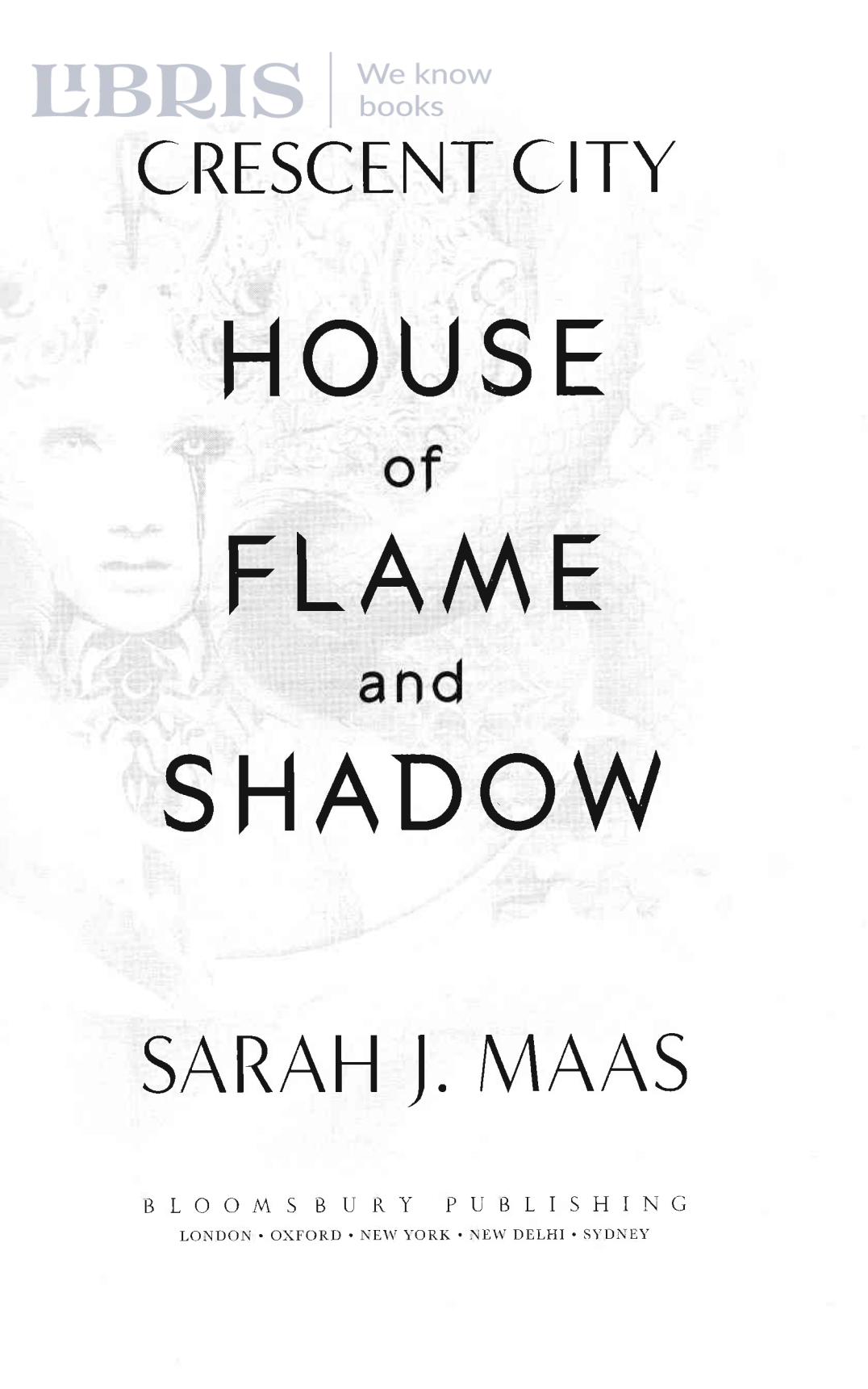


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CRESCENT CITY



HOUSE
of
FLAME
and
SHADOW

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 Lower, though many of them refuse to accept this.*

PROLOGUE

The Hind knelt before her undying masters and contemplated how it would feel to tear out their throats.

Around her own throat, a silver torque lay cool and heavy. It never warmed against her skin. As if the taken lives it symbolized wanted her to endure death's icy grip as well.

