



There was a wolf at the gallery door.

Which meant it must be Thursday, which meant Bryce had to be *really* gods-damned tired if she relied on Danika's comings and goings to figure out what day it was.

The heavy metal door to Griffin Antiquities thudded with the impact of the wolf's fist—a fist that Bryce knew ended in metallic-purple painted nails in dire need of a manicure. A heartbeat later, a female voice barked, half-muffled through the steel, "Open the Hel up, B. It's hot as shit out here!"

Seated at the desk in the modest gallery showroom, Bryce smirked and pulled up the front door's video feed. Tucking a strand of her wine-red hair behind a pointed ear, she asked into the intercom, "Why are you covered in dirt? You look like you've been rootling through the garbage."

"What the fuck does *rootling* mean?" Danika hopped from foot to foot, sweat gleaming on her brow. She wiped at it with a filthy hand, smearing the black liquid splattered there.

"You'd know if you ever picked up a book, Danika." Glad for the break in what had been a morning of tedious research, Bryce smiled as she rose from the desk. With no exterior windows, the gallery's extensive surveillance equipment served as her only warning of who stood beyond its thick walls. Even with her sharp

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half-Fae hearing, she couldn't make out much beyond the iron door save for the occasional banging fist. The building's unadorned sandstone walls belied the latest tech and grade A spellwork that kept it operational and preserved many of the books in the archives below.

As if merely thinking about the level beneath Bryce's high heels had summoned her, a little voice asked from behind the six-inch-thick archives door to her left, "Is that Danika?"

"Yes, Lehabah." Bryce wrapped her hand around the front door's handle. The enchantments on it hummed against her palm, slithering like smoke over her freckled golden skin. She gritted her teeth and withstood it, still unused to the sensation even after a year of working at the gallery.

From the other side of the deceptively simple metal door to the archives, Lehabah warned, "Jesiba doesn't like her in here."

"*You* don't like her in here," Bryce amended, her amber eyes narrowing toward the archives door and the tiny fire sprite she knew was hovering just on the other side, eavesdropping as she always did whenever someone stood out front. "Go back to work."

Lehabah didn't answer, presumably drifting back downstairs to guard the books below. Rolling her eyes, Bryce yanked open the front door, getting a face full of heat so dry it threatened to suck the life from her. And summer had only just begun.

Danika didn't just look like she'd been rootling through the garbage. She smelled like it, too.

Wisps of her silvery blond hair—normally a straight, silken sheet—curled from her tight, long braid, the streaks of amethyst, sapphire, and rose splattered with some dark, oily substance that reeked of metal and ammonia.

"Took you long enough," Danika grouched, and swaggered into the gallery, the sword strapped at her back bobbing with each step. Her braid had become tangled in its worn leather hilt, and as she stopped before the desk, Bryce took the liberty of prying the plait free.

She'd barely untangled it before Danika's slim fingers were unbuckling the straps that kept the sword sheathed across her worn

leather motorcycle jacket. “I need to dump this here for a few hours,” she said, pulling the sword off her back and aiming for the supply closet hidden behind a wooden panel across the showroom.

Bryce leaned against the lip of the desk and crossed her arms, fingers brushing against the stretchy black fabric of her skintight dress. “Your gym bag’s already stinking up the place. Jesiba’s due back later this afternoon—she’ll throw your shit in the dumpster again if it’s still here.”

It was the mildest Hel Jesiba Roga could unleash if provoked.

A four-hundred-year-old enchantress who’d been born a witch and defected, Jesiba had joined the House of Flame and Shadow and now answered only to the Under-King himself. Flame and Shadow suited her well—she possessed an arsenal of spells to rival any sorcerer or necromancer in the darkest of the Houses. She’d been known to change people into animals when irritated enough. Bryce had never dared ask if the small animals in the dozen tanks and terrariums had always been animals.

And Bryce tried never to irritate her. Not that there were any safe sides when the Vanir were involved. Even the least powerful of the Vanir—a group that covered every being on Midgard aside from humans and ordinary animals—could be deadly.

“I’ll get it later,” Danika promised, pushing on the hidden panel to spring it open. Bryce had warned her three times now that the showroom supply closet wasn’t her personal locker. Yet Danika always countered that the gallery, located in the heart of the Old Square, was more centrally located than the wolves’ Den over in Moonwood. And that was that.

The supply closet opened, and Danika waved a hand in front of her face. “My gym bag’s stinking up the place?” With a black boot, she toed the sagging duffel that held Bryce’s dance gear, currently wedged between the mop and bucket. “When the fuck did you last wash those clothes?”

