbird—her great-grandmother had mated with a human long ago, before being executed. The gift, more legend than truth these days, had resurfaced in Sofie.

It was why the rebels had wanted her so badly, why they'd sent her out on such dangerous missions. Why Pippa had come to value her. Sofie smelled like and could pass for a human, but in her veins lurked an ability that could kill in an instant. The Asteri had long ago hunted most thunderbirds to extinction. She'd never learned how her great-grandmother had survived, but the descendants had kept the bloodline secret. *She* had

kept it secret.

Until that day three years ago when her family had been killed and taken. When she'd found the nearest Ophion base and showed them exactly what she could do. When she told them what she wanted them to do for her in exchange.

She hated them. Almost as much as she hated the Asteri and the world they'd built. For three years, Ophion had dangled Emile's whereabouts above her, promising to find him, to help her free him, if she could do *one more mission*. Pippa and Silver might believe in the cause, though they differed in their methods of how to fight for it, but Emile had always been Sofie's cause. A free world would be wonderful. But what did it matter if she had no family to share it with?

So many times, for those rebels, she had drawn up power from the grid, from lights and machines, and killed and killed, until her soul lay in tatters. She'd often debated going rogue and finding her brother herself, but she was no spy. She had no network. So she'd stayed, and covertly built up her own bait to dangle before Ophion. Made sure they knew the importance of what she'd gleaned before she entered Kavalla.

Faster, faster she pushed herself toward the dock. If she didn't make it, maybe there would be a smaller boat that she could take to the steamer. Maybe she'd just swim until she was close enough for Silver to spot her, and easily reach her with his power.

Half-crumbling houses and uneven streets passed; fog drifted in veils.

The stretch of wooden dock between Sofie and the steamer pulling away lay clear. She raced for it.

She could make out Silver on the *Bodegraven's* deck, monitoring her approach. But why didn't he use his power to reach her? Another few feet closer, and she spied the hand pressed to his bleeding shoulder.

Cthona have mercy on him. Silver didn't appear badly hurt, but she had a feeling she knew what kind of bullet he'd been hit with. A bullet with a core of gorsian stone—one that would stifle magic.

His power was useless. But if a sniper had hit Silver on the ship ... Sofie drew up short.

The convertible sat in the shadows of the building across from the docks. The Hind still lounged like a queen, a sniper beside her with his rifle trained on Sofie. Where the second had gone, she didn't know. Only this one mattered. This one, and his rifle.

It was likely chock-full of gorsian bullets. They'd bring her down in

seconds.

The Hind's golden eyes glowed like coals in the dimness. Sofie gauged the distance to the end of the dock, the rope Silver had thrown down, trailing with every inch the *Bodegraven* chugged toward the open water.

The Hind inclined her head in challenge. A deceptively calm voice slid from between her red lips. "Are you faster than a bullet, thunderbird?"

Sofie didn't wait to banter. As swift as a wind through the fjords of her native land, she hurtled down the dock. She knew the sniper's rifle tracked her.

The end of the dock, the dark harbor beyond, loomed.

The rifle cracked.

Silver's roar cleaved the night before Sofie hit the wood planks, splinters cutting into her face, the impact ricocheting through one eye. Pain burst through her right thigh, leaving a wake of shredded flesh and shattered bone, so violent it robbed even the scream from her lungs.

Silver's bellow stopped abruptly—and then he yelled to the captain, "Go, go, go, go!"

Facedown on the dock, Sofie knew it was bad. She lifted her head, swallowing her shriek of pain, blood leaking from her nose. The droning hum of an Omega-boat's energy rocked through her even before she spied the approaching lights beneath the harbor's surface.

Four imperial submersible warships converged like sharks on the *Bodegraven*.

Pippa Spetsos stood aboard the rebel ship *Orrae*, the Haldren Sea a dark expanse around her. In the distance, the firstlights of the towns along Pangera's northern coast twinkled like gold stars.

But her attention remained fixed on the gleam of Servast. On the little light sailing toward them.

The *Bodegraven* was on time.

Pippa pressed a hand against the cold, hard armor covering her breast, right above the sinking sun insignia of the Lightfall unit. She would not lose that final breath of relief—not until she saw Sofie. Until she'd secured the assets Sofie carried with her: the boy and the intel.

Then she'd demonstrate to Sofie precisely how Command felt about being manipulated.

Agent Silverbow, the arrogant bastard, had followed the woman he

loved. She knew the asset Sofie brought with her meant little to him. The fool. But the possibility of the intel that Sofie claimed to have spent years covertly gathering for Ophion ... even Silverbow would want that.

Captain Richmond stepped up beside her. "Report," she ordered.

He'd learned the hard way not to disobey her. Learned exactly who in Command supported her, and would rain down Hel on her behalf. Monitoring the approaching vessel, Richmond said, "We've made radio contact. Your operative is not on that ship."

Pippa went still. "The brother?"

"The boy is there. And eleven other children from Kavalla. Sofie Renast stayed behind to buy them time. I'm sorry."

Sorry. Pippa had lost track of how many times she'd heard that fucking word.

But right now ... Emile had made it to the ship. Was gaining him worth losing Sofie?

It was the gamble they'd taken in even allowing Sofie to go into Kavalla: possibly losing one valuable asset in the quest to seize another. But that was before Sofie had left—and then informed them, right before entering the camp, that she'd attained vital intel on their enemies. To lose Sofie now, with that crucial intel on the line ...

She hissed at the captain, "I want—"

A human sailor barreled out the glass-enclosed bridge door, skin eerily pale in the moonlight. He faced the captain, then Pippa, uncertain whom to report to. "The *Bodegraven's* got four Omegas on her tail, closing in fast. Agent Silverbow is down—gorsian bullet to the shoulder."

Pippa's blood chilled. Silverbow wouldn't be any help with a gorsian bullet in him. "They're going to sink that ship, rather than let those children go."

She had not yet become so numb to the horrors of this world that it didn't roil her stomach. Captain Richmond swore softly.

Pippa ordered, "Prepare the gunners." Even if the odds were slim that *they* would survive an assault by the Omegas, they could provide a distraction. The captain grunted his agreement. But the sailor who'd come rushing out of the bridge gasped and pointed.

On the horizon, each and every light in Servast was winking out. The wave of darkness swept inland.

"What in Hel—"

"Not Hel," Pippa murmured as the blackout spread.



Sofie. Or ... Her eyes narrowed on the *Bodegraven*.

Pippa ran for the bridge's better view. She arrived, panting, Richmond beside her, in time to see the *Bodegraven* racing for them—the submerged lights of the four Omega-boats flickering behind, closing in.

But as they did, a mighty white light soared beneath the surface. It wrapped its long arms around the nearest Omega.

The white light leapt away a moment later, flying for the next boat. No submersible lights glowed in its wake. On the radar before her, the Omega-boat vanished.