A silver dart on a dreadwolf uniform: the trophy for a rebel wiped off the face of Midgard. Lidia had acquired so many that her imperial grays couldn't hold them all. So many that they'd been melted down into that torque.

Did anyone in this chamber see the necklace for what it truly was?

A collar. With a golden leash leading right to the monsters before her.

And did those monsters ever suspect that their faithful pet sat at their feet and pondered the taste and texture of their blood on her tongue? On her teeth?

But here she would kneel, until given leave to rise. As this world would kneel until the six enthroned Asteri drained it dry and left its carcass to rot in the emptiness of space.

The staff of the Eternal Palace had cleaned the blood from the shining crystal floor beneath her knees. No coppery tang lingered in the sterile air, no errant drops marred the columns flanking the chamber. As if the events of two days ago had never occurred.

But Lidia Cervos could not let herself dwell on those events. Not while surrounded by her enemies. Not with Pollux kneeling beside her, one of his shining wings resting atop her calf. From another, it might have been a gesture of comfort, of solidarity.

From Pollux, from the Hammer, it meant nothing but possession.

Lidia willed her eyes dead and cold. Willed her heart to be the same, and focused on the two Fae Kings pleading their cases.

“My late son acted of his own accord,” declared Morven, King of the Avallen Fae, his bone-white face grave. The tall, dark-haired male wore all black, but no heavy air of mourning lay upon him. “Had I known of Cormac’s treason, I would have handed him over myself.”

Lidia flicked her gaze to the panel of parasites seated on their crystal thrones.

Rigelus, veiled as usual in the body of a Fae teenage boy, propped his delicate chin on a fist. “I find it difficult to believe that you had no knowledge of your son’s activities, considering how tightly you held his reins.”

Shadows whispered over Morven’s broad shoulders, trailing off his scaled armor. “He was a defiant boy. I thought I’d beaten it out of him long ago.”

“You thought wrong,” sneered Hesperus, the Evening Star, who’d taken on the shape of a blond nymph. Her long, slim fingers tapped the glimmering arm of her throne. “We can only assume that his treachery stemmed from some decay within your royal house. One that must now be scourged.”

For the first time in the decades the Hind had known him, King Morven held his tongue. He’d had no choice but to answer the Asteri’s summons yesterday, but he clearly did not appreciate the reminder that his autonomy was a mere illusion, even on the misty isle of Avallen.

Some small part of her relished it—seeing the male who’d strutted through Summits and meetings and balls now weighing his every word. Knowing it might be his last.

Morven growled, “I had no knowledge of my son’s activities or of his craven heart. I swear it upon Luna’s golden bow.” His voice

rang clear as he added with impressive fury, “I condemn all that Cormac was and stood for. He shall not be honored with a grave nor a burial. There will be no ship to sail his body into the Summerlands. I will ensure that his name is wiped from all records of my house.”

For a heartbeat, Lidia allowed herself a shred of pity for the Ophion agent she’d known. For the Fae Prince of Avallen who’d given everything to destroy the beings before her.

As she had given everything. Would still give everything.

Polaris, the North Star—wearing the body of a white-winged, dark-skinned female angel—drawled, “There will be no ship to sail Cormac’s body to the Summerlands because the boy immolated himself. And tried to take us with him.” Polaris let out a soft, hateful laugh that raked talons down Lidia’s skin. “As if a paltry flame might do such a thing.”

Morven said nothing. He’d offered what he could, short of getting on his knees to plead. It might very well come to that, but for now, the Fae King of Avallen held his head high.

Legend claimed that even the Asteri could not pierce the mists that shrouded Avallen, but Lidia had never heard of it being tested. Perhaps that was also why Morven had come—to keep the Asteri from having a reason to explore whether the legend was true.

If they were somehow repelled by whatever ancient power lay around Avallen, that would be a secret worth abasing oneself to keep.

Rigelus crossed an ankle over his knee. Lidia had seen the Bright Hand order entire families executed with the same casual air. “And you, Einar? What have you to say for your son?”

“Traitorous shit,” spat Pollux from where he knelt beside Lidia. His wing still rested on her leg like he owned it. Owned her.