Bryce wrinkled her nose at the reek of old shoes and sweaty clothing that wafted out. Right—she’d forgotten to bring home the leotard and tights to wash after a lunchtime class two days ago. Mostly thanks to Danika sending her a video of a heap of

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mirthroot on their kitchen counter, music already blasting from the beat-up boom box by the windows, along with a command to hurry home quick. Bryce had obeyed. They'd smoked enough that there was a good chance Bryce had still been high yesterday morning when she'd stumbled into work.

There was really no other explanation for why it had taken ten minutes to type out a two-sentence email that day. Letter by letter.

"Never mind that," Bryce said. "I have a bone to pick with you."

Danika rearranged the crap in the closet to make space for her own. "I told you I was sorry I ate your leftover noodles. I'll buy you more tonight."

"It's not that, dumbass, though again: fuck you. That was my lunch for today." Danika chuckled. "This tattoo hurts like Hel," Bryce complained. "I can't even lean against my chair."

Danika countered in a singsong voice, "The artist warned you it'd be sore for a few days."

"I was so drunk I spelled my name wrong on the waiver. I'd hardly say I was in a good place to understand what 'sore for a few days' meant." Danika, who'd gotten a matching tattoo of the text now scrolling down Bryce's back, had already healed. One of the benefits to being a full-blooded Vanir: swift recovery time compared to humans—or a half-human like Bryce.

Danika shoved her sword into the mess of the closet. "I promise I'll help you ice your sore back tonight. Just let me take a shower and I'll be out of here in ten."

It wasn't unusual for her friend to pop into the gallery, especially on Thursdays, when her morning patrol ended just a few blocks away, but she'd never used the full bathroom in the archives downstairs. Bryce motioned to the dirt and grease. "What *is* that on you?"

Danika scowled, the angular planes of her face scrunching. "I had to break up a fight between a satyr and a nightstalker." She bared her white teeth at the black substance crusting her hands. "Guess which one spewed its *juices* onto me."

Bryce snorted and gestured to the archives door. "Shower's yours. There are some clean clothes in the bottom drawer of the desk down there."

Danika's filthy fingers began pulling the handle of the archives door. Her jaw tightened, the older tattoo on her neck—the horned, grinning wolf that served as the sigil for the Pack of Devils—rippling with tension.

Not from the effort, Bryce realized as she noted Danika's stiff back. Bryce glanced to the supply closet, which Danika had not bothered to shut. The sword, famed both in this city and far beyond it, leaned against the push broom and mop, its ancient leather scabbard nearly obscured by the full container of gasoline used to fuel the electric generator out back.

Bryce had always wondered why Jesiba bothered with an old-fashioned generator—until the citywide firstlight outage last week. When the power had failed, only the generator had kept the mechanical locks in place during the looting that followed, when creeps had rushed in from the Meat Market, bombarding the gallery's front door with counterspells to break through the enchantments.

But—Danika ditching the sword in the office. Danika needing to take a shower. Her stiff back.

Bryce asked, "You've got a meeting with the City Heads?"

In the five years since they'd met as freshmen at Crescent City University, Bryce could count on one hand the number of times Danika had been called in for a meeting with the seven people important enough to merit a shower and change of clothes. Even while delivering reports to Danika's grandfather, the Prime of the Valbaran wolves, and to Sabine, her mother, Danika usually wore that leather jacket, jeans, and whatever vintage band T-shirt wasn't dirty.

Of course, it pissed off Sabine to no end, but *everything* about Danika—and Bryce—pissed off the Alpha of the Scythe Moon Pack, chief among the shifter units in the city's Auxiliary.

It didn't matter that Sabine was the Prime Apparent of the Valbaran wolves and had been her aging father's heir for centuries, or that Danika was officially second in line to the title. Not when whispers had swirled for years that Danika should be tapped to be the Prime Apparent, bypassing her mother. Not when the old wolf had given his granddaughter their family's heirloom sword after

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centuries of promising it to Sabine only upon his death. The blade had called to Danika on her eighteenth birthday like a howl on a moonlit night, the Prime had said to explain his unexpected decision.

Sabine had never forgotten that humiliation. Especially when Danika carried the blade nearly everywhere—especially in front of her mother.

Danika paused in the gaping archway, atop the green carpeted steps that led down to the archives beneath the gallery—where the true treasure in this place lay, guarded by Lehabah day and night. It was the real reason why Danika, who'd been a history major at CCU, liked to drop by so often, just to browse the ancient art and books, despite Bryce's teasing about her reading habits.

Danika turned, her caramel eyes shuttered. "Philip Briggs is being released today."

