

Among Gods

Working on the Emporium never gave them a dull moment. Be it because of their own lines of work or some freak accident, but it was comforting to know that there were plenty of friendly and familiar faces around. In a way, if something happened, it remained among friends. A tightly knit group of friends at that. However, it also meant that despite all sharing a workplace, having their schedules aligned could be tricky.

“Ah... this is nice.” Purred Dana, stretching her body after sitting on the wooden handrail others leaned against..

“It is.”

“How long has it been since we were all together spending some free time, Gale?”

“Too long, Vale.” Agreed the owner of the Emporium. “Too long.”

There were plenty of ways to describe them, but in a bit of an ironic way, most of them followed the same pattern. Not that it was a bad thing, as the positives lined up in a roll call. Curvy and busty, gorgeous, kind, smart, playful... Each of them were gifted and one of a kind. Maybe Gale lacked the abilities others had, but she more than made up for it with wit and mind; while Kodaka leaned on the shyer side despite her fantastic looks.

Gale Rider, the blonde manager that was in a relation to Alex Cherrygum, local genie and belly dancer. Enough to have Galex between them, their merged form and daughter, as well as the second genie around. Maya Goodwall, the buxom brunette showgirl that could merge with others, and her girlfriend Kodaka Lu'an, local kitsune and transformation potion brewer. While the remaining two were Vale Adamson and Vale dearest, Bast's kind and gymnasts extraordinaire.

And after some talking and planning, they had managed to finally get all together. They had chosen to spend the day by a nearby lake, which would make a lovely spot to have a picnic and simply relax. The cabin they had hired was clean and offered both a lovely view and a place to weather the heat. Lucky for them, the weather had chosen to be on its best behaviour for them, gracing them with a sunny day and a lovely breeze.

The cabin was a simple wooden building with a large main room that held a table and benches within. A couple of side rooms with a toilet and an empty storage room was all else there was to it. Another wooden table stood outside, should anyone eat in the open air, but that was it. And it was more than sufficient for a day, as the surrounding trees made a clear way to the lake.

“Dana?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve heard about a trip you, Vale and Alex made.” Asked Galex, the genie leaning against the handrail. “What was it about?”

“It’s... a bit personal.”

“Oh.”

Had the genie been like Vale and her, she would have seen her ears drop immediately. An innocent question, but one she preferred not to answer. Not for her and her companions’ sake... or at least not fully, but rather because she didn’t want to know the consequences of revealing it.

“Well, at least everything worked out, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what matters then.”

Gale and Dana exchanged a look, one of relief and the other of gratitude, before looking at the rest of the group below. Kodaka was still sitting on one of the table's benches, giggling while she looked at the impromptu show the remaining three had started, with her as the judge. In a bit of a competition, Maya, Vale and Alex tried to see who came out on top.

"Kodaka! Maya better not get an advantage!" Called out Vale, displaying her flexibility to the fullest.

"Cheer me on, dear! The jeans are enough of a handicap..."

"Mhm, the jeans... maybe you're getting a bit rusty Maya..."

"And how are you not cheating?! You used your magic to shift into that outfit!"

"No one said anything about not using everything at our disposal~"

"What?!" Huffed Maya while she tried her best while her jeans tried to remain stitched together. "Vale, you got to back me on this one!"

"Sorry Maya, but she's got a point." The were-liger said, once again displaying her flexibility with another pose.

"Ugh... cheaters, both of you!"

"Hang in there Maya! You're doing pretty well too!"

"What happened to the impartial judge?" Mocked Alex, never stopping her dance moves.

"Gale, Gale, you two better cheer me on!"

"What the hell, Dana?"

The three women on the handrail exchanged a look, or rather Gale and Dana did, while the younger genie simply bounced in place excitedly.

“Nah, we’re good. Thanks for asking.”

“Agreed, we’ll stick as the audience. Fantastic show girls, keep it going!”

A chorus of protests and complaints rose, but they fell on deaf ears. Sometimes it was better to simply sit back, relax and watch the impending doom. That’s what they had come for after all. And the spectacle the gymnast, the showgirl and the belly dancer formed was quite entertaining and amusing to say the least. But something felt off. An itch that Dana couldn’t quite put her finger on.

It could be nothing, and maybe they had to wait a bit before the heat died down a bit more. But the eyes of the manager slowly drifted from the fun and games before her to the surroundings. There was a certain... stillness to it. The sun’s light felt cold and merciless, a far cry from what it had been a moment ago. Not even the slightest breeze blew, and it was quiet, too quiet.

