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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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A Court of Thorns and Roses Colouring Book



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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Acknowledgments

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, nōkks, 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 knobby-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 Pangera.

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.