The Autumn King ignored the Hammer. Ignored everyone except Rigelus as he flatly replied, “Ruhn has been wild since birth. I did what I could to contain him. I have little doubt that he was lured into this business through his sister’s machinations.”

Lidia kept her fingers loose, even as they ached to curl into fists. Steadied her heart into a sluggish, ordinary beat that no Vanir ears would detect as unusual.

“So you would seek to spare one child by damning the other?” Rigelus asked, lips curling into a mild smile. “What sort of father are you, Einar?”

“Neither Bryce Quinlan nor Ruhn Danaan has the right to call themselves my children any longer.”

Rigelus angled his head, his short, dark hair shimmering in the glow of the crystal room. “I thought she had claimed the name Bryce Danaan. Have you revoked her royal status?”

A muscle ticked in the Autumn King’s cheek. “I have yet to decide a fitting punishment for her.”

Pollux’s wings rustled, but the angel kept his head down as he snarled to the Autumn King, “When I get my hands on your cunt of a daughter, you’ll be glad to have disavowed her. What she did to the Harpy, I shall do to her tenfold.”

“You’d have to find her first,” the Autumn King said coolly. Lidia supposed Einar Danaan was one of the few Fae on Midgard who could openly taunt an angel as powerful as the Malleus. The Fae King’s amber eyes, so like his daughter’s, lifted to the Asteri. “Have your mystics discovered her whereabouts yet?”

“Do you not wish to know where your son is?” asked Octartis, the Southern Star, with a coy smile.

“I know where Ruhn is,” the Autumn King countered, unmoved. “He deserves to be there.” He half turned toward where Lidia knelt, and surveyed her coldly. “I hope you wring every last answer from him.”

Lidia held his stare, her face like stone, like ice—like death.

The Autumn King’s gaze flicked over the silver torque at her throat, a faint, approving curve gracing his mouth. But he asked Rigelus, with an authority that she could only admire, “Where is Bryce?”

Rigelus sighed, bored and annoyed—a lethal combination. “She has chosen to vacate Midgard.”

“A mistake we shall soon rectify,” Polaris added.

Rigelus shot the lesser Asteri a warning look.

The Autumn King said, his voice a shade faint, “Bryce is no longer in this world?”

Morven glanced warily at the other Fae King. As far as anyone knew, there was only one place that could be accessed from Midgard—there was an entire wall circling the Northern Rift in Nena to prevent its denizens from crossing into this world. If Bryce was no longer on Midgard, she had to be in Hel.

It had never occurred to Lidia that the wall around the Rift would also keep Midgardians from getting *out*.

Well, most Midgardians.

Rigelus said tightly, “That knowledge is not to be shared with anyone.” The edge sharpening his words implied the rest: *under pain of death*.

Lidia had been present when the other Asteri had demanded to know how it had happened: how Bryce Quinlan had opened a gate to another world in their own palace and slipped through the Bright Hand’s fingers. Their disbelief and rage had been a small comfort in the wake of all that had happened, all that was still churning through Lidia.

A silvery bell rang from behind the Asteri’s thrones in a polite reminder that another meeting had been scheduled shortly.

“This discussion is not yet finished,” Rigelus warned the two Fae Kings. He pointed with a skinny finger to the double doors open to the hall beyond. “Speak of what you have heard today, and you will find that there is no place on this planet where you will be safe from our wrath.”

The Fae Kings bowed and left without another word.

The weight of the Asteri’s gazes landed upon Lidia, singeing her very soul. She withstood it, as she had withstood all the other horrors in her life.

“Rise, Lidia,” Rigelus said with something that bordered on affection. Then, to Pollux, “Rise, my Hammer.” Lidia shoved down the bile that burned like acid and got to her feet, Pollux with her. His white wing brushed against her cheek, the softness of his feathers at odds with the rot of his soul.

The bell tinkled again, but Rigelus lifted a hand to the attendant waiting in the shadows of the nearby pillars. The next meeting could wait another moment.

“How go the interrogations?” Rigelus slouched on his throne as if he had asked about the weather.

“We are in the opening movements,” Lidia said, her mouth somehow distant from her body. “Athalar and Danaan will require time to break.”

“And the Helhound?” asked Hesperus, the nymph’s dark eyes gleaming with malice.

“I am still assessing him.” Lidia kept her chin high and tucked her hands behind her back. “But trust that I shall get what we need from all of them, Your Graces.”