While the cabin was a somewhat secluded location, it did not mean it was lifeless. The rustling of nearby treetops, the chirping of birds and even the song of the cicadas had gone silent. The voices of the competitors and Kodaka were heard much louder, maybe a bit too loud... The were-leopard sniffed the air.

“Dana, something wrong?”

“...no.”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

She was about to ask why, but the woman finally noticed the tail on her rear that she swung with ease and practise. “Oh.”

“You were making funny faces too.” Added Galex, much to the brunette’s annoyance. She had to work on unconsciously scrunching up her face a bit more it seemed...

“I don’t know yet, but it feels... off.” She admitted.

“Off?”

“Give it a listen, it’s too quiet.”

The voices of the performers and the laughter had died down too, as Vale now sported similar features to her friend. A long and golden tail moved behind her, while her ears had shifted into feline circular ones, as well as moving to the top of her head, now peeking from her blonde mane.

As stated, it was quiet. No sounds of any kind came from the nature around them. No chirping birds or insects. No whistling wind or the sound of rippling water from the lake. It was as if someone had taken the place and frozen it in time. An idyllic and picturesque photo, but completely lifeless. And that made them the only source of noise in it.

“Hey Dana! You hear that?” Shouted Vale.

It would have been much better for the liger *not* to shout to the top of her lungs to avoid unwanted attention, but she did. It wasn’t something momentary nor casual, the rumbling carrying a rhythm. It felt like it came from everywhere, creeping closer and growing ever louder.

“Galex, dear, start preparing a teleportation spell back to the emporium.” Commanded Gale .
“Everyone, get back her-”

The noise got the jump on them, as a chorus of whoops and cries surrounded them in a blur. Bursting out of the void, apparently, they were surrounded by charging riders. About half a dozen of them, and they were dressed as... cowboys? Wide brimmed hats, light shirts with some sort of vest or jacket, and trousers thought for cattle herding. The charge caught the group off guard, separating those below from the trio in the entrance of the cabin.

Maya made a run for the table and the benches, under which Kodaka had taken refuge, while Alex failed to reach the gymnast, the genie was busy enough trying to keep herself out of

harm's way. Barely managing to dodge an incoming horse, Vale bared her teeth at them, which immediately got the attention of some.

“Ignore the rest of the wenches, boys! The blonde one is the one we’re looking for!”

“Hurry!”

“Vale!”

Dana watched as Maya dragged Kodaka and made a run for the stairs, the two women running past them and into the relative safety of the cabin. Horses neighed, the riders shouted orders to each other as they attempted to overwhelm the were-liger. By now she had almost fully transformed, as Vale snarled and hissed at them, constantly trying to keep tabs.

Her most notable changes were the feline tail and ears, as well as her elongating nails that looked more and more feral. Her bared canines became sharper too, all too willing to dare the riders to lay a hand on her. See how that played out... But the keen eye could see the more subtle changes too.

Her pupils had become vertical and slitted, much like a feline, while her body started to show some faint markings. Spots appeared on her forehead and to the sides and below her eyes, while some stripes started to make themselves known in several places. Her arms, her legs and even shoulders and clavicles. And the riders did happen to notice.

“Ho-wee! Looks like it’s a lucky day! We found ourselves one of those mixed blooded freaks!”

“Tie her up and off we go! She’ll fetch a pretty penny.”

Vale swung her arms wildly, trying to keep them in line and maybe, if she was lucky enough, scare off one of the horses to make an opening. No such luck though, as some of the horses even threatened to crush her with their forehooves, using all of their weight for it.

One lasso came from behind, catching one of her arms, but it lasted little as she immediately cut the rope with her free claw. Another from the right for the other arm, another cut rope. Left. Cut. Right. Cut. Left. Right. Back. Cut. Cut. Back.Front. Left... Bit by bit, they immobilised her, one lasso actually getting her neck and starting to choke her.

“Vale! Let her go!” Shouted Gale, only to immediately crouch as a shot rang in the clearing. It was a handgun, but it boomed like a cannon.

“Quiet over there.” Said a gruff and calm voice. “We only want her, no one has to get hurt. Just let us work and-”

“Let. Her. Go!”

The circle broke, as a blur barrelled towards the gruff voiced rider. The man seemed to be the leader, or at least one of the more level-headed ones. Gale wouldn't bet on it, given the party he belonged to, but Dana did. As more and more of her leopard side had come to light, she had rushed to help Vale, catching the man by surprise.

