

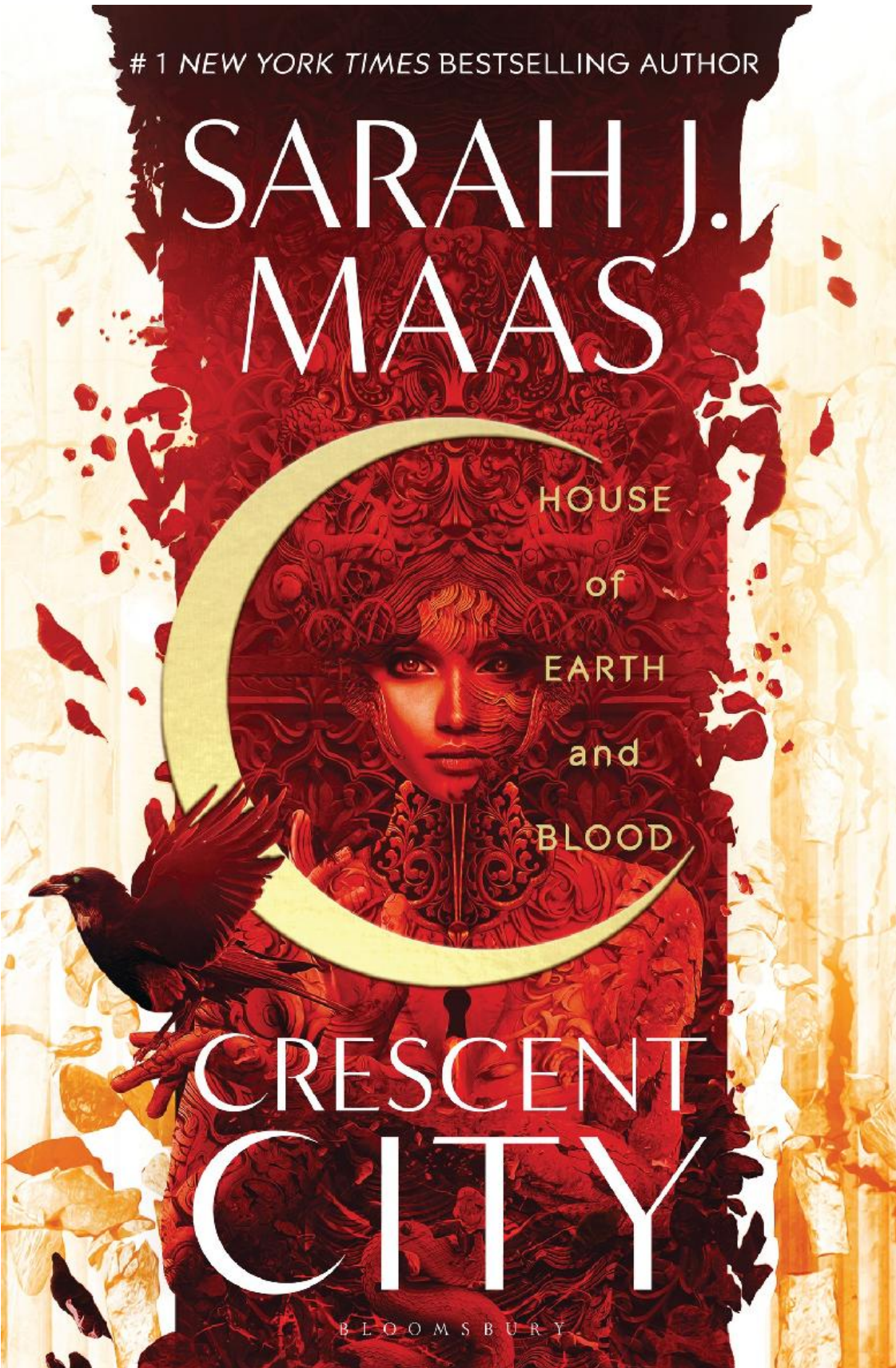
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH J.
MAAS

HOUSE
of
EARTH
and
BLOOD

CRESCENT
CITY

BLOOMSBURY



CRESCENT CITY

HOUSE

of

EARTH

and

BLOOD

CRESCENT CITY

HOUSE

of

EARTH

and

BLOOD

For Taran—

The brightest star in my sky



Books by Sarah J. Maas

The Throne of Glass series

The Assassin's Blade

Throne of Glass

Crown of Midnight

Heir of Fire

Queen of Shadows

Empire of Storms

Tower of Dawn

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The Throne of Glass Coloring Book

