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BEDLAM

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Magic.

The place dripped with the stuff. It gathered in the corner booths, spilled over the long, lacquered bar, and crawled its way across the floor, grinning its slow, idiot grin. It was in everything – the music, the drinks, the words spoken and the laughs they provoked. It was stitched into clothes and etched into jewellery. It was in the coiffed hair. The lipstick.

That's what sorcerers did now. Free from the old rules, they took their magic and they experimented. They pushed their powers into sigils scrawled on squares of paper. They shared and swapped, dipped in and dabbled. For some, it meant a night of unforgettable wonder. For others, it meant sinking into a cold, dark place with no walls and no floors and no way to climb out. But the party went on. The party always went on.

The sorcerers looked at Valkyrie when she walked in. They knew her. They all knew her. Valkyrie Cain, the Arbiter, the detective, her dark hair loose, still wearing her jacket, still cold from outside. Twenty-five years old, six feet tall and made of muscle and sinew, a pretty girl with a nasty streak.

And, where she was, *he* was, emerging from the other side of the bar. Skulduggery Pleasant, the Arbiter, the Skeleton Detective, wearing a black three-piece with a blue shirt and black tie, his

hat pulled low over one eye socket. If bad news had a name, it answered to Skulduggery.

The conversation faded just for a moment, then swelled again, as if acting innocent was going to save anyone. They talked, and laughed, every one of them hoping that they weren't the person the Arbiters were looking for. Not tonight. Please, whatever god you believe in, not tonight.

Valkyrie took off her jacket. There were those who were impressed and those who weren't – but they all looked. They looked at her shoulders, carved from granite, and peeked at her abs when her T-shirt rode up, carved from marble. They saw the work she'd put in, the sacrifices she'd made. The punishment. Most of them would never know what it took to go through that. None of them knew the pain that drove her.

Christopher Reign, at least, knew of the effort involved. He was a man who loved his muscles as much as he loved his suits. The suits were from Italy. The muscles came straight from Detroit.

Valkyrie and Skulduggery sat at his table and didn't say anything. Skulduggery took off his hat.

Reign watched them. Smiled. Nodded to Valkyrie. "Thought you'd be bigger."

"No, you didn't," she said back.

He looked away, raised a hand. "I got a girl could bench-press you."

His girl stood up. She was taller than Valkyrie. Bigger arms. Her thighs stretched her trousers.

Valkyrie barely glanced at her. "I'm not here to outflex your gym buddies. I'm here to talk to you about Doctor Nye."

"I know you are," said Reign, and laughed. "Everyone knows you are. You been looking for that messed-up freak since before Christmas. That's over two months now. Why is that?"

"It's a family matter."

"A family matter involving Nye? Yowch." He chuckled. "Ever think that maybe it don't wanna be found?"

"We don't much care," said Valkyrie. "We're going to find it anyway. We've heard you might know where it is."

Reign shook his head. "I don't associate with the Crenga. They may talk like they're kinda human, but they're not. They're monsters. Intelligent monsters, hell, yeah, but monsters. You can't trust a monster."

Valkyrie put a square piece of paper on the table. It had a sigil drawn on it.

"I don't know what that is," said Reign.

"Of course you don't. People are calling it a Splash."

"Oh," said Reign. "Oh, I heard about this. Little jolts of magic shared between friends, am I right? Just enough to make you feel good?"

"Sure," Valkyrie said. "Completely harmless fun, if you don't count the potential side effects."

Reign's smile widened. "Side effects, Miss Detective? Oh, you're talking about those mages who lost control for a bit, right? Hurt a few people? Such a shame."

"Yes, it was," said Valkyrie. She tapped the piece of paper. "This is one of yours, isn't it? One you've sold?"

"What a positively outrageous accusation. I am deeply, deeply hurt."

"We talked to some people," said Valkyrie. "We did our homework. These little Splashes started appearing six weeks ago. We traced them right back here."

"Back here?" Reign said, eyebrows rising.

"Back here," said Valkyrie, nodding.

"Wow. I mean, I'm assuming you have evidence..."

"You've been watching too many mortal cop shows, Christopher. We don't need evidence. All we need is a suspicion, and then we let our Sensitives take a peek inside your mind."

"That would be worrying, if indeed I *was* involved in a criminal enterprise, and I didn't have the best psychic barriers that money can buy."

For the first time, Valkyrie smiled. "I'm a bit of a Sensitive myself," she said. "I've only just started to find out what I can do, but I bet I could break through those pesky barriers of yours."