“Holy gods,” Richmond said.

*Something like that*, Pippa wanted to say. It was Sofie's strange gift: not only electricity, but firstlight power, too. Energy of any type was hers to command, to suck into herself. Her kind had been hunted to extinction by the Asteri centuries ago because of that mighty, unconquerable gift—or so it had seemed.

But now there were two of them.

Sofie said her brother's powers dwarfed her own. Powers Pippa now witnessed as the light leapt from the second boat—another blackout—and raced for the third.

She could make out no sign of Emile on the *Bodegraven*'s deck, but he had to be there.

“What can bring down an Omega with no torpedoes?” murmured one of the sailors. Closer now, the light swept beneath the surface for the third boat, and even with the distance, Pippa could see the core of long, bright white tendrils streaming from it—like wings.

“An angel?” someone whispered. Pippa scoffed privately. There were no angels among the few Vanir in Ophion. If Pippa had her way, there'd be no Vanir among them at all ... save for ones like this. Vanir powers, but a human soul and body.

Emile was a great prize for the rebellion—Command would be pleased indeed.

The third Omega submersible went black, vanishing into the inky deep. Pippa's blood sang at the terrible glory of it. Only one Omega left.

“Come on,” Pippa breathed. “Come on ...” Too much rested on that boat. The balance of this war might hang on it.

“Two brimstone torpedoes fired from the remaining Omega,” a sailor shouted.

But the white light slammed into the Omega, miles' worth of firstlight

sending the final ship spiraling into a watery abyss.

And then a leap outward, a whip of light illuminating the waves above it to turquoise. A stretching hand.

A sailor reported hoarsely, awe and anticipation in every word, “Brimstone torpedoes are gone from the radar. Vanished.”

Only the lights of the *Bodegraven* remained, like dim stars in a sea of darkness.

“Commander Spetsos?” Richmond asked.

But Pippa ignored Richmond, and stalked into the warmth of the bridge’s interior, yanking a pair of long-range binoculars from a hook just inside the door. Within seconds, she was out on the wind-whipped deck again, binoculars focused on the *Bodegraven*.

Emile stood there, aged but definitely the same child from Sofie’s photos, no more than a lean figure alone at the prow. Staring toward the watery graveyard as they passed over it. Then to the land beyond. He slowly sank to his knees.

Smiling to herself, Pippa shifted the view on the binoculars and gazed toward the thorough blackness of Pangerera.

Lying on her side, the lap of waves against the quay and the drip of her blood on the surface beneath the wooden slats the only sounds she could hear, Sofie waited to die.

Her arm dangled off the end of the dock as the *Bodegraven* sailed toward those savior lights on the sea. Toward Pippa. Pippa had brought battleships to guide the *Bodegraven* to safety. Likely to ensure Sofie was on it, along with Emile, but ... Pippa had still come. Ophion had come.

Tears slid along her cheeks, onto the wood slats. Everything hurt.

She’d known this would happen, if she pushed too far, demanded too much power, as she had tonight. The firstlight always hurt so much worse than electricity. Charred her insides even as it left her craving more of its potent power. It was why she avoided it as much as possible. Why the idea of Emile had been so enticing to Command, to Pippa and her Lightfall squadron.

There was nothing left inside her now. Not one spark of power. And no one was coming to save her.

Footsteps thudded on the dock, rattling her body. Sofie bit her lip against the flashing pain.

Polished black boots stopped inches from her nose. Sofie shifted her

good eye upward. The Hind's pale face peered down.

"Naughty girl," the Hind said in that fair voice. "Electrocuting my dreadwolves." She ran an amber eye over Sofie. "What a remarkable power you have. And what a remarkable power your brother has, downing my Omega-boats. It seems all the legends about your kind are true."

Sofie said nothing.

The spy-breaker smiled slightly. "Tell me who you passed the intel to, and I will walk off this dock and let you live. I'll let you see your darling little brother."

Sofie said through stiff lips, "No one."

The Hind merely said, "Let's go for a ride, Sofie Renast."

The dreadwolves bundled Sofie into a nondescript boat. No one spoke as it sailed out to sea. As an hour passed, and the sky lightened. Only when they were so far from the shore that it was no longer a darker shadow against the night sky did the Hind lift a hand. The engines cut off, and the boat bobbed in the waves.

Again, those polished, knee-high boots approached Sofie. She'd been bound, gorsian shackles around her wrists to stifle her power. Her leg had gone numb with agony.

With a nod to a wolf, the Hind ordered that Sofie should be hauled to her feet. Sofie bit down her cry of pain. Behind her, another wolf opened the transom gate, exposing the small platform off the boat's back. Sofie's throat closed up.

"Since your brother has bestowed such a death upon a multitude of imperial soldiers, this will be an apt punishment for you," the Hind said, stepping onto the platform, not seeming to care about the water splashing over her boots. She pulled a small white stone from her pocket, lifting it for Sofie to see, and then chucked it into the water. Observed it with her Vanir-sharp eyes as it dropped down, down, down into the inky blackness.

"At that depth, you'll likely drown before you hit the seafloor," the Hind observed, her golden hair shifting across her imperious face. She slid her hands into her pockets as the wolves knelt at Sofie's feet and bound them together with chains weighted with lead blocks.

"I'll ask you again," the Hind said, angling her head, silver torque glinting at her neck. "With whom did you share the intelligence you collected before you went into Kavalla?"

Sofie felt the ache of her missing fingernails. Saw the faces in that camp. The people she'd left behind. Her cause had been Emile—yet

Ophion was right in so many ways. And some small part of her had been glad to kill for Ophion, to fight for those people. Would keep fighting for them, for Emile, now. She gritted out, “I told you: no one.”

“Very well, then.” The Hind pointed to the water. “You know how this ends.”

Sofie kept her face blank to conceal her shock at her good luck, one last gift from Solas. Apparently, even the Hind was not as clever as she believed herself to be. She offered a swift, horrible death—but it was nothing compared to the endless torture Sofie had expected.

“Put her on the platform.”

A dreadwolf—a hulking, dark-haired male—objected, sneering, “We’ll get it out of her.” Mordoc, the Hind’s second in command. Almost as feared as his commander. Especially with his particular gifts.

The Hind didn’t so much as look at him. “I’m not wasting my time on this. She says she didn’t tell anyone, and I’m inclined to believe her.” A slow smile. “So the intel will die with her.”

It was all the Hind needed to say. The wolves hauled Sofie onto the platform. She swallowed a cry at the wave of agony that rippled through her thigh. Icy water sprayed, soaking through her clothes, burning and numbing.

Sofie couldn’t stop her shaking. Tried to remember the kiss of the air, the scent of the sea, the gray of the sky before dawn. She would not see the sunrise, only minutes away. She’d never see another one again.

She had taken the beauty and simplicity of living for granted. How she wished she’d savored it more. Every single moment.