The Court of Thorns and Roses series

A Court of Thorns and Roses

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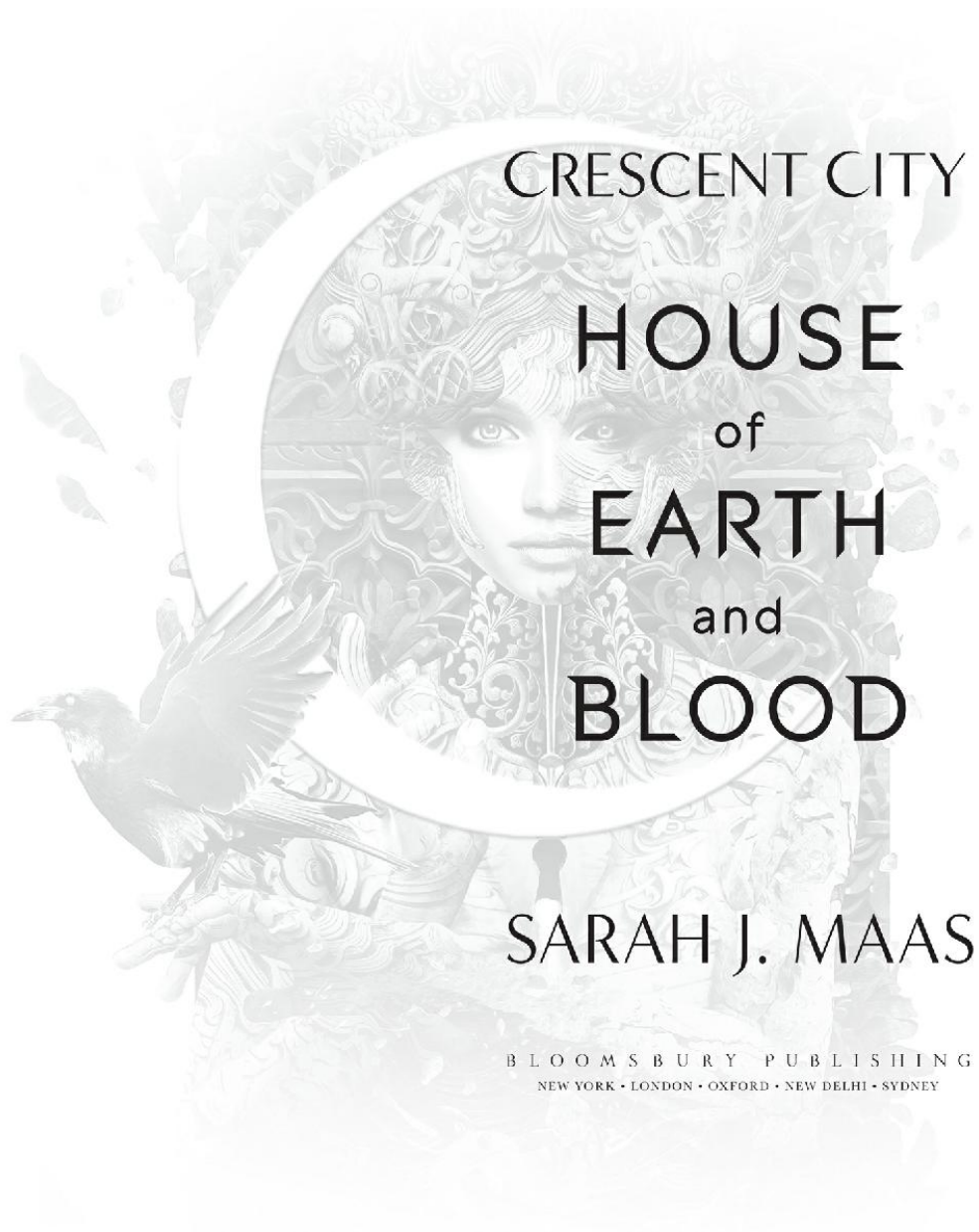
A Court of Frost and Starlight

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A Court of Thorns and Roses Coloring Book

The Crescent City series

House of Earth and Blood



CONTENTS

[Part I: The Hollow](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Part II: The Trench](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Part III: The Canyon](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Chapter Fifty-One](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Five](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Six](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Sixty](#)

[Chapter Sixty-One](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Two](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Three](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Four](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Five](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Six](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Seven](#)

[Part IV: The Ravine](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Sixty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Seventy](#)

[Chapter Seventy-One](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Two](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Three](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Four](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Five](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Six](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Seven](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Eight](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Nine](#)

[Chapter Eighty](#)

[Chapter Eighty-One](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Two](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Three](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Four](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Five](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Six](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Eighty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Ninety](#)

[Chapter Ninety-One](#)

[Chapter Ninety-Two](#)

[Chapter Ninety-Three](#)

[Chapter Ninety-Four](#)