"I think I'd like to see you try."

"How'd you do it, Christopher?"

His face fell. "Have we stopped flirting already?"

"Oh, that wasn't flirting. See, we know you don't have anyone in your crew who could come up with these Splashes. Something like this is relatively easy to replicate, but not at all easy to create. We think you had outside help."

"Ah," said Reign. "You think Doctor Nye is responsible."

"That's what we think."

"And so you're hoping that I still know where that gangly, no-nosed freak might be hiding out."

"That's exactly it."

Reign finished his drink and a waitress appeared, taking the empty glass and replacing it with a fresh one.

Skulduggery watched her hurry away. "Do you have mortals working in your bar, Mr Reign?" he asked.

"Sure do. I got a few of 'em. It's perfectly legal, and they're cheaper than hiring one of *us*. No mage wants to wait tables or scrub toilets, you know?"

"Back to Doctor Nye, Christopher," said Valkyrie.

"I told you, I don't associate with Crengarrions. I'm a business owner. I run a bar. I'm not a criminal. I don't deal drugs, magical or otherwise. I am a law-abiding citizen of Roarhaven, and I pay my taxes, the same as everyone else. Now, I just met you, and I like you, but right now I'm feeling... what's the word? Harassed. I feel like you're harassing me. You're welcome to buy yourself a drink and stay, chat, make new friends. I would love to see you loosen up. But I'm afraid I'm gonna have to call a halt to the interrogation."

"You don't have much of a say in it," said Valkyrie.

Reign's gym buddy came over then, the tall woman with all the muscles.

"This is Panthea," said Reign. "She's one of the door staff here. She is well within her rights to throw you outta this bar. All she needs is an excuse."

Valkyrie sighed, and stood. The chatter stopped. Only the music continued. Skulduggery started to rise, but Valkyrie put a hand on his shoulder as she stepped round him.

"You want to take the first swing?" she asked, looking up at Panthea.

Panthea sneered. "So you can arrest me for assaulting an Arbiter?"

"Oh, I wouldn't arrest you for something like that."

"So... I could knock you the hell out and I wouldn't land in a jail cell?"

"I doubt you'd be able to," said Valkyrie, "but sure."

Panthea smiled.

"So how do you want to do this?" Valkyrie asked. "Want to go outside, want to clear a space, want to just throw each other over tables?"

"I can do whatever you want."

"Not the third one," said Reign, "please. These tables cost money."

"I'll give you the first shot," Valkyrie said. "One clean shot, right across the jaw. See if you can knock me out."

Panthea grinned. "A shot like that, you'll be eating through a straw."

"If I could just interject," Skulduggery said, attempting to rise again.

Once more, Valkyrie put a hand on his shoulder, keeping him down. "Not right now," she said. "I'm having a conversation with the pretty lady."

Panthea arched an eyebrow. "You think I'm pretty?"

"You have gorgeous eyes."

"Compliments won't stop me from beating you up so bad you crawl home to your mammy."

"I wouldn't expect them to, beautiful."

Panthea folded her massive arms. "OK, well, you can stop, because I am many things, but beautiful is not one of them."

"Are you kidding?" Valkyrie said. "With your bone structure?"

"I've got a busted nose."

"Your nose has character. It's cute, and it makes the rest of you even cuter."

Panthea sneered again, and looked Valkyrie up and down. "Your arms are amazing," she said at last.

"You think so?"

"You're hitting all the right angles," Panthea said, nodding.

"Well, *your* arms are phenomenal."

"Yeah," said Panthea, "but it's hard to find clothes that fit."

"Oh, God, I know."

"I'm confused," said Reign. "I thought you two were gonna fight."

Panthea hesitated, then glanced at her boss. "I don't think I can, Mr Reign. I like her."

"*Awww*," Valkyrie said, "thank you. I like you, too. I'm looking for a gym to train at here in Roarhaven – where do you go?"

"Fit to Fight, down on Ascendance Street."

"Hey," said Reign, "I go there. I don't want her at my gym."

Valkyrie and Panthea ignored him.

"Actually," said Panthea, "I only work doors part time – the rest of my day I spend down there as a personal trainer, so..."

Valkyrie bit her lower lip. "Do you think you could fit me in?"

"Definitely."

Reign stood up. "OK, what the hell is going on?"

"We're flirting," said Valkyrie. "This is what flirting is, Christopher."

"Panthea, you can't flirt with her," Reign said, scowling. "She's an Arbiter and a... a customer."

Panthea frowned. "Is she a customer if she hasn't even bought a drink?"