The deer shifter prowled closer. “Any last words?”

Emile had gotten away. It was all that mattered. He’d be kept safe now.

Sofie smiled crookedly at the Hind. “*Go to Hel.*”

Mordoc’s clawed hands shoved her off the platform.

The frigid water hit Sofie like a bomb blast, and then the lead at her feet grabbed all that she was and might have been, and pulled her under.

The Hind stood, a phantom in the chilled mist of the Haldren Sea, and watched until Sofie Renast had been wrapped in Ogenas’s embrace.

PART I  
THE CHASM

# 1

For a Tuesday night at the Crescent City Ballet, the theater was unusually packed. The sight of the swarming masses in the lobby, drinking and chatting and mingling, filled Bryce Quinlan with a quiet sort of joy and pride.

There was only one reason why the theater was so packed tonight. With her Fae hearing, she could have sworn she heard the hundreds of voices all around her whispering, *Juniper Andromeda*. The star of tonight's performance.

Yet even with the crowd, an air of quiet reverence and serenity filled the space. As if it were a temple.

Bryce had the creeping sensation that the various ancient statues of the gods flanking the long lobby watched her. Or maybe that was the well-dressed older shifter couple standing by a reclining statue of Cthona, the earth goddess, naked and awaiting the embrace of her lover, Solas. The shifters—some sort of big cats, from their scents, and rich ones, judging by their watches and jewelry—blatantly ogled her.

Bryce offered them a bland, close-lipped smile.

Some variation of this had happened nearly every single day since the attack this past spring. The first few times had been overwhelming, unnerving—people coming up to her and sobbing with gratitude. Now they just stared.

Bryce didn't blame the people who wanted to speak to her, who *needed* to speak to her. The city had been healed—by her—but its people ...

Scores had been dead by the time her firstlight erupted through Lunathion. Hunt had been lucky, had been taking his last breaths, when the firstlight saved him. Five thousand other people had not been so lucky.

Their families had not been so lucky.

So many dark boats had drifted across the Istros to the mists of the Bone Quarter that they had looked like a bevy of black swans. Hunt had carried her into the skies to see it. The quays along the river had teemed with people, their mourning cries rising to the low clouds where she and Hunt had glided.

Hunt had only held her tighter and flown them home.

“Take a picture,” Ember Quinlan called now to the shifters from where she stood next to a marble torso of Ogenas rising from the waves, the ocean goddess’s full breasts peaked and arms upraised. “Only ten gold marks. Fifteen, if you want to be in it.”

“For fuck’s sake, Mom,” Bryce muttered. Ember stood with her hands on her hips, gorgeous in a silky gray gown and pashmina. “Please don’t.”

Ember opened her mouth, as if she’d say something else to the chastised shifters now hurrying toward the east staircase, but her husband interrupted her. “I second Bryce’s request,” Randall said, dashing in his navy suit.

Ember turned outraged dark eyes on Bryce’s stepfather—her only father, as far as Bryce was concerned—but Randall pointed casually to a broad frieze behind them. “That one reminds me of Athalar.”

Bryce arched a brow, grateful for the change of subject, and twisted toward where he’d pointed. On it, a powerful Fae male stood poised above an anvil, hammer raised skyward in one fist, lightning cracking from the skies, filling the hammer, and flowing down toward the object of the hammer’s intended blow: a sword.

Its label read simply: *Unknown sculptor. Palmira, circa 125 V.E.*

Bryce lifted her mobile and snapped a photo, pulling up her messaging thread with *Hunt Athalar Is Better at Sunball Than I Am*.

She couldn’t deny that. They’d gone to the local sunball field one sunny afternoon last week to play, and Hunt had promptly wiped the floor with her. He’d changed his name in her phone on the way home.

With a few sweeps of her thumbs, the picture zoomed off into the ether, along with her note: *Long-lost relative of yours?*

She slid her phone into her clutch to find her mother watching. “What?” Bryce muttered.

But Ember only motioned toward the frieze. “Who does it depict?”

Bryce checked the sliver of writing in the lower right corner. “It just says *The Making of the Sword*.”

Her mother peered at the half-faded etching. “In what language?”

Bryce tried to keep her posture relaxed. “The Old Language of the Fae.”

“Ah.” Ember pursed her lips, and Randall wisely drifted off through the crowd to study a towering statue of Luna aiming her bow toward the heavens, two hunting dogs at her feet and a stag nuzzling her hip. “You stayed fluent in it?”

“Yep,” Bryce said. Then added, “It’s come in handy.”

“I’d imagine so.” Ember tucked back a strand of her black hair.

Bryce moved to the next frieze dangling from the distant ceiling on near-invisible wires. “This one’s of the First Wars.” She scanned the relief carved into the ten-foot expanse of marble. “It’s about ...” She schooled her expression into neutrality.

“What?” Ember stepped closer to the depiction of an army of winged demons swooping down from the skies upon a terrestrial army gathered on the plain below.

“This one’s about Hel’s armies arriving to conquer Midgard during the First Wars,” Bryce finished, trying to keep her voice bland. To block out the flash of talons and fangs and leathery wings—the boom of her rifle resounding through her bones, the rivers of blood in the streets, the screaming and screaming and—

“You’d think this one would be a popular piece these days,” Randall observed, returning to their sides to study the frieze.

Bryce didn’t reply. She didn’t particularly enjoy discussing the events of the past spring with her parents. Especially not in the middle of a packed theater lobby.

Randall jerked his chin to the inscription. “What’s this one say?”

Keenly aware of her mother marking her every blink, Bryce kept her stance unaffected as she skimmed the text in the Old Language of the Fae.

It wasn’t that she was trying to hide what she’d endured. She *had* talked to her mom and dad about it a few times. But it always resulted in Ember crying, or ranting about the Vanir who’d locked out so many innocents, and the weight of all her mother’s emotions on top of all of *hers* ...

It was easier, Bryce had realized, to not bring it up. To let herself talk it out with Hunt, or sweat it out in Madame Kyrrah’s dance classes twice a week. Baby steps toward being ready for actual talk therapy, as Juniper kept suggesting, but both had helped immensely.



Bryce silently translated the text. “This is a piece from a larger collection—likely one that would have wrapped around the entire exterior of a building, each slab telling a different part of the story. This one says: *Thus the seven Princes of Hel looked in envy upon Midgard and unleashed their unholy hordes upon our united armies.*”

“Apparently nothing’s changed in fifteen thousand years,” Ember said, shadows darkening her eyes.

Bryce kept her mouth shut. She’d never told her mom about Prince Aidas—how he’d helped her twice now, and had seemed unaware of his brothers’ dark plans. If her mom knew she’d consorted with the fifth Prince of Hel, they’d have to redefine the concept of *going berserk*.

But then Ember said, “Couldn’t you get a job *here*?” She gestured with a tan hand to the CCB’s grand entrance, its ever-changing art exhibits in the lobby and on a few of the other levels. “You’re qualified. This would have been perfect.”