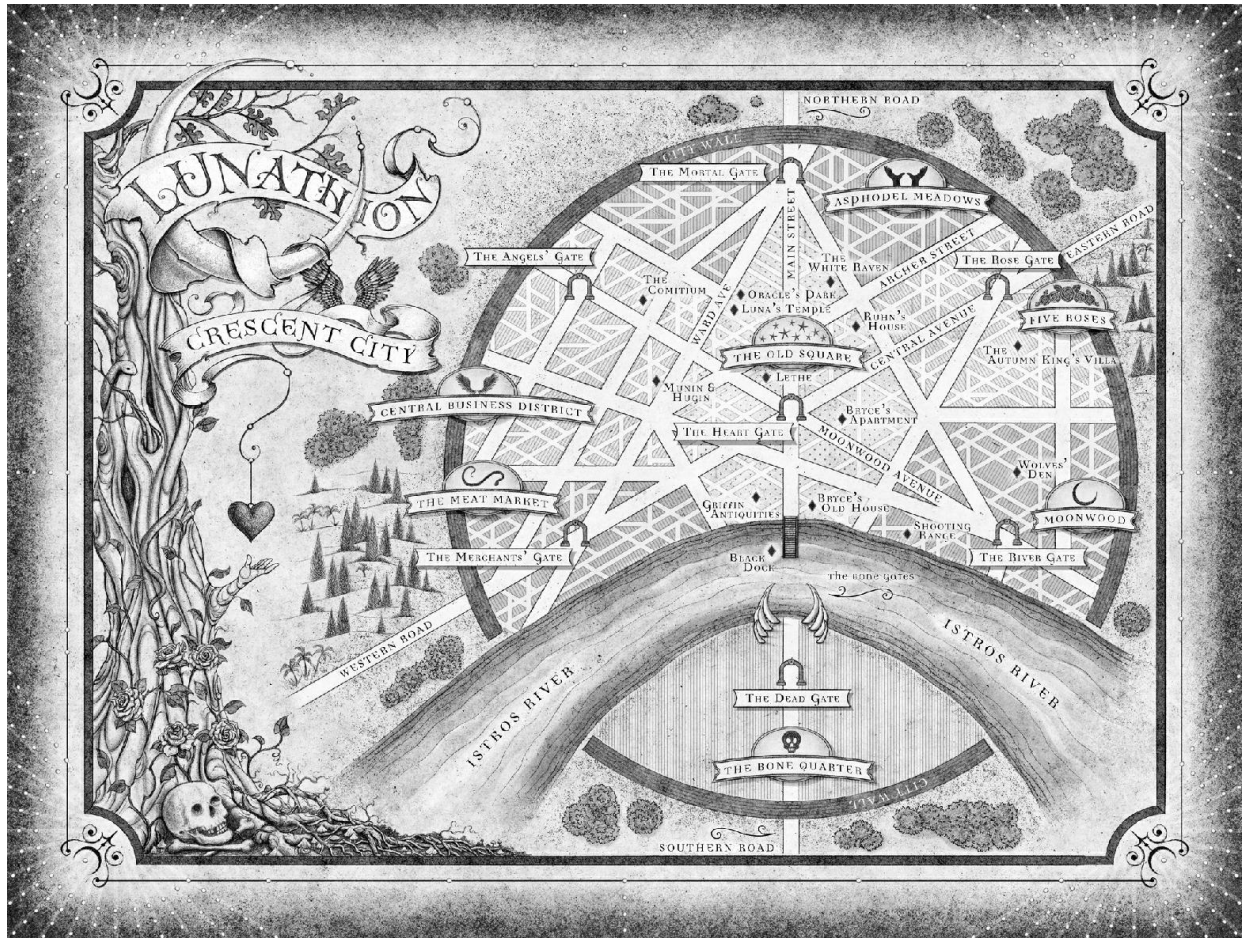
[Chapter Ninety-Five](#)

Chapter Ninety-Six

Chapter Ninety-Seven

Epilogue

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, nøkks, and others watched over by Ogenas

HOUSE OF FLAME AND SHADOW

Daemonaki, Reapers, wraiths, vampyrs, draki, dragons, necromancers, and many wicked and

unnamed things that even Urd herself cannot see

* *Sprites were kicked out of their House as a result of their participation in the Fall, and are now*

considered Lowers, though many of them refuse to accept this.

PART I

THE HOLLOW

1

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 Hell 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 rooting 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 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 rooting 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 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

enchancements.

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 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 firstlights 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.

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.”

2

By the time Danika emerged on the gallery’s showroom floor, Bryce had endured a mildly

threatening reprimand from Jesiba about her ineptitude, one email from a fussy client demanding

Bryce expedite the paperwork on the ancient urn she’d bought so she could show it off to her

equally fussy friends at her cocktail party on Monday, and two messages from members of

Danika's pack inquiring about whether their Alpha was about to kill someone over Briggs's

release.