The horse neighed, standing on its back legs and making the man have to focus on not falling from the back. Vale certainly would not let a fallen foe get away unscathed, even if they were outnumbered and outgunned. Still she bit and clawed her way through rope after rope, trying to avoid the grabbing attempts from the riders.

Dana burst through like an avalanche, managing to surprise two riders. Despite not liking it, slashing the horses did the trick, the beasts buckling and actually making their riders lose focus. Their prey would not go down without a fight, and none wanted to fight on the same level as them. A powerful slash helped Vale set free, giving Dana a toothy smirk in return.

“Cabin. Now!”

The two cubs of Bast pounced on the two riders, this time managing to tackle them into the ground as the horses also fell. It was a tangled mess with a panicking animal, a rabid werecat and a very unfortunate hunter. With the distinction that hunter and prey roles now were reversed.

One of them had managed to stand up, drawing a gun and a knife, trying to hold Vale at bay while the other had enough holding Dana's hands in place. They were locked in a standstill while the leopard woman tried to get a bite on his face, or even better, his throat. The brunette athlete now sported purple spots all over her, while her attitude went along her much sharper and longer canines.

BANG!

Time froze in place as a gunshot rung once again. Dana felt a burning pain on her leg, suddenly feeling weak. Looking at the hunter that grappled with her, the lips of the young cowboy twisted into a crooked smile, taking advantage to push Dana back and kick her on the leg. The were-leopard stumbled to the ground, her head light and vision dizzy and blurry.

"Shooting a woman in the back. Tsk, tsk..."

"The leg." The gruff man quickly corrected. "Maybe you wanted a brand new scar on that ugly face of yours?"

"Always so considerate... unlike a certain something."

The cowboy drew his weapon and shot the were-leopard in the belly, following it with another kick and making Dana whimper. It earned him whoops and cheers from the rest of the hunters, only feeding the ego and kicking once and twice again. The gruff man didn't look precisely happy.

"Quit messing around an-"

It was all a blur. A warning shout and a roar, followed by Vale pouncing on the young cowboy slashing his face with blind fury, making him holler in pain. She then picked the limp Dana and made a run for the cabin.

"God fucking dammit! I told you not to mess around!"

More gunshots rang, flying by her, but none landed the hit. Seeing only the door, and terrified for Dana's life, she ran. She passed by Gale, who closed the door behind them. Maya's and Kodaka's faces were pale, while Alex and Galex had the spell ready, a pinkish aura surrounding them. Shouts she didn't quite get and gestures. A window breaking due to a gunshot. And then, light.

The infirmary was a rush. Maya and Gale had set Dana on a table, while Kodaka and Alex talked about the wounds. Two shots was bad enough, but the kicks had probably worsened the effects. And in the room, Dana was pale as a ghost.

"Galex. Galex, listen to me. I'm going to need your help."

"Y-yeah."

"Maya, bring me a potion I have in my room. A medium bottle, with a bright red liquid on my table. Gale, the less we are around here the better." Commanded Kodaka. "Alex, Vale, put both hands on the wounds."

As the manager took her girlfriend with her, the showgirl left in a rush, and Alex immediately got on with her search. Kodaka, despite being awfully pale herself, was unharmed and oddly calm. She immediately fetched gauzes, water and a pincer; just in time for Maya to return in a gallop with the potion bottle in her hands. Immediately taking it from her, she approached the pale Dana, looking at the catatonic Vale.

"Maya, take Vale. The less around, the better."

The were-liger barely offered any resistance, looking at the were-leopard as the showgirl dragged her out of the room. Kodaka closed it behind them, locking themselves inside. Maya talked, but she barely made a mumble out of her words as the showgirl dragged her around.

Dana had never harmed anyone, she had never used her scent for anything that was not the usual. In fact, she made a much more deliberate use of it, and instead it had been Dana who

had gotten badly wounded because of it. Hallways blurred into a nebulous and misty surrounding, just as vague as Maya's mumble, but the image of the pale Dana burned in her mind and eyes with excruciating detail and clarity.

“-ale.”

She finally snapped back, blinking as she registered her surroundings. Maya had dragged her to the bathroom, where she had cleaned her hands from holding Dana's wound. And then had splashed her face if the dripping water was anything to go by. Maya looked tired, the energy drained from the showgirl as the aftermath of the shock kicked in and the adrenaline wore off.