“There were no openings.” True. And she didn’t want to use her princess status to get one. She wanted to work at a place like the CCB’s art department on her own merit.

Her job at the Fae Archives ... Well, she definitely got that because they saw her as a Fae Princess. But it wasn’t the same, somehow. Because she hadn’t wanted to work there as badly.

“Did you even *try*?”

“Mom,” Bryce said, voice sharpening.

“Bryce.”

“Ladies,” Randall said, a teasing remark designed to fracture the growing tension.

Bryce smiled gratefully at him but found her mother frowning. She sighed up at the starburst chandeliers above the glittering throng. “All right, Mom. Out with it.”

“Out with what?” Ember asked innocently.

“Your opinion about my job.” Bryce gritted her teeth. “For years, you ragged on me for being an assistant, but now that I’m doing something better, it’s not good enough?”

This was so not the place, not with tons of people milling about within earshot, but she’d had it.

Ember didn’t seem to care as she said, “It’s not that it’s not good enough. It’s about where that job is.”

“The Fae Archives operate independently of *him*.”

“Oh? Because I remember him bragging that it was pretty much his personal library.”

Bryce said tightly, “Mom. The gallery is gone. I need a job. Forgive me if the usual corporate nine-to-five isn’t available to me right now. Or if CCB’s art department isn’t hiring.”

“I just don’t get why you couldn’t work something out with Jesiba. She’s still got that warehouse—surely she needs help with whatever she does there.”

Bryce refrained from rolling her eyes. Within a day of the attack on the city this spring, Jesiba had cleared out the gallery—and the precious volumes that made up all that remained of the ancient Great Library of Parthos. Most of Jesiba’s other pieces were now in a warehouse, many in crates, but Bryce had no idea where the sorceress had spirited off the Parthos books—one of the few remnants of the human world before the Asteri’s arrival. Bryce hadn’t dared question Jesiba about their current whereabouts. It was a miracle that the Asteri hadn’t been tipped off about the contraband books’ existence. “There are only so many times I can ask for a job without looking like I’m begging.”

“And we can’t have a princess do that.”

She’d lost count of how often she’d told her mom she wasn’t a princess. Didn’t want to be, and the Autumn King sure as shit didn’t want her to be, either. She hadn’t spoken to the asshole since that last time he’d come to see her at the gallery, right before her confrontation with Micah. When she’d revealed what power coursed through her veins.

It was an effort not to glance down at her chest, to where the front of her gauzy, pale blue dress plunged to just below her breasts, displaying the star-shaped mark between them. Thankfully, the back was high enough to hide the Horn tattooed there. Like an old scar, the white mark stood out starkly against her freckled, golden-tan skin. It hadn’t faded in the three months since the city had been attacked.

She’d already lost count of how many times she’d caught her mom staring at her star since arriving last night.

A cluster of gorgeous females—woodland nymphs, from their cedar-and-moss scents—meandered past, champagne in hand, and Bryce lowered her voice. “What do you want me to say? That I’ll move back home to Nidaros and pretend to be normal?”

“What’s so bad about normal?” Her mother’s beautiful face blazed with an inner fire that never banked—never, ever died out. “I think Hunt

would like living there.”

“Hunt still works for the 33rd, Mom,” Bryce said. “He’s second in command, for fuck’s sake. And while he might appease you by saying he’d *love* to live in Nidaros, don’t think for one minute he means it.”

“Way to throw him under the bus,” Randall said while keeping his attention on a nearby information placard.

Before Bryce could answer, Ember said, “Don’t think I haven’t noticed things between you two are weird.”

Trust her mom to bring up two topics she didn’t want to talk about in the space of five minutes. “In what way?”

“You’re together but not *together*,” Ember said bluntly. “What’s that about?”

“It’s none of your business.” It really wasn’t. But as if he’d heard her, the phone in her clutch buzzed. She yanked it out and peered at the screen.

Hunt had written, *I can only hope to have abs like those one day.*

Bryce couldn’t help her half smile as she peered back at the muscular Fae male on the frieze before answering. *I think you might have a few on him, actually ...*

“Don’t ignore me, Bryce Adelaide Quinlan.”

Her phone buzzed again, but she didn’t read Hunt’s reply as she said to her mother, “Can you please drop it? And don’t bring it up when Hunt gets here.”

Ember’s mouth popped open, but Randall said, “Agreed. No job or romance interrogations when Hunt arrives.”

Her mother frowned doubtfully, but Bryce said, “Mom, just ... stop, okay? I don’t mind my job, and the thing between me and Hunt is what he and I agreed on. I’m doing fine. Let’s leave it at that.”

It was a lie. Sort of.

She actually *liked* her job—a lot. The private wing of the Fae Archives housed a trove of ancient artifacts that had been sorely neglected for centuries—now in need of researching and cataloging so they could be sent on a traveling exhibit next spring.

She set her own hours, answering only to the head of research, an owl shifter—one of the rare non-Fae staff—who only worked from dusk to dawn, so they barely overlapped. The worst part of her day was entering the sprawling complex through the main buildings, where the sentries all gawked at her. Some even bowed. And then she had to walk through the atrium, where the librarians and patrons tended to stare, too.

Everyone these days stared—she really fucking hated it. But Bryce didn't want to tell her mom any of that.

Ember said, "Fine. You know I just worry."

Something in Bryce's chest softened. "I know, Mom. And I know ..."  
She struggled for the words. "It really helps to know that I can move back home if I want to. But not right now."

"Fair enough," Randall chimed in, giving Ember a pointed glance before looping his arm around her waist and steering her toward another frieze across the theater lobby.

Bryce used their distraction to take out her phone, and found that Hunt had written two messages:

*Want to count my abs when we get home from the ballet?*

Her stomach tightened, and she'd never been more grateful that her parents possessed a human sense of smell as her toes curled in her heels.

Hunt had added, *I'll be there in five, by the way. Isaiah held me up with a new case.*

She sent a thumbs-up, then replied: *Pleaaaaaaase get here ASAP. I just got a major grilling about my job. And you.*

Hunt wrote back immediately, and Bryce read as she slowly trailed her parents to where they observed the frieze: *What about me?*

"Bryce," her mom called, pointing to the frieze before her. "Check out this one. It's JJ."

Bryce looked up from her phone and grinned. "Badass warrior Jelly Jubilee." There, hanging on the wall, was a rendering of a pegasus—though not a unicorn-pegasus, like Bryce's childhood toy—charging into battle. An armored figure, helmet obscuring any telltale features, rode atop the beast, sword upraised. Bryce snapped a photo and sent it to Hunt.

*First Wars JJ, reporting for duty!*

She was about to reply to Hunt's *What about me?* question when her mom said, "Tell Hunt to stop flirting and hurry up already."

Bryce scowled at her mom and put her phone away.

