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Chapter 1

NORA

Honora Holtzfall was never late. Everyone who arrived before the Holtzfall Heiress was unfashionably early. Everyone who arrived after her was embarrassingly tardy.

Except Nora was no longer the Holtzfall Heiress. Officially, she never had been, though every newspaper had called her that. She'd been the heiress to the Heiress. But now the Heiress was dead, and Nora was no longer guaranteed to succeed her as eventual head of the family. She was just another granddaughter of Mercy Holtzfall.

And there wasn't a person in Walstad wealthy enough that they could afford to keep Mercy Holtzfall waiting. Not even Nora.

Especially not Nora.

Especially not on the first day of the Veritaz Trials.

The clock above the bank on Bauer Street showed ten minutes to the hour.

Nora would just make it.

Obviously, in an ideal world, she would have arrived both on time *and* wearing shoes. But Nora couldn't have everything, no matter what the papers liked to say.

Today was the equinox. Allegedly the first day of spring, although Nora would have contended the chill in the air wasn't exactly vernal. But it meant that today, there would be exactly as much day as there

was night. And even now, in a city lit with magimek bulbs, days like the equinox still held power.

Twice a year the immortal Huldrekall would willingly emerge from the woods. If they didn't ask the Huldrekall for a Veritaz tonight, they would have to wait for the first day of autumn before they could start the trials.

Stay out of the woods, little one. The old folktale refrain whispered in Nora's mind. *There you will find dangers you do not yet know how to face.*

Of course, every newspaper in the city had an opinion about the trials being held so swiftly.

At Least Wait Until the Last Heiress Is Cold Before Picking a New One

Some couched it in feigned sympathy for Nora.

Let the Girl Grieve Before You Make Her Compete!

But like most things, Nora agreed with her grandmother rather than the press. The sooner they held the trials, the sooner she could regain her rightful place in the family.

So tonight, Mercy Holtzfall, head of their family for the past three decades, would ask the Huldrekall which of her granddaughters was worthiest of being her heir.

It was a rite that stretched back centuries.

Held over generations.

Bound up in blood, custom, and ancient oaths.

And *still* Nora wouldn't put it past her grandmother to disqualify her if she was even a few minutes late for breakfast.

Nora turned onto Konig Street just as the metal grating of a kiosk

clattered open noisily. Inside, the kiosk's owner began slicing open the thick bundles of morning papers, arranging them among packs of gum, cigarettes, and small charms, so that their headlines faced out.

The front page of *The Walstad Herald* caught Nora's eye. It was a picture of her sitting at one of the small tables at Rik's, taken just a few hours ago. Her head was thrown back in laughter, and a flute of champagne loosely dangled from one hand, while the other rested on Freddie Loetze's shoulder as if to say, 'Oh, Freddie dear, you're too much.' A diamond the size of a cherry glinted on her finger, and the thin strap of her effervescent dress slid off one shoulder, carelessly displaying her skin. Nora pulled up the same strap absently now. She looked carefree in the photograph only because she had taken a lot of care to appear that way. The headline was printed in fresh ink above it:

Cheers to Better Days Ahead for the Once (and Future?) Holtzfall Heiress

Nora waited for it: the intoxication that usually came with seeing herself on the front page. But she felt as sober as ever in the cool morning light.

Grief-Stricken Former Holtzfall Heiress Drowns Her Sorrows

Well – Nora plucked the *Gazette* out of the rack next to the *Herald* – that was definitely another take on things. There was a photo of her sipping from a frothy coupe with the blur of the brass band at Café Bliss behind her. She was still wearing her Lussier heels in that picture, kicked up brazenly amidst the chaos. She must have left them at the Ash Lounge, then. Or maybe the Ruby Rose Club.

Her fingers flicked through the rest of the broadsheets as the kiosk owner set them out. She was on the front page of most of them, obviously. News about the Holtzfalls always had papers flying off the stand before the ink was even done drying.

Especially since the murder.

Shock in the City as Verity Holtzfall Found Dead!

For a week, everything else had dropped off the front page as the same picture graced every newspaper in the city under a series of revolving headlines.

Nora's mother's lifeless body.

Lit by police headlights.

And the flash of journalists' greedy cameras.

Just hours before that picture, her mother had absently reached out to kiss her cheek before she left for the evening, as if Nora were a small child again. Nora had resisted the impulse to wipe at her cheek, which would have made her feel even more like a child. Instead Nora had said something flippant about not wanting to wear her mother's lipstick as rouge. Or maybe she hadn't said it. Maybe she had just thought it as she'd swept out the door without glancing back.

She wasn't sure, because in the moment, it hadn't mattered.

It only mattered a few hours later. When it became the last time she would ever see her mother alive. When she would next see her as a body on a newspaper cover.

That was how she'd found out. Leaving the Silverlight Café near dawn to a newspaper boy brandishing a broadsheet, calling out *Extra! Extra! Holtzfall Heiress Tragedy!*

Theo was waiting for her.

It was a burden to be as smart as Nora was sometimes.

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