The two walked out, retracing their steps. It was almost a contiguous room, but it had felt much, much further away. But here they were again, leaning against the wall before the locked door. Or at least Maya was, since Vale didn't know what to do. Pacing might help her nerves, but she would drive the exhausted showgirl insane, but she couldn't stand still in place, least she wanted to go insane herself

“Don't worry, she'll be fine.” She said letting herself fall to the floor and sitting.

“Maya! Are you alright! O-oh no, we didn't check if anyone else was-”

“We are fine, thanks to you two. That was quite amazing.” She gave her a weak smile “Thank all the gods out there you were with us, because otherwise...”

The door opened, Kodaka looking at them with tired eyes and barely having time to step aside before Vale rushed in. Alex looked just as exhausted, setting what they had used aside for proper cleaning and storing. But Dana remained motionless. She had been stripped of everything but her underwear, her clothes a pile set aside, and there was no sign that she had been wounded.

“Dana! Dana! Why isn't she awake?! She's not wounded anymore!”

“We... we don’t know.” Kodaka said, exchanging a glance with Alex. “We have healed her wounds, but she won’t awake or show any signs of recovery no matter what we do.

Vale froze in place, looking at one and then at the other. Back and forth, while both women tried their best to hold her gaze and not look away, but eventually had to. Kodaka was hugged by Maya, the showgirl trying her best to comfort her; while Galex sat on the floor with her back against the wall, shoulders slumped. No words came from the were-liger’s mouth, only a dry croaking sound as she looked at Dana.

And then her mind gave her one last ray of light, as Maya’s words played on loop in her mind.

“Thank all the gods out there you were with us.”

“Thank all the gods out there you were with us.”

“Thank all the gods”

“Thank all the gods”

“Gods”

She spun around and broke into a sprint. She heard Maya call after her, asking what was wrong and where was she going, but she didn’t care. She was not giving up, and neither was Dana. She felt her body full of energy like never before, her tail growing once again on top of her rear and her ears gradually morphing into feline ones. Her nails elongated a bit, taking a more claw-like appearance, and the spots and stripes returned.

Halls blended one into another, only interrupted by ascending stairs. She was not waiting for the elevator, and besides, she would feel like a caged animal inside, even if it was for a few seconds. She let herself run free, in a mad dash towards the roof of the Emporium. And the door that led to it opened without effort, almost encouraging her.

Her heart beat like a gong getting hit by a hammer, but she didn’t care, looking at the night sky above her. She inhaled, and let out a roar like she had never had before. Something that channelled her frustration, her fear and her pain; feeling weak and empty the moment she went silent.

Panting she heard something inside, as the rest of the group poured into the roof. Gale, accompanied by both of her mothers, while Kodaka and Maya carried Dana's body. They set in on the floor with extreme care, and as Vale knelt next to her, the heavens answered. If her roar had been a thunder, this was a deafening thunder that threatened to split concrete itself.

Two stars looked down at her, the dark and starry sky around them seemingly to shift and change for a moment, like rippling water after a single drop had fallen in it. There was nothing flashy, nor grand entrance, a piece of night sky shifted and moved, landing on the roof next to them with otherworldly grace. The massive lioness looked at them, most of the group too amazed or terrified to budge.

And she shifted once again before them. The animal shrunk to a more normal size, standing on her hind legs as the proportions transformed. Fore and hind legs became lean and long limbs, arms and legs respectively. The muscular body developed into a curvy and well-endowed female figure with wide hips and hourglass curves. The lioness' face also changed to a much more familiar shape, although the eyes remained unchanged, ancient and all-knowing.

Before them was a woman that looked from the eastern lands of Africa, and that seemed like the night sky itself. She actually had just been a piece of it, and all across her body twinkling stars and constellations could be seen, while different symbols glowed only to fade soon after and reappear. Some known, some not, but her blazing eyes held a severe and concerned gaze.

"Tell me, Vale, what happened?"

"I... we... We were just having a nice day, and then these guys showed up with horses and lassoes and guns. And they attacked us, and they almost caught me. Dana helped me, but she got shot and then she won't wake up."

Bast had walked up to her, kneeling next to her and gently putting a single finger on the were-liger's lips. Vale immediately went silent, as the goddess surveyed the group that accompanied them and Dana.

“Pleased to meet you again, Alex.” She said, receiving a nod from the genie. “Now, from the beginning.”

Inhaling to calm her nerves, Vale recounted what happened. Their lakeside plan, how it had all gone well until it had rubbed them the wrong way. How her and Dana’s scents had flared up, and the sudden charge by the cowboys. The ensuing fight, and the result of it. And how Dana wouldn’t wake up, despite having been treated by both Kodaka and Alex.