So many things had changed since revealing her heritage as the Autumn King's daughter and a Starborn heir: people gawking, the hat and sunglasses she now wore on the street to attain some level of anonymity, the job at the Fae Archives. But at least her mother remained the same.

Bryce couldn't decide whether that was a comfort or not.

Entering the private box in the angels' section of the theater—the stage-

left boxes a level above the floor—Bryce grinned toward the heavy golden curtain blocking the stage from sight. Only ten minutes remained until the show began. Until the world could see how insanely talented Juniper was.

Ember gracefully sank into one of the red velvet chairs at the front of the box, Randall claiming the seat beside her. Bryce's mother didn't smile. Considering that the royal Fae boxes occupied the wing across from them, Bryce didn't blame her. And considering that many of the bejeweled and shining nobility were staring at Bryce, it was a miracle Ember hadn't flipped them off yet.

Randall whistled at the prime seats as he peered over the golden rail. "Nice view."

The air behind Bryce went electric, buzzing and alive. The hair on her arms prickled. A male voice sounded from the vestibule, "A benefit to having wings: no one wants to sit behind you."

Bryce had developed a keen awareness of Hunt's presence, like scenting lightning on the wind. He had only to enter a room and she'd know if he was there by that surge of power in her body. Like her magic, her very blood answered to his.

Now she found Hunt standing in the doorway, already tugging at the black tie around his neck.

Just ... gods-damn.

He'd worn a black suit and white shirt, both cut to his powerful, muscled body, and the effect was devastating. Add in the gray wings framing it all and she was a goner.

Hunt smirked knowingly, but nodded to Randall. "You clean up good, man. Sorry I'm late." Bryce could barely hear her dad's reply as she surveyed the veritable malakim feast before her.

Hunt had cut his hair shorter last month. Not too short, since she'd staged an intervention with the stylist before the draki male could chop off all those beautiful locks, but gone was the shoulder-length hair. The shorter style suited him, but it was still a shock weeks later to find his hair neatly trimmed to his nape, with only a few pieces in the front still unruly enough to peek through the hole in his sunball hat. Tonight, however, he'd brushed it into submission, revealing the clear expanse of his forehead.

That was still a shock, too: no tattoo. No sign of the years of torment the angel had endured beyond the *C* stamped over the slave's tattoo on his right wrist, marking him a free male. Not a full citizen, but closer to it than the peregrini.

The mark was hidden by the cuff of his suit jacket and the shirt beneath, and Bryce lifted her gaze to Hunt's face. Her mouth went dry at the bald hunger filling his dark, angular eyes. "You look okay, too," he said, winking.

Randall coughed, but leafed through the playbill. Ember did the same beside him.

Bryce ran a hand down the front of her blue dress. "This old thing?"

Hunt chuckled, and tugged on his tie again.

Bryce sighed. "Please tell me you're not one of those big, tough males who makes a big fuss about how he hates getting dressed up."

It was Ember's turn to cough, but Hunt's eyes danced as he said to Bryce, "Good thing I don't have to do it that often, huh?"

A knock on the box door shut off her reply, and a satyr server appeared, carrying a tray of complimentary champagne. "From Miss Andromeda," the cloven-hoofed male announced.

Bryce grinned. "Wow." She made a mental note to double the size of the bouquet she'd planned to send to June tomorrow. She took the glass the satyr extended to her, but before she could raise it to her lips, Hunt halted her with a gentle hand on her wrist. She'd officially ended her No Drinking rule after this spring, but she suspected the touch had nothing to do with reminding her to go slow.

Arching a brow, she waited until the server had left before asking, "You want to make a toast?"

Hunt reached into an inner pocket of his suit and pulled out a small container of mints. Or what seemed like mints. She barely had time to react before he plopped a white pill into her glass.

"What the *Hel*—"

"Just testing." Hunt studied her glass. "If it's drugged or poisoned, it'll turn green."

Ember chimed in with her approval. "The satyr said the drinks are from Juniper, but how do you know, Bryce? Anything could be in it." Her mom nodded at Hunt. "Good thinking."

Bryce wanted to object, but ... Hunt had a point. "And what am I supposed to do with it now? It's ruined."

"The pill is tasteless," Hunt said, clinking his flute against hers when the liquid remained pale gold. "Bottoms up."

"Classy," she said, but drank. It still tasted like champagne—no hint of the dissolved pill lingered.

The golden sconces and dangling starburst chandeliers dimmed twice in a five-minute warning, and Bryce and Hunt took their seats behind her parents. From this angle, she could barely make out Fury in the front row.

Hunt seemed to track the direction of her attention. “She didn’t want to sit with us?”

“Nope.” Bryce took in her friend’s shining dark hair, her black suit. “She wants to see every drop of Juniper’s sweat.”

“I’d think she saw that every night,” Hunt said wryly, and Bryce waggled her eyebrows.

But Ember twisted in her seat, a genuine smile lighting her face. “How are Fury and Juniper doing? Did they move in together yet?”

“Two weeks ago.” Bryce craned her neck to study Fury, who seemed to be reading the playbill. “And they’re really good. I think Fury’s here to stay this time.”

Her mom asked carefully, “And you and Fury? I know things were weird for a while.”

Hunt did her a favor and made himself busy on his phone. Bryce idly flipped the pages of her playbill. “Working things out with Fury took some time. But we’re good.”

Randall asked, “Is Axtar still doing what she does best?”

“Yep.” Bryce was content to leave her friend’s mercenary business at that. “She’s happy, though. And more important, June and Fury are happy together.”

“Good,” Ember said, smiling softly. “They make such a beautiful couple.” And because her mom was ... well, her mom, Ember sized up Bryce and Hunt and said with no shame whatsoever, “You two would as well, if you got your shit together.”

Bryce slouched down in her seat, lifting her playbill to block her red-hot face. Why weren’t the lights dimming yet? But Hunt took it in stride and said, “All good things come to those who wait, Ember.”

Bryce scowled at the arrogance and amusement in his tone, throwing her playbill into her lap as she declared, “Tonight’s a big deal for June. Try not to ruin it with nonsensical banter.”

Ember patted Bryce’s knee before twisting back to face the stage.

Hunt drained his champagne, and Bryce’s mouth dried out again at the sight of the broad, strong column of his throat working as he swallowed, then said, “Here I was, thinking you loved the banter.”

Bryce had the option of either drooling or turning away, so rather than

ruin her dress, she observed the crowd filtering into their seats. More than one person peered toward her box.

Especially from the Fae boxes across the way. No sign of her father or Ruhn, but she recognized a few cold faces. Tristan Flynn's parents—Lord and Lady Hawthorne—were among them, their professional snob of a daughter Sathia sitting between them. None of the glittering nobility seemed pleased at Bryce's presence. Good.

"Tonight's a big deal for June, remember," Hunt murmured, lips quirking upward.