“As you always do,” Rigelus said, gaze dipping to her silver collar. “We give you leave to do your finest work, Hind.”

Lidia bowed at the waist with imperial precision. Pollux did the same, wings folding elegantly. The portrait of a perfect soldier—the one he’d been bred to become.

It wasn’t until they’d entered the long corridor beyond the throne room that the Hammer spoke. “Do you think that little bitch really went to Hel?” Pollux jerked his head behind them, toward the dull, silent crystal Gate at the opposite end of the hall.

The busts lining the walkway—all the Asteri in their various forms throughout the centuries—had been replaced. The windows that had been shattered by Athalar’s lightning had been repaired.

As in the throne room, not one hint of what had occurred remained here. And beyond the crystal walls of this palace, no whisper had surfaced in the news.

The only proof: the two Asterian Guards now flanking either side of the Gate. Their white-and-gold regalia shone in the streaming sunlight, the tips of the spears gripped in their gloved hands like fallen stars. With their golden helmets’ visors down, she could make out nothing of the faces beneath. It didn’t matter, she supposed. There was no individuality, no life in them. The elite, highborn angels had been bred for obedience and service. Just as they’d been bred to bear those glowing white wings. As the angel beside her had.

Lidia maintained her unhurried pace toward the elevators. “I won’t waste time trying to find out. But Bryce Quinlan will no doubt return one day, regardless of where she wound up.”

Beyond the windows, the seven hills of the Eternal City rippled under the sunlight, most of them crusted with buildings crowned by terra-cotta roofs. A barren mountain—more of a hill, really—lay among several nearly identical peaks just north of the city border, the metallic gleam atop it like a beacon.

Was it an intentional taunt to Athalar that the mountain, Mount Hermon—where he and the Archangel Shahar had staged the doomed first and final battle of their rebellion—today housed scores of the Asteri's new hybrid mech-suits? Down in the dungeons, Athalar would have no way of seeing them, but knowing Rigelus, the positioning of the new machines was definitely symbolic.

Lidia had read the report yesterday morning about what the Asteri had cooked up these last few weeks, despite Ophion's attempts to stop it. Despite *her* attempts to stop it. But the written details had been nothing compared to the suits' appearance at sunset. The city had been abuzz as the military transports had crested the hill and deposited them, one by one, with news crews rushing out to report on the cutting-edge tech.

Her stomach had churned to see the suits—and did so again now as she gazed at their steel husks glinting in the sun.

Further proof of Ophion's failure. They'd destroyed the mech-suit on Ydra, obliterated the lab days ago—yet it had all been too late. In secret, Rigelus had crafted this metal army and stationed it atop Mount Hermon's barren peak. An improvement on the hybrids, these did not even require pilots to operate them, though they still had the capacity to hold a single Vanir soldier, if need be. As if the hybrids had been a well-calculated distraction for Ophion while Rigelus had secretly perfected *these*. Magic and tech now blended with lethal efficiency, with minimal cost to military life. But those suits spelled death for any remaining rebels, and damned the rest of the rebellion.

She should have caught Rigelus's sleight of hand—but she hadn't. And now that horror would be unleashed on the world.

The elevator opened, and Lidia and Pollux entered in silence. Lidia hit the button for the lowest sublevel—well, second lowest. The elevators did not descend to the catacombs, which could only

be accessed by a winding crystal staircase. There, one thousand mystics slumbered.

Each of whom were now focused on a single task: *Find Bryce Quinlan.*

It begged the question: If everyone knew that the Northern Rift and other Gates only opened to Hel, why did the Asteri bother to expend such resources in hunting for her? Bryce had landed in Hel—surely there was no need to order the mystics to find her.

Unless Bryce Quinlan had wound up somewhere *other* than Hel. A different world, perhaps. And if that was the case . . .

How long would it take? How many worlds existed beyond Midgard? And what were the odds of Bryce surviving on any of them—or ever getting back to Midgard?

The elevators opened into the dank dimness of the dungeons. Pollux prowled down the stone walkway, wings tightly furled. Like he didn't want one speck of dirt from this place marring their pristine white feathers. "Is that why you're keeping them alive? As bait for that bitch?"