Nathalie, Danika's Third, had gotten straight to the point: *Has she lost her shit about Briggs*

yet?

Connor Holstrom, Danika's Second, took a little more care with what he sent out into the

ether. There was always a chance of a leak. *Have you spoken to Danika?* was all he'd asked.

Bryce was writing back to Connor— *Yes. I've got it covered*—when a gray wolf the size of a

small horse pushed the iron archives door shut with a paw, claws clicking on the metal.

"You hated my clothes that much?" Bryce asked, rising from her seat. Only Danika's

caramel eyes remained the same in this form—and only those eyes softened the pure menace and

grace the wolf radiated with each step toward the desk.

"I've got them on, don't worry." Long, sharp fangs flashed with each word. Danika cocked

her fuzzy ears, taking in the computer that had been shut down, the purse Bryce had set on the

desk. “You’re coming out with me?”

“I’ve got to do some sleuthing for Jesiba.” Bryce grabbed the ring of keys that opened doors

into various parts of her life. “She’s been hounding me about finding Luna’s Horn again. As if I

haven’t been trying to find it nonstop for the last week.”

Danika glanced to one of the visible cameras in the showroom, mounted behind a decapitated

statue of a dancing faun dating back ten thousand years. Her bushy tail swished once. “Why does

she even want it?”

Bryce shrugged. “I haven’t had the balls to ask.”

Danika stalked to the front door, careful not to let her claws snag a single thread in the

carpet. “I doubt she’s going to return it to the temple out of the goodness of her heart.”

“I have a feeling Jesiba would leverage its return to her advantage,” Bryce said. They strode

onto the quiet street a block off the Istros, the midday sun baking the cobblestones, Danika a

solid wall of fur and muscle between Bryce and the curb.

The theft of the sacred horn during the power outage had been the biggest news story out of

the disaster: looters had used the cover of darkness to break into Luna’s Temple and swipe the

ancient Fae relic from its resting place atop the lap of the massive, enthroned deity.

The Archangel Micah himself had offered a hefty reward for any information regarding its

return and promised that the sacrilegious bastard who'd stolen it would be brought to justice.

Also known as public crucifixion.

Bryce always made a point of not going near the square in the CBD, where they were usually

held. On certain days, depending on the wind and heat, the smell of blood and rotting flesh could

carry for blocks.

Bryce fell into step beside Danika as the massive wolf scanned the street, nostrils sniffing for

any hint of a threat. Bryce, as half-Fae, could scent people in greater detail than the average

human. She'd entertained her parents endlessly as a kid by describing the scents of everyone in

their little mountain town, Nidaros—humans possessed no such way to interpret the world. But

her abilities had nothing on her friend's.

As Danika scented the street, her tail wagged once—and not from happiness.

“Chill,” Bryce said. “You’ll make your case to the Heads, then they’ll figure it out.”

Danika's ears flattened. “It's all fucked, B. All of it.”

Bryce frowned. “You really mean to tell me that any of the Heads want a rebel like Briggs at

large? They’ll find some technicality and throw his ass right back in jail.” She added, because

Danika still wouldn’t look at her, “There’s no way the 33rd’s not monitoring his every breath.

Briggs so much as blinks wrong and he’ll see what kind of pain angels can rain down on us all.

Hel, the Governor might even send the Umbra Mortis after him.” Micah’s personal assassin, with

the rare gift of lightning in his veins, could eliminate almost any threat.

Danika snarled, teeth gleaming. “I can handle Briggs myself.”

“I know you can. Everyone knows you can, Danika.”

Danika surveyed the street ahead, glancing past a poster of the six enthroned Asteri tacked

up on a wall—with an empty throne to honor their fallen sister—but loosed a breath.

She would always have burdens and expectations to shoulder that Bryce would never have to

endure, and Bryce was thankful as Hel for that privilege. When Bryce fucked up, Jesiba usually

gripped for a few minutes and that was that. When Danika fucked up, it was blasted on news

reports and across the interweb.

Sabine made sure of it.

Bryce and Sabine had hated each other from the moment the Alpha had sneered at her only

child's improper, half-breed roommate that first day at CCU. And Bryce had loved Danika from

the moment her new roommate had offered her a hand in greeting anyway, and then said Sabine

was just pissy because she'd been hoping for a muscle-bound vampyr to drool over.

Danika rarely let the opinions of others—especially Sabine—eat away at her swagger and

joy, yet on rough days like this ... Bryce lifted a hand and ran it down Danika's muscled ribs, a

comforting, sweeping stroke.