She glowered. "What?"

Hunt inclined his head toward the Fae nobility sneering across the space. "I can see you thinking about some way to piss them off."

"I was not."

He leaned in to whisper, his breath brushing her neck, "You were, and I know it because I was thinking the same thing." A few cameras flashed from above and below, and she knew people weren't snapping photos of the stage curtain.

Bryce peeled back to survey Hunt, the face she knew as well as her own. For a moment, for a too-brief eternity, they stared at each other. Bryce swallowed, but couldn't bring herself to move. To break the contact.

Hunt's throat bobbed. But he said nothing more, either.

Three fucking *months* of this torture. Stupid agreement. Friends, but more. More, but without any of the physical benefits.

Hunt said at last, voice thick, "It's really nice of you to be here for Juniper."

She tossed her hair over a shoulder. "You're making it sound like it's some big sacrifice."

He jerked his chin toward the still-sneering Fae nobility. "You can't wear a hat and sunglasses here, so ... yeah."

She admitted, "I wish she'd gotten us seats in the nosebleed section."

Instead, Juniper—to accommodate Hunt's wings—had gotten them this box. Right where everyone could see the Starborn Princess and the Fallen Angel.

The orchestra began tuning up, and the sounds of slowly awakening violins and flutes drew Bryce's attention to the pit. Her muscles tensed of their own volition, as if priming to move. To dance.

Hunt leaned in again, voice a low purr, "You look beautiful, you know."



“Oh, I know,” she said, even as she bit her lower lip to keep from grinning. The lights began dimming, so Bryce decided to Hel with it. “When do I get to count those abs, Athalar?”

The angel cleared his throat—once, twice—and shifted in his seat, feathers rustling. Bryce smiled smugly.

He murmured, “Four more months, Quinlan.”

“And three days,” she shot back.

His eyes shone in the growing darkness.

“What are you two talking about back there?” Ember asked, and Bryce replied without tearing her gaze from Hunt’s, “Nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing. It was the stupid bargain she’d made with Hunt: that rather than diving right into bed, they’d wait until Winter Solstice to act on their desires. Spend the summer and autumn getting to know each other without the burdens of a psychotic Archangel and demons on the prowl.

So they had. Torturing each other with flirting was allowed, but sometimes, tonight especially ... she really wished she’d never suggested it. Wished she could drag him into the coat closet of the vestibule behind them and show him precisely how much she liked that suit.

Four months, three days, and ... She peeked at the delicate watch on her wrist. Four hours. And at the stroke of midnight on Winter Solstice, *she* would be stroking—

“Burning fucking Solas, Quinlan,” Hunt grunted, again shifting in his seat.

“Sorry,” she muttered, thankful for the second time in an hour that her parents didn’t have the sense of smell that Hunt possessed.

But Hunt laughed, sliding an arm along the back of her chair, fingers tangling in her unbound hair. He seemed contented. Assured of his place there.

She glanced at her parents, sitting with similar closeness, and couldn’t help but smile. Her mom had taken a while to act on her desires with Randall, too. Well, there’d been some initial ... stuff. That was as much as Bryce let herself think about them. But she knew it had been nearly a year before they’d made things official. And they’d turned out pretty damn well.

So these months with Hunt, she cherished them. As much as she cherished her dance classes with Madame Kyrah. No one except Hunt really understood what she’d gone through—only Hunt had been at the

Gate.

She scanned his striking features, her lips curving again. How many nights had they stayed up, talking about everything and nothing? Ordering in dinner, watching movies or reality shows or sunball, playing video games, or sitting on the roof of the apartment building, observing malakim and witches and draki dart across the sky like shooting stars.

He'd shared so many things about his past, sad and horrible and joyous. She wanted to know all of it. And the more she learned, the more she found herself sharing, and the more she ...

Light flared from the star on her chest.

Bryce clapped a hand over it. "I shouldn't have worn this stupid dress."

Her fingers could barely cover the star that was blaring white light through the dim theater, illuminating every face now turned her way as the orchestra quieted in anticipation of the conductor's approach.

She didn't dare look toward the Fae across the space. To see the disgust and disdain.

Ember and Randall twisted in their seats, her dad's face scrunched with concern, Ember's eyes wide with fear. Her mom knew those Fae were sneering, too. She'd hidden Bryce from them her whole life because of how they'd react to the power that now radiated from her.

Some jackass shouted from the audience below, "*Hey! Turn off the light!*" Bryce's face burned as a few people chuckled, then quickly went silent.

She could only assume Fury had been nearby.

Bryce cupped both hands over the star, which had taken to glowing at the *worst* fucking times—this was merely the most mortifying. "I don't know how to turn it off," she muttered, making to rise from her seat and flee into the vestibule behind the curtain.

But Hunt slid a warm, dry hand over her scar, fingers grazing her breasts. His palm was broad enough that it covered the mark, capturing the light within. It glowed through his fingers, casting his light brown skin into rosy gold, but he managed to contain the light.

"Admit it: you just wanted me to feel you up," Hunt whispered, and Bryce couldn't help her stupid, giddy laugh. She buried her face in Hunt's shoulder, the smooth material of his suit cool against her cheeks and brow. "Need a minute?" he asked, though she knew he was glaring daggers at all the assholes still gawking. The Fae nobility hissing about the *disgrace*.

“Should we go?” Ember asked, voice sharp with worry.

“No,” Bryce said thickly, putting a hand over Hunt’s. “I’m good.”

“You can’t sit there like that,” Ember countered.

“I’m good, Mom.”

Hunt didn’t move his hand. “We’re used to the staring. Right, Quinlan?” He flashed Ember a grin. “They won’t fuck with us.” An edge laced his smile, a reminder to anyone watching that he wasn’t only Hunt Athalar, he was also the Umbra Mortis. The Shadow of Death.

He’d earned that name.

Ember nodded again approvingly as Randall offered Hunt a grateful dip of the chin. Mercifully, the conductor emerged then, and a smattering of applause filled the theater.

Bryce inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled. She had zero control over when the star flared, or when it stopped. She sipped from her champagne, then said casually to Hunt, “The headline on the gossip sites tomorrow is going to be: *Horndog Umbra Mortis Gropes Starborn Princess at Ballet.*”

“Good,” Hunt murmured. “It’ll improve my standing in the 33rd.”

She smiled, despite herself. It was one of his many gifts—making her laugh, even when the world seemed inclined to humiliate and shun her.

His fingers went dark at her chest, and Bryce heaved a sigh. “Thanks,” she said as the conductor raised his baton.

Hunt slowly, so slowly, removed his hand from her chest. “Don’t mention it, Quinlan.”

She glanced sidelong at him again, wondering at the shift in his tone. But the orchestra began its lilting opening, and the curtain drew back, and Bryce leaned forward breathlessly to await her friend’s grand entrance.