"Yes." Lidia followed the screams past the guttering firstlight sconces along the wall. "Quinlan and Athalar are mates. She will return to this world because of that bond. And when she does, she will go straight to him."

"And the brother?"

"Ruhn and Bryce are Starborn," Lidia said, heaving open the iron door to the large interrogation chamber beyond. Metal grated against stone, its shriek eerily similar to the sounds of torment all around them. "She will want to free him—as her brother and her ally."

She stalked down the exposed steps into the heart of the chamber, where three males hung from gorsian shackles in the center of the room. Blood pooled beneath them, dribbling into the grate below their bare feet.

She shut down every part of her that felt, that breathed.

Athalar and Baxian dangled unconscious from the ceiling, their torsos patchworks of scars and burns. And their backs . . .

A constant drip sounded in the otherwise silent chamber, like a leaking faucet. The blood still oozed from the stumps where their wings had been. The gorsian shackles had slowed their healing to near-human levels—keeping them from dying entirely, but ensuring that they suffered through every moment of pain.

Lidia couldn't look at the third figure hanging between them. Couldn't get a breath down near him.

Leather whispered over stone, and Lidia dove deep within herself as Pollux's whip cracked. It snapped against Athalar's raw, bloody back, and the Umbra Mortis jolted, swaying on his chains.

"Wake up," the Hammer sneered. "It's a beautiful day."

Athalar's swollen eyes cracked open. Hate blazed in their dark depths.

The halo inked anew upon his brow seemed darker than the shadows of the dungeon. His battered mouth parted in a feral smile, revealing bloodstained teeth. "Morning, sunshine."

A soft, broken rasp of a laugh sounded to Athalar's right. And though she knew it was folly, Lidia looked.

Ruhn Danaan, Crown Prince of the Valbaran Fae, was staring at her.

His lip was swollen from where Pollux had torn out his piercing. His eyebrow was crusted with blood from where that hoop had been ripped out, too. Across his tattooed torso, along the arms above his head, blood and dirt and bruises mingled.

The prince's striking blue eyes were sharp with loathing.

For her.

Pollux slashed his whip into Athalar's back again, not bothering with questions. No, this was the warm-up. Interrogation would come later.

Baxian still hung unconscious. Pollux had beaten him into a bloody pulp last night after severing his and Athalar's wings with a blunt-toothed saw. The Helhound didn't so much as stir.

Night, Lidia tried, casting her voice into the moldy air between herself and the Fae Prince. They'd never spoken mind-to-mind outside of their dreaming, but she'd been trying since he'd arrived

here. Again and again, she'd cast her mind toward his. Only silence answered.

Just as it had from the moment Ruhn had learned who she was. What she was.

She knew he could communicate, even with the gorsian stones halting his magic and slowing his healing. Knew he'd done so with his sister before Bryce had escaped.

Night.

Ruhn's lip pulled back in a silent snarl, blood snaking down his chin.

Pollux's phone rang, a shrill, strange sound in this ancient shrine to pain. His ministrations halted, a terrible silence in their wake. "Mordoc," the Hammer said, whip still in one hand. He pivoted from Athalar's swinging, brutalized body. "Report."

Lidia didn't bother to protest the fact that her captain was reporting to the Hammer. Pollux had taken the Harpy's death personally—he'd commandeered Mordoc and the dreadwolves to find any hint of where Bryce Quinlan might have gone.

That he still believed Bryce was responsible for the Harpy's death was only because Athalar and Ruhn hadn't revealed that it was Lidia who'd murdered the Harpy. They knew who she was, and only the fact that she was vital to the rebellion kept them from spilling her secrets.

For a moment, with Pollux turned away, Lidia let her mask drop. Let Ruhn see her true face. The one that had kissed his soul and shared her own with him, their very beings melding.

Ruhn, she pleaded into his mind. *Ruhn*.

But the Fae Prince did not answer. The hate in his eyes did not lessen. So Lidia donned her Hind's mask once again.

And as Pollux pocketed his phone and angled his whip anew, the Hind ordered the Hammer in the low, lifeless voice that had been her shield for so long now, "Get the barbed wire instead."

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PART I
THE DROP

Bryce Quinlan sat in a chamber so far beneath the mountain above that daylight must have been a myth to the creatures who dwelled there.