“Do you think Briggs will come after you or the pack?” Bryce asked, her stomach twisting.

Danika hadn't busted Briggs alone—he had a score to settle with all of them.

Danika's snout wrinkled. “I don't know.”

The words echoed between them. In hand-to-hand combat, Briggs would never survive

against Danika. But one of those bombs would change everything. If Danika had made the Drop

into immortality, she'd probably survive. But since she hadn't—since she was the only one of

the Pack of Devils who hadn't yet done it ... Bryce's mouth turned dry.

“Be careful,” Bryce said quietly.

“I will,” Danika said, her warm eyes still full of shadows. But then she tossed her head, as if

shaking it free of water—the movement purely canine. Bryce often marveled at this, that Danika

could clear away her fears, or at least bury them, enough to move onward. Indeed, Danika

changed the subject. “Your brother will be at the meeting today.”

Half brother. Bryce didn’t bother to correct her. *Half brother and full-Fae prick.* “And?”

“Just thought I’d warn you that I’ll be seeing him.” The wolf’s face softened slightly. “He’s

going to ask me how you’re doing.”

“Tell Ruhn I’m busy doing important shit and to go to Hel.”

Danika huffed a laugh. “Where, exactly, are you doing this sleuthing for the Horn?”

“The temple,” Bryce said with a sigh. “Honestly, I’ve been looking into this thing for days

on end, and can’t figure out anything. No suspects, no murmurings at the Meat Market about it

being for sale, no motive for who’d even bother with it. It’s famous enough that whoever’s got it

has it wrapped up *tight*.” She frowned at the clear sky. “I almost wonder if the power outage was

tied to it—if someone shut down the city’s grid to steal it in the chaos. There are about twenty

people in this city capable of being that crafty, and half of them possess the resources to pull it

off.”

Danika’s tail twitched. “If they’re able to do something like that, I’d suggest staying away.

Lead Jesiba around a bit, make her think you’re looking for it, and then let it drop. Either the

Horn will show up by then, or she’ll move on to her next stupid quest.”

Bryce admitted, “I just ... It’d be good to find the Horn. For my own career.” Whatever the

hell that would be. A year of working at the gallery hadn’t sparked anything beyond disgust at

the obscene amounts of money that rich people squandered on old-ass shit.

Danika’s eyes flickered. “Yeah, I know.”

Bryce zipped a tiny golden pendant—a knot of three entwined circles—along the delicate

chain around her neck.

Danika went on patrol armed with claws, a sword, and guns, but Bryce’s daily armor

consisted solely of this: an Archesian amulet barely the size of her thumbnail, gifted by Jesiba on

the first day of work.

A hazmat suit in a necklace, Danika had marveled when Bryce had shown off the amulet’s

considerable protections against the influence of various magical objects.
Archesian amulets

didn't come cheap, but Bryce didn't bother to delude herself into thinking
her boss's gift was

given out of anything but self-interest. It would have been an insurance
nightmare if Bryce didn't

have one.

Danika nodded to the necklace. "Don't take that off. Especially if you're
looking into shit

like the Horn." Even though the Horn's mighty powers had long been dead
—if it had been stolen

by someone powerful, she'd need every magical defense against them.

"Yeah, yeah," Bryce said, though Danika was right. She'd never taken the
necklace off since

getting it. If Jesiba ever kicked her to the curb, she knew she'd have to find
some way to make

sure the necklace came with her. Danika had said as much several times,
unable to stop that

Alpha wolf's instinct to protect at all costs. It was part of why Bryce loved
her—and why her

chest tightened in that moment with that same love and gratitude.

Bryce's phone buzzed in her purse, and she fished it out. Danika peered
over, noted who was

calling, and wagged her tail, ears perking up.

“Do not say a word about Briggs,” Bryce warned, and accepted the call. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetie.” Ember Quinlan’s clear voice filled her ear, drawing a smile from Bryce even

with three hundred miles between them. “I wanted to double-check that next weekend is still

okay to visit.”

“Hi, Mommy!” Danika barked toward the phone.

Ember laughed. Ember had always been *Mom* to Danika, even from their first meeting. And

Ember, who had never borne any children beyond Bryce, had been more than glad to find herself

with a second—equally willful and troublesome—daughter. “Danika’s with you?”

Bryce rolled her eyes and held out the phone to her friend. Between one step and the next,

Danika shifted in a flash of light, the massive wolf shrinking into the lithe humanoid form.

Snatching the phone from Bryce, Danika pinned it between her ear and shoulder as she

adjusted the white silk blouse Bryce had loaned her, tucking it into her stained jeans. She’d

managed to wipe a good amount of the nightstalker gunk off both the pants and leather jacket,

but the T-shirt had apparently been a lost cause. Danika said into the phone, “Bryce and I are

taking a walk.”