Occasionally one or another of the group would pitch in, but Bast remained silent through it all, patiently hearing the story. However, the moment the hunters had been mentioned she had flared out her nostrils, visibly angered or distressed for a moment.

“Thank you for telling me everything.” She stood up and took a couple of steps away from them. “ANUBIS!”

Her bellow was answered immediately, as a breeze picked up and grew in strength. Out of nowhere, they had been joined by a man on the roof. He looked... rather plain. Short dark hair, carefully combed backwards and a perfectly shaved face. His slightly tanned skin looked more human than Bast’s appearance, and instead of a more godly outfit like that of the goddess, he wore a business suit.

He looked ordinary, but there was something about him that said anything but. Maybe it was his posture, perfectly still and standing as tall as he was. Maybe it was his movements, each graceful and ethereal, as if it had been previously calculated and rehearsed to perfection. Or maybe it was the green eyes that examined each of them, which held a very distinct green colour.

“I hope you have a good reason to call me on such short notice. The dead requires constant work, and I don’t want to delay any paperwork or procedures-”

“Free her soul, Anubis.” Growled Bast. “Now.”

“You know how this works. When someone passes away, their soul remains in its corresponding realm.

“Anubis, let me make this clear. She *WILL* come back to them, one way or another.”

“If we start letting souls come and go it would be quite the mess, sister.” Anubis answered.
“Where do we draw the line? Is there some criteria we would have to set? Or are we merely playing favourites?”

“You do not want to anger me, Anubis. Not when you are partly responsible for this.”

“Partly responsible? Do enlighten me...” The god of the dead reached for something inside his suit, bringing out in his hand a small light, which immediately morphed into a familiar face. “You think she’ll be heavier than she should be if judged now?”

“Dana!” cried Vale.

“Dana...” repeated Anubis, amused.

“It’s the work of the poachers.” With her words, Anubis’ expression changed from amusement to cold seriousness. “Her time is not due, and you know that.”

There was a moment of silence, as he pondered to himself the words of the goddess and what was the optimal course of action. Some few seconds felt not like hours, but years for the group.

“Your friend is very lucky. She’s free to go.”

He closed the distance with a firm step, kneeling next to her and letting the soul enter her body again. The effect was immediate, as her chest started breathing and the paleness started to fade away. The moment the deity stepped back Vale immediately threw her arms around Dana, putting her ear over her chest. The sound of a single heartbeat was enough to have her eyes water and cling tightly to her.

As the rest of the group embraced her, Anubis and Bast exchanged a serious look, the two walking a bit away from them..

“Bast, you can’t keep your kin on borrowed time forever.” He said so that they would not be heard. “I’m growing tired of your antics.”

“Remember the commands our father gave us, Brother. Keep our matters and feuds out of their lives.”

“Agreed. It would make things unnecessarily complicated.”

“Will you be taking your leave then?”

“Certainly. However, before that...” He walked back to the group, surveying them all as they huddled around Dana’s sleeping form. “Which one of you healed her wounds?”

“Why does that matter?” Asked Vale.

“Mere curiosity.”

“That would be us.” Said Kodaka and Alex, stepping forward and standing between him and Dana.

He looked at them from head to toe, as if he was seizing them and peering into their very soul, but he did nothing else.

“What are your names?”

“I’m Alex, and she’s Kodaka.”

“Alex and Kodaka...” “My apologies for the inconvenience.”

“That’s quite the intriguing group I must say...” He mused.

“They certainly are.” Intervened Bast, standing next to him. “Do not worry, our personal matters won’t affect you any further.”

The two gods turned around walking away as the wind picked up again. They were talking, most of it inaudible, but some words did find their way to some ears. The moment they vanished, they were left alone, huddled together around a peacefully sleeping Dana under the night sky.

“That’s enough thrills for one day.” Sighed Gale. “Everyone, go home and get some much needed rest.”

Despite the weariness and exhaustion, no matter how hard she tried, Maya couldn’t sleep. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, but next night she was bound to catch some shut-eye. However, it would not be tonight, as some words played on loop in her mind. It was something she had overheard Anubis say, the fact that she had witnessed not one but two gods before her being shoved aside.

“Quite interesting that one, Kodaka. Her flame flickers ever stronger.”

What did he mean with that? Those words that were driving her crazy, she was Kodaka’s girlfriend after all. She knew everything there was about her... right?