## 2

Bryce tried not to shiver with delight when Hunt knocked her with a wing while they walked up the sagging stairs to Ruhn's house.

*A small get-together*, Ruhn had said when he'd called to invite them to swing by after the ballet. Since the thought of her mother grilling her again about her job, sex life, and princess status was sure to drive her to drink anyway, Bryce and Hunt had dumped her parents back at their hotel, changed at the apartment—Hunt had insisted on that part with a grumbled *I need to get the fuck out of this suit*—and flown over here.

The entire Old Square had apparently turned up as well: Fae and shifters and people of all Houses drank and danced and talked. On the pathetic excuse for a front lawn, a cluster of green-haired river nymphs and fauns both male and female played cornhole. A cluster of Fae males behind them—Aux members, from their muscles and stick-up-the-ass posture—were engaged in what looked like an absolutely *riveting* game of bocce.

The arid day had yielded to a whisper-sweet night, warm enough that every bar and café and club in the Old Square—especially around Archer Street—teemed with revelers. Even with the booming music erupting from Ruhn's house, she could make out the thump of the bass from the other houses along the street, the bar at the corner, the cars driving by.

Everyone was celebrating being alive.

As they should be.

"Fury and June are already here," Bryce called to Hunt over the noise as they strode up the rickety, beer-splattered steps into Ruhn's house. "June said they're in the living room."

Hunt nodded, though his focus remained fixed on the partying crowd. Even here, people noted from all directions as the Starborn Princess and

the Umbra Mortis arrived. The crowd parted for them, some even backing away. Bryce stiffened, but Hunt didn't halt his easy pace. He was accustomed to this shit—had been for a while now. And though he was no longer officially the Shadow of Death, people hadn't forgotten what he had once done. Who he'd once served.

Hunt aimed for the living room to the left of the foyer, the ridiculous muscles along his shoulders shifting with the movement. They were put on near-obscene display by the black tank top he wore. Bryce might have survived the sight of it, had it not been for the white sunball hat, twisted backward the way Hunt usually wore it.

She preferred that hat to the fancy suit, actually.

To her shock, Hunt didn't protest when a reveling air sprite floated past, crowning him and then Bryce with glow-stick necklaces made from firstlight. Bryce removed the plastic tube of light and looped it into a bracelet snaking up her arm. Hunt left his hanging over his chest, the light casting the deep muscles of his pectorals and shoulders in stark relief. Gods spare her.

Hunt had only taken one step into the living room when Tristan Flynn's voice boomed from the foyer behind them: "The *fuck*, Ruhn!"

Bryce snorted, and through the crowd she spied the Fae lord at one end of the beer pong table on which he'd painted an image of an enormous Fae head devouring an angel whole.

Ruhn stood at the other end of the table, both middle fingers raised to his opponents, his lip ring glinting in the dim lights of the foyer. "Pay up, assholes," her brother said, the rolled cigarette between his lips bobbing with his words.

Bryce reached a hand for Hunt, fingers grazing his downy soft wings. He went rigid, twisting to look at her. Angels' wings were highly sensitive. She might as well have grabbed him by the balls.

Face flushing, she jabbed a thumb toward her brother. "Tell June and Fury I'll be there in a sec," she called over the noise. "I want to say hi to Ruhn." She didn't wait for Hunt to reply before wending her way over.

Flynn let out a cheer as she appeared, obviously well on his way to being smashed. Typical Tuesday night for him. She considered sending a photo of his wasted ass to his parents and sister. They might not sneer so much at her, then.

Declan Emmett appeared slightly more sober as he said from Flynn's side, "Hey, B."

Bryce waved, not wanting to shout over the crowd gathered in what had once been a dining room. It had recently been transformed into a billiards and darts room. Absolutely fitting for the Crown Prince of the Valbaran Fae, Bryce thought with a half smile as she sidled up to the male beside her brother. “Hi, Marc.”

The towering leopard shifter, all sleek muscle beneath his dark brown skin, peered down at her. His striking topaz eyes sparkled. Declan had been seeing Marc Rosarin for a month now, having met the tech entrepreneur during some fancy party at one of the big engineering companies in the Central Business District. “Hey, Princess.”

Flynn demanded, “Since when do you let Marc get away with calling you Princess?”

“Since I like him better than you,” Bryce shot back, earning a clap on the shoulder from Marc and a grin from Ruhn. She said to her brother, “A *small get-together*, huh?”

Ruhn shrugged, the tattoos along his arms shifting. “I blame Flynn.”

Flynn lifted his last beer up in acknowledgment and chugged.

“Where’s Athalar?” Declan asked.

“With June and Fury in the living room,” Bryce said.

Ruhn waved his greeting to a passing partier before he asked, “How was the ballet?”

“Awesome. June killed her solos. Brought the house to its feet.” She’d had chills along her entire body while her friend had danced—and tears in her eyes when Juniper had received a standing ovation after finishing. Bryce had never heard the CCB so full of cheering, and from Juniper’s flushed, joyous face as she’d bowed, Bryce knew her friend realized it, too. A promotion to principal was sure to come any day now.

“Hottest ticket in town,” Marc said, whistling. “Half my office would have sold their souls to be there tonight.”

“You should have told me,” Bryce said. “We had a few extra seats in our box. We could have fit them.”

Marc smiled appreciatively. “Next time.”

Flynn began reracking the beer pong cups, and called to her, “How are Mommy and Daddy?”

“Good. They fed me a bottle of milk and read me a bedtime story before I left.”

This earned a chuckle from Ruhn, who had once again become close with Ember. Her brother asked, “How many interrogations since they got

here last night?”

“Six.” Bryce pointed to the foyer and living room beyond. “Which is why I’m going to go have a drink with my friends.”

“Open bar,” Declan said, gesturing magnanimously behind him.

Bryce waved again, and she was off. Without Hunt’s imposing form, far fewer people turned her way. But when they did ... pockets of silence appeared. She tried to ignore them, and nearly sighed with relief when she spied a familiar pair of horns atop a head of gracefully curling hair tucked into Juniper’s usual bun. She was seated on the stained living room sectional, thigh to thigh with Fury, their hands interlaced.

Hunt stood before them, wings held at a casual angle as he talked with her friends. He looked up as Bryce entered the living room, and she could have sworn his black eyes lit.

She reined in her joy at the sight as she plopped onto the cushions beside Juniper, cuddling close. She nuzzled June’s shoulder. “Hi, my talented and brilliant and beautiful friend.”

Juniper laughed, squeezing Bryce. “Right back at you.”

Bryce said, “I was talking to Fury.”

Juniper smacked Bryce’s knee, and Fury laughed, observing, “Already acting like a prima donna.”

Bryce sighed dramatically. “I can’t wait to see June throw temper tantrums about the state of her dressing room.”