With Bryce’s arched ears, she could hear her mother perfectly as she said, “Where?”

Ember Quinlan made overprotectiveness a competitive sport.

Moving here, to Lunathion, had been a test of wills. Ember had only relented when she’d

learned who Bryce’s freshman-year roommate was—and then gave Danika a lecture on how to

make sure Bryce stayed safe. Randall, Bryce’s stepfather, had mercifully cut his wife off after

thirty minutes.

Bryce knows how to defend herself, Randall had reminded Ember. *We saw to that. And Bryce*

will keep up her training while she’s here, won’t she?

Bryce certainly had. She’d hit up the gun range just a few days ago, going through the

motions Randall—her true father, as far as she was concerned—had taught her since childhood:

assembling a gun, taking aim at a target, controlling her breathing.

Most days, she found guns to be brutal killing machines, and felt grateful that they were

highly regulated by the Republic. But given that she had little more to defend herself beyond

speed and a few well-placed maneuvers, she’d learned that for a human, a gun could mean the

difference between life and slaughter.

Danika fibbed, “We’re just heading to one of the hawker stalls in the Old Square—we

wanted some lamb kofta.”

Before Ember could continue the interrogation, Danika added, “Hey, B must have forgotten

to tell you that we’re actually heading down to Kalaxos next weekend—Ithan’s got a sunball

game there, and we’re all going to cheer him on.”

A half-truth. The game was happening, but there had been no discussion of going to watch

Connor’s younger brother, CCU’s star player. This afternoon, the Pack of Devils was actually

heading over to the CCU arena to cheer for Ithan, but Bryce and Danika hadn’t bothered to

attend an away game since sophomore year, when Danika had been sleeping with one of the

defensemen.

“That’s too bad,” Ember said. Bryce could practically hear the frown in her mother’s tone.

“We were really looking forward to it.”

Burning Solas, this woman was a master of the guilt trip. Bryce cringed and snatched back

the phone. “So were we, but let’s reschedule for next month.”

“But that’s so long from now—”

“Shit, a client’s coming down the street,” Bryce lied. “I gotta go.”

“Bryce Adelaide Quinlan—”

“Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, Mom!” Danika echoed, just as Bryce hung up.

Bryce sighed toward the sky, ignoring the angels soaring and flapping past, their shadows

dancing over the sun-washed streets. “Message incoming in three, two ...”

Her phone buzzed.

Ember had written, *If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were avoiding us, Bryce. Your father*

will be very hurt.

Danika let out a whistle. “Oh, she’s good.”

Bryce groaned. “I’m not letting them come to the city if Briggs is running free.”

Danika’s smile faded. “I know. We’ll keep pushing them off until it’s sorted out.” Thank

Cthona for Danika—she always had a plan for everything.

Bryce slid her phone into her purse, leaving her mother’s message unanswered.

When they reached the Gate at the heart of the Old Square, its quartz archway as clear as a

frozen pond, the sun was just hitting its upper edge, refracting and casting small rainbows against

one of the buildings flanking it. On Summer Solstice, when the sun lined up perfectly with the

Gate, it filled the entire square with rainbows, so many that it was like walking inside a diamond.

Tourists milled about, a line of them snaking across the square itself, all waiting for the

chance at a photo with the twenty-foot-high landmark.

One of seven in this city, all carved from enormous blocks of quartz hewn from the Laconian

Mountains to the north, the Old Square Gate was often called the Heart Gate, thanks to its

location in the dead center of Lunathion, with the other six Gates located equidistant from it,

each one opening onto a road out of the walled city.

“They should make a special access lane for residents to cross the square,” Bryce muttered as

they edged around tourists and hawkers.

“And give tourists fines for slow walking,” Danika muttered back, but flashed a lupine grin

at a young human couple that recognized her, gawked, and began snapping photos.

“I wonder what they’d think if they knew that nightstalker’s special sauce is all over you,”

Bryce murmured.

Danika elbowed her. “Asshole.” She threw a friendly wave to the tourists and continued on.

On the other side of the Heart Gate, amid a small army of vendors selling food and touristy

crap, a second line of people waited to access the golden block sticking out of its southern side.

“We’ll have to cut through them to get across,” Bryce said, scowling at the tourists idling in the

wilting heat.

But Danika halted, her angular face turned to the Gate and the plaque. “Let’s make a wish.”

“I’m not waiting in that line.” Usually, they just shouted their wishes drunkenly into the ether

late at night when they were staggering home from the White Raven and the square was empty.

Bryce checked the time on her phone. “Don’t you have to get over to the Comitium?” The

Governor’s five-towered stronghold was at least a fifteen-minute walk away.