For a place that apparently *wasn't* Hel, her surroundings sure appeared like it: black stone, subterranean palace, even-more-subterranean interrogation cell . . . The darkness seemed inherent to the three people standing across from her: a petite female in gray silk, and two winged males clad in black scalelike armor, one of them—the beautiful, powerful male in the center of the trio—literally rippling with shadows and stars.

Rhysand, he'd called himself. The one who looked so much like Ruhn.

It couldn't be coincidence. Bryce had leapt through the Gate intending to reach Hel, to finally take up Aidas's and Apollion's repeated offers to send their armies to Midgard and stop this cycle of galactic conquest. But she'd wound up here instead.

Bryce glanced to the warrior beside Ruhn's almost-twin. The male who'd found her. Who'd carried the black dagger that had reacted to the Starsword.

His hazel eyes held nothing but cold, predatory alertness.

"Someone has to start talking," the short female said—the one who'd seemed so shocked to hear Bryce speak in the Old

Language, to see the sword. Flickering braziers of something that resembled firstlight gilded the silken strands of her chin-length bob, casting the shadow of her slender jaw in stark relief. Her eyes, a remarkable shade of silver, slid over Bryce but remained unimpressed. “You said your name is Bryce Quinlan. That you come from another world—Midgard.”

Rhysand murmured to the winged male beside him. Translating, perhaps.

The female went on, “If you are to be believed, how is it that you came here? *Why* did you come here?”

Bryce surveyed the otherwise empty cell. No table glittering with torture instruments, no breaks in the solid stone beyond the door and the grate in the center of the floor, a few feet away. A grate from which she could have sworn a hissing sound emanated.

“What world is this?” Bryce rasped, the words gravelly. After Ruhn’s body double had introduced himself in that lovely, cozy foyer, he’d grabbed her hand. The strength of his grip, the brush of his calluses against her skin had been the only solid things as wind and darkness had roared around them, the world dropping away—and then there was only solid rock and dim lighting. She’d been brought to a palace carved beneath a mountain, and then down the narrow stairs to this dungeon. Where he’d pointed to the lone chair in the center of the room in silent command.

So she’d sat, waiting for the handcuffs or shackles or whatever restraints they used in this world, but none had come.

The short female countered, “Why do you speak the Old Language?”

Bryce jerked her chin at the female. “Why do you?”

The female’s red-painted lips curved upward. It wasn’t a reassuring sight. “Why are you covered in blood that is not your own?”

Score: one for the female.

Bryce knew her blood-soaked clothes, now stiff and dark, and her blood-crusting hands did her no favors. It was the Harpy’s blood, and a bit of Lidia’s. All coating Bryce as a part of a careful

game to keep her alive, to keep their secrets safe, while Hunt and Ruhn had—

Her breath began sawing in and out. She'd left them. Her mate and her brother. She'd left them in Rigelus's hands.

The walls and ceiling pushed in, squeezing the air from her lungs.

Rhysand lifted a broad hand wreathed in stars. "We won't harm you." Bryce found the rest of the sentence lurking within the dense shadows around him: *if you don't try to harm us*.

She closed her eyes, fighting past the jagged breathing, the crushing weight of the stone above and around her.

Less than an hour ago, she'd been sprinting away from Rigelus's power, dodging exploding marble busts and shattering windows, and Hunt's lightning had speared through her chest, into the Gate, opening a portal. She'd leapt toward Hel—

And now . . . now she was here. Her hands shook. She balled them into fists and squeezed.

Bryce took a slow, shuddering breath. Another. Then opened her eyes and asked again, her voice solid and clear, "What world is this?"

Her three interrogators said nothing.

So Bryce fixed her eyes on the female, the smallest but by no means the least deadly of the group. "You said the Old Language hasn't been spoken here in fifteen thousand years. Why?"

That they were Fae and knew the language at all suggested some link between here and Midgard, a link that was slowly dawning on her with terrible clarity.

"How did you come to be in possession of the lost sword Gwydion?" was the female's cool reply.

"What . . . You mean the Starsword?" Another link between their worlds.

All of them just stared at her again. An impenetrable wall of people accustomed to getting answers in whatever way necessary.

Bryce had no weapons, nothing beyond the magic in her veins, the Archesian amulet around her neck, and the Horn tattooed