“Oh, you’re both horrible,” Juniper said, but laughed along with them. “One, I won’t even *have* a dressing room to myself for years. *Two—*”

“Here we go,” Fury said, and when June made a noise of objection, she only chuckled and brushed her mouth over the faun’s temple.

The casual, loving bit of intimacy had Bryce daring a glance toward Hunt, who was smiling faintly. Bryce avoided the urge to fidget, to think about how that could so easily be them, cuddling on the couch and kissing. Hunt just said, voice gravelly, “What can I get you, Quinlan?” He inclined his head toward the bar in the rear of the room, barely visible with the crowds mobbing the two bartenders.

“Whiskey, ginger beer, and lime.”

“You got it.” With a mockery of a salute, Hunt stalked off through the crowd.

“How’s the whole no-sex thing going for you, Bryce?” Fury asked wryly, leaning forward to peer at her face.

Bryce slumped against the cushions. “Asshole.”

June's laugh fizzled through her, and her friend patted her thigh. "Remind me why you two aren't hooking up?"

Bryce peered over the back of the couch to make sure Hunt still stood at the bar before she said, "Because I am a fucking idiot, and you two jerks know that."

Juniper and Fury snickered, the latter taking a sip of her vodka soda. "Tell him you've changed your mind," the merc said, resting the glass on her black leather-clad knee. How Fury could wear leather in this heat was beyond Bryce. Shorts, T-shirt, and sandals were all she could endure with the sizzling temperatures, even at night.

"And break our bargain before Winter Solstice?" Bryce hissed. "He'd never let me live it down."

"Athalar already knows you want to break it," Fury drawled.

"Oh, he totally knows," Juniper agreed.

Bryce crossed her arms. "Can we not talk about this?"

"Where would the fun be in that?" Fury asked.

Bryce kicked Fury's leather boot, wincing as her gold-sandaled foot collided with unforgiving metal. "Steel toes? Really?"

"This is a veritable frat party," Fury said, smirking. "There might be some asses to kick if someone makes a move on my girlfriend."

Juniper glowed at the term. *Girlfriend*.

Bryce didn't know what the Hel she was to Hunt. *Girlfriend* seemed ridiculous when talking about Hunt fucking Athalar. As if Hunt would ever do anything as normal and casual as dating.

Juniper poked Bryce in the arm. "I mean it. Remind me why you guys still need to wait for solstice to do the deed."

Bryce slouched, sinking down a few inches, her feet sending the empty beer cans under the coffee table clattering. "I just ..."

That familiar buzz of power and maleness that was Hunt filled the air behind her, and Bryce shut her mouth a moment before a plastic cup of amber liquid garnished with a wedge of lime appeared before her. "Princess," Hunt crooned, and Bryce's toes curled—yet again. They seemed to have a habit of doing that around him.

"Do we get to use that term now?" June perked up with delight. "I've been *dying*—"

"Absolutely not." Bryce swigged from her drink. She gagged. "How much whiskey did you have the bartender *put* in here, Athalar?" She coughed, as if it'd do anything to ease the burn.



Hunt shrugged. “I thought you liked whiskey.”

Fury snorted, but Bryce got to her feet. Lifted the cup toward Hunt in a silent toast, then lifted it to June. “To the next principal dancer of the CCB.”

Then she knocked back the whole thing and let it burn right down to her soul.

Hunt let himself—just for one fucking second—look at Bryce. Admire the steady, unfaltering tap of her sandaled foot on the worn wood floor to the beat of the music; the long, muscled legs that gleamed in the neon firstlights, her white shorts offsetting her summer tan. No scars remained from the shit that had occurred this spring, aside from that mark on her chest, though the thick scar from years ago still curved along her thigh.

His fierce, strong, beautiful Bryce. He’d done his best not to gape at the shape of her ass in those shorts as they’d walked over here, the sway of her long hair against her lower back, the ample hips that swished with each step.

He was a stupid fucking animal. But he’d always been a stupid fucking animal around her.

He’d barely been able to focus on the ballet earlier—on June’s dancing—because Bryce had looked so ... delicious in that blue dress. Only her parents sitting a few feet in front of him had kept him from thinking too much about sliding his hand up her thigh and underneath that gauzy material.

But that wasn’t part of the plan. Earlier this spring, he’d been fine with it. Aching for her, but fine with the concept of getting to know each other better before sex entered the equation. Yet that ache had only gotten worse these past months. Living together in their apartment was a slow kind of torture for both of them.

Bryce’s whiskey-colored eyes shifted toward him. She opened her mouth, then shut it at whatever she beheld in his expression.

The memory of those days following Micah’s and Sandriel’s demises cooled his rising lust.

*Let’s take things slow, she’d requested. I feel like we tumbled into all of this, and now that things are getting back to normal, I want to do this right with you. Get to know you in real time, not while we’re running around the city trying to solve murders.*

He’d agreed, because what else could he do? Never mind that he’d

come home from the Comitium that night planning to seduce Quinlan within an inch of her life. He hadn't even gotten to the kissing part when she'd announced she wanted to hit the brakes.

He knew more lay behind it. Knew it likely had something to do with the guilt she harbored for the thousands of people who hadn't been saved that day. Allowing herself to be with him, to be happy ... She needed time to sort it out. And Hunt would give it to her. Anything Bryce wanted, anything she needed, he'd gladly give it to her. He had the freedom to do so now, thanks to the branded-out tattoo on his wrist.

But on nights like these, with her in those shorts ... it was really gods-damned hard.

Bryce hopped up from the couch and padded over to him, leaving Juniper and Fury to chat, Fury busy reloading the arts page of the *Crescent City Times* for the review of Juniper's performance. "What's up?" Hunt said to Bryce as she took up a place beside him.

"Do you actually like coming to these parties?" Bryce asked, gesturing to the throng, firstlight glow stick around her wrist gleaming bright. "This doesn't disgust you?"

He tucked in his wings. "Why would it disgust me?"

"Because you've seen all the shit that's happening in the world, and been treated like dirt, and these people ..." She tossed her sheet of hair over a shoulder. "A lot of them have no idea about it. Or just don't care."

Hunt studied her tight face. "Why do we come to these parties if it bothers you?"

"Well, tonight we're here to avoid my mom." Hunt chuckled, but she went on, "And because I want to celebrate June being a genius." She smiled at her friend on the couch. "And we're here because Ruhn asked me to come. But ... I don't know. I want to feel normal, but then I feel guilty about that, and then I get mad at all these people who don't care enough to feel guilty, and I think the poison-testing pill you no doubt put in my whiskey had some sort of sad-sack potion in it because I don't know why I'm thinking about this right now."

Hunt huffed a laugh. "Sad-sack potion?"

"You know what I mean!" She glared. "This really doesn't bug you?"

"No." He assessed the party raging around them. "I prefer to see people enjoying their lives. And you can't assume that because they're here, it means they don't care. For all you know, a lot of them lost family and friends this spring. Sometimes people need stuff like this to feel alive