“I’ve got time,” Danika said, and grabbed Bryce’s hand, tugging her through the crowds and

toward the real tourist draw of the Gate.

Jutting out of the quartz about four feet off the ground lay the dial pad: a solid-gold block

embedded with seven different gems, each for a different quarter of the city, the insignia of each

district etched beneath it.

Emerald and a rose for Five Roses. Opal and a pair of wings for the CBD.
Ruby and a heart

for the Old Square. Sapphire and an oak tree for Moonwood. Amethyst and a
human hand for

Asphodel Meadows. Tiger's-eye and a serpent for the Meat Market. And
onyx—so black it

gobbled the light—and a set of skull and crossbones for the Bone Quarter.

Beneath the arc of stones and etched emblems, a small, round disk rose up
slightly, its metal

worn down by countless hands and paws and fins and any other manner of
limb.

A sign beside it read: *Touch at your own risk. Do not use between sundown
and sunrise.*

Violators will be fined.

The people in line, waiting for access to the disk, seemed to have no problem
with the risks.

A pair of giggling teenage male shifters—some kind of feline from their
scents—goaded

each other forward, elbowing and taunting, daring the other to touch the
disk.

“Pathetic,” Danika said, striding past the line, the ropes, and a bored-looking
city guard—a

young Fae female—to the very front. She fished a badge from inside her
leather coat and flashed

it at the guard, who stiffened as she realized who'd cut the line. She didn't even look at the

golden emblem of the crescent moon bow with an arrow nocked through it before stepping back.

"Official Aux business," Danika declared with an unnervingly straight face. "It'll just be a

minute."

Bryce stifled her laughter, well aware of the glares fixed on their backs from the line.

Danika drawled to the teenage boys, "If you're not going to do it, then clear off."

They whirled toward her, and went white as death.

Danika smiled, showing nearly all her teeth. It wasn't a pleasant sight.

"Holy shit," whispered one of them.

Bryce hid her smile as well. It never got old—the awe. Mostly because she knew Danika had

earned it. Every damned day, Danika earned the awe that bloomed across the faces of strangers

when they spotted her corn-silk hair and that neck tattoo. And the fear that made the lowlifes in

this city think twice before fucking with her and the Pack of Devils.

Except for Philip Briggs. Bryce sent a prayer to Ogenas's blue depths that the sea goddess

would whisper her wisdom to Briggs to keep his distance from Danika if he ever really did walk

free.

The boys stepped aside, and it only took a few milliseconds for them to notice Bryce, too.

The awe on their faces turned to blatant interest.

Bryce snorted. *Keep dreaming.*

One of them stammered, turning his attention from Bryce to Danika, “My—my history

teacher said the Gates were originally communication devices.”

“I bet you get all the ladies with those stellar factoids,” Danika said without looking back at

them, unimpressed and uninterested.

Message received, they slunk back to the line. Bryce smirked and stepped up to her friend’s

side, peering down at the dial pad.

The teenager was right, though. The seven Gates of this city, each set along a ley line

running through Lunathion, had been designed as a quick way for the guards in the districts to

speak to each other centuries ago. When someone merely placed a hand against the golden disk

in the center of the pad and spoke, the wielder’s voice would travel to the other Gates, a gem

lighting up with the district from which the voice originated.

Of course, it required a drop of magic to do so—literally sucked it like a vampyr from the

veins of the person who touched the pad, a tickling *zap* of power, gone forever.

Bryce raised her eyes to the bronze plaque above her head. The quartz Gates were

memorials, though she didn't know for which conflict or war. But each bore the same plaque:

The power shall always belong to those who give their lives to the city.

Considering it was a statement that could be construed as being in opposition to the Asteri's

rule, Bryce was always surprised that they allowed the Gates to continue to stand. But after

becoming obsolete with the advent of phones, the Gates had found a second life when kids and

tourists began using them, having their friends go to the other Gates in the city so they could

whisper dirty words or marvel at the sheer novelty of such an antiquated method of

communication. Not surprisingly, come weekends, drunk assholes—a category to which Bryce

and Danika firmly belonged—became such a pain in the ass with their shouting through the

Gates that the city had instituted hours of operation.

And then dumb superstition grew, claiming the Gate could make wishes come true, and that

to give over a droplet of your power was to make an offering to the five gods.

It was bullshit, Bryce knew—but if it made Danika not dread Briggs’s release so much, well,

it was worth it.

“What are you going to wish for?” Bryce asked when Danika stared down at the disk, the

gems dark above it.

The emerald for FiRo lit up, a young female voice coming through to shriek, “*Titties!*”

People laughed around them, the sound like water trickling over stone, and Bryce chuckled.

