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SARAH J.  
MAAS

HOUSE  
OF  
SKY  
AND  
BREATH  
A CRESCENT CITY NOVEL

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PART I

THE CHASM

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 Kyrach'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."

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"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