Bryce started. "*What?*"

"They're letting him go on some gods-damned technicality. Someone fucked up the paperwork. We're getting the full update in the meeting." She clenched her slim jaw, the glow from the first-lights in the glass sconces along the stairwell bouncing off her dirty hair. "It's so fucked up."

Bryce's stomach churned. The human rebellion remained confined to the northern reaches of Pangera, the sprawling territory across the Haldren Sea, but Philip Briggs had done his best to bring it over to Valbara. "You and the pack busted him right in his little rebel bomb lab, though."

Danika tapped her booted foot on the green carpet. "Bureaucratic fucking nonsense."

"He was going to blow up a *club*. You literally found his blueprints for blowing up the White Raven." As one of the most popular nightclubs in the city, the loss of life would have been catastrophic. Briggs's previous bombings had been smaller, but no less deadly, all designed to trigger a war between the humans and Vanir to match the one raging in Pangera's colder climes. Briggs made no secret of his goal: a global conflict that would cost the lives of millions on either side. Lives that were expendable if it meant a possibility for humans

to overthrow those who oppressed them—the magically gifted and long-lived Vanir and, above them, the Asteri, who ruled the planet Midgard from the Eternal City in Pangera.

But Danika and the Pack of Devils had stopped the plot. She'd busted Briggs and his top supporters, all part of the Keres rebels, and spared innocents from their brand of fanaticism.

As one of the most elite shifter units in Crescent City's Auxiliary, the Pack of Devils patrolled the Old Square, making sure drunken, handsy tourists didn't become drunken, dead tourists when they approached the wrong person. Making sure the bars and cafés and music halls and shops stayed safe from whatever lowlife had crawled into town that day. And making sure people like Briggs were in prison.

The 33rd Imperial Legion claimed to do the same, but the angels who made up the fabled ranks of the Governor's personal army just glowered and promised Hel if challenged.

"Believe me," Danika said, stomping down the stairs, "I'm going to make it perfectly fucking clear in this meeting that Briggs's release is unacceptable."

She would. Even if Danika had to snarl in Micah Domitus's face, she'd get her point across. There weren't many who'd dare piss off the Archangel of Crescent City, but Danika wouldn't hesitate. And given that all seven Heads of the City would be at this meeting, the odds of that happening were high. Things tended to escalate swiftly when they were in one room. There was little love lost between the six lower Heads in Crescent City, the metropolis formally known as Lunathion. Each Head controlled a specific part of the city: the Prime of the wolves in Moonwood, the Fae Autumn King in Five Roses, the Under-King in the Bone Quarter, the Viper Queen in the Meat Market, the Oracle in the Old Square, and the River Queen—who very rarely made an appearance—representing the House of Many Waters and her Blue Court far beneath the Istros River's turquoise surface. She seldom deigned to leave it.

The humans in Asphodel Meadows had no Head. No seat at the table. Philip Briggs had found more than a few sympathizers because of it.

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But Micah, Head of the Central Business District, ruled over them all. Beyond his city titles, he was Archangel of Valbara. Ruler of this entire fucking territory, and answerable only to the six Asteri in the Eternal City, the capital and beating heart of Pangera. Of the entire planet of Midgard. If anyone could keep Briggs in prison, it would be him.

Danika reached the bottom of the stairs, so far below that she was cut off from sight by the slope of the ceiling. Bryce lingered in the archway, listening as Danika said, “Hey, Syrinx.” A little yip of delight from the thirty-pound chimera rose up the stairs.

Jesiba had purchased the Lower creature two months ago, to Bryce’s delight. *He is not a pet*, Jesiba had warned her. *He’s an expensive, rare creature bought for the sole purpose of assisting Lehabah in guarding these books. Do not interfere with his duties.*

Bryce had so far failed to inform Jesiba that Syrinx was more interested in eating, sleeping, and getting belly rubs than monitoring the precious books. No matter that her boss might see that at any point, should she bother to check the dozens of camera feeds in the library.

Danika drawled, the smirk audible in her voice, “What’s got your panties in a twist, Lehabah?”

The fire sprite grumbled, “I don’t wear panties. Or clothes. They don’t pair well when you’re made of flame, Danika.”

Danika snickered. Before Bryce could decide whether to go downstairs to referee the match between the fire sprite and the wolf, the phone on the desk began ringing. She had a good idea who it would be.

Heels sinking into the plush carpeting, Bryce reached the phone before it went to audiomail, sparing herself a five-minute lecture. “Hi, Jesiba.”

A beautiful, lilting female voice answered, “Please tell Danika Fendyr that if she continues to use the supply closet as her own personal locker, I *will* turn her into a lizard.”