But Danika’s face had gone solemn. “I’ve got too many things to wish for,” she said. Before

Bryce could ask, Danika shrugged. “But I think I’ll wish for Ithan to win his sunball game

tonight.”

With that, she set her palm onto the disk. Bryce watched as her friend let out a shiver and

quietly laughed, stepping back. Her caramel eyes shone. “Your turn.”

“You know I have barely any magic worth taking, but okay,” Bryce said, not to be outdone,

even by an Alpha wolf. From the moment Bryce walked into her dorm room freshman year,

they’d done everything together. Just the two of them, as it always would be.

They even planned to make the Drop together—to freeze into immortality at the same breath,

with members of the Pack of Devils Anchoring them.

Technically, it wasn't true immortality—the Vanir did age and die, either of natural causes or

other methods, but the aging process was so slowed after the Drop that, depending on one's

species, it could take centuries to show a wrinkle. The Fae could last a thousand years, the

shifters and witches usually five centuries, the angels somewhere between. Full humans did not

make the Drop, as they bore no magic. And compared to humans, with their ordinary life spans

and slow healing, the Vanir *were* essentially immortal—some species bore children who didn't

even enter maturity until they were in their eighties. And most were very, very hard to kill.

But Bryce had rarely thought about where she'd fall on that spectrum—whether her half-Fae

heritage would grant her a hundred years or a thousand. It didn't matter, so long as Danika was

there for all of it. Starting with the Drop. They'd take the deadly plunge into their matured power

together, encounter whatever lay at the bottom of their souls, and then race back up to life before

the lack of oxygen rendered them brain-dead. Or just plain dead.

Yet while Bryce would inherit barely enough power to do cool party tricks, Danika was

expected to claim a sea of power that would put her ranking far past Sabine's—likely equal to

that of Fae royalty, maybe even beyond the Autumn King himself.

It was unheard of, for a shifter to have that sort of power, yet all the standard childhood tests

had confirmed it: once Danika Dropped, she'd become a considerable power among the wolves,

the likes of which had not been seen since the elder days across the sea.

Danika wouldn't just become the Prime of the Crescent City wolves. No, she had the

potential to be the Alpha of *all* wolves. On the fucking planet.

Danika never seemed to give two shits about it. Didn't plan for her future based on it.

Twenty-seven was the ideal age to make the Drop, they'd decided together, after years of

mercilessly judging the various immortals who marked their lives by centuries and millennia.

Right before any permanent lines or wrinkles or gray hairs. They merely said to anyone who

inquired, *What's the point of being immortal badasses if we have sagging tits?*

Vain assholes, Fury had hissed when they'd explained it the first time.

Fury, who had made the Drop at age twenty-one, hadn't chosen the age for herself. It'd just

happened, or had been forced upon her—they didn't know for sure. Fury's attendance at CCU

had only been a front for a mission; most of her time was spent doing *truly* fucked-up things for

disgusting amounts of money over in Pangera. She made it a point never to give details.

Assassin, Danika claimed. Even sweet Juniper, the faun who occupied the fourth side of their

little friendship-square, admitted the odds were that Fury was a merc. Whether Fury was

occasionally employed by the Asteri and their puppet Imperial Senate was up for debate, too. But

none of them really cared—not when Fury always had their back when they needed it. And even

when they didn't.

Bryce's hand hovered over the golden disk. Danika's gaze was a cool weight on her.

"Come on, B, don't be a wimp."

Bryce sighed, and set her hand on the pad. "I wish Danika would get a manicure. Her nails

look like shit."

Lightning zapped through her, a slight vacuuming around her belly button, and then Danika

was laughing, shoving her. “You fucking *dick*.”

Bryce slung an arm around Danika’s shoulders. “You deserved it.”

Danika thanked the security guard, who beamed at the attention, and ignored the tourists still

snapping photos. They didn’t speak until they reached the northern edge of the square—where

Danika would head toward the angel-filled skies and towers of the CBD, to the sprawling

Comitium complex in its heart, and Bryce toward Luna’s Temple, three blocks up.

Danika jerked her chin toward the streets behind Bryce. “I’ll see you at home, all right?”

“Be careful.” Bryce blew out a breath, trying to shake her unease.

“I know how to look out for myself, B,” Danika said, but love shone in her eyes—gratitude

that crushed Bryce’s chest—merely for the fact that someone cared whether she lived or died.

Sabine was a piece of shit. Had never whispered or hinted who Danika’s father might be—so

Danika had grown up with absolutely no one except her grandfather, who was too old and

withdrawn to spare Danika from her mother’s cruelty.

Bryce inclined her head toward the CBD. “Good luck. Don’t piss off too many people.”

“You know I will,” Danika said with a grin that didn’t meet her eyes.