



Duchess of Forsyth

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

Description: Possess. Defile. Menace.

The Dukes are trained for one thing: to fight.

To fight for West End.

To fight their enemies.

To fight one another.

It's no surprise that when Lavinia Lucia comes into their lives, they want to fight her too.

Unfortunately for Nick, Remy, and Sy, their new Duchess wasn't born to fight back. She was created for it, and she's determined that no West End Bruin is going to take her down without getting in a few hits herself.

Total Pages (Source): 42

1

SAINT NICK

Living in a shitty, run-down, '60s era motel has its little quirks. The walls are as thin as a paper bag. The bed is basically five handfuls of fiberglass padding stuffed into a torture device of uneven springs. The air conditioner only works for the first ten minutes after turning it on, and then it takes three hours for it to generate anything approaching non-tropical air. Now that it's cold, the heat is even less predictable.

The worst part is the shower, though.

There's one minuscule window on weekdays, between three and four in the morning, where the possibility of getting water just north of lukewarm is very nearly guaranteed. I stopped adhering to anything resembling a traditional circadian rhythm the second I was shoved into this dump, so I make it a point to be awake at this time every night. It's the quietest time of day here, all the whores having gotten their payment and either fucked off to their hidey holes or nested down into the rooms. The fights taper off around two, and the junkies are all passed out by now.

It's with this rare feeling of calm that I step into the shower.

I make a note of my shower gel running low as I bang the lid-side against my palm a few times. Back at home, I'd listen to music in the shower. Something fast and hard and worth dancing to. This time of year, I'd pull out the fun, festive stuff. Old school carols and obscure singles. They took my phone, and my playlists, when they tossed me in here. I don't even bother humming. I just run the sudsy washcloth over my

hips—bony, I’ve lost too much weight in this hellhole—and go through the motions of washing the stench of this place from my skin.

There’s zero fucking joy here. I do what I can, but it’s mostly due to boredom that I tore half the pages from the bible in the bedside drawer and, with some creative folding and tenacious fingernails, ripped them into various symmetrical snowflake shapes. I’ve already read the thing from front to back three times, anyway. I spent most of my day stringing the snowflakes across the room. My little indulgence in the holiday spirit.

It’s Christmas Eve, after all.

I wash my hair mechanically, the shitty two-in-one shampoo-conditioner combo making it stringy and dry like straw. I guess I used to think my Christmases were shitty. The only gifts my father ever graced me with were statements showing the shiny new total of my trust fund. But that was never a gift. It was half bribe, half threat, and complete manipulation. He always did enjoy having it to hold over me, even though I couldn’t possibly care less.

Of course, those were the days of high-end conditioners, shower dancing, and basic fucking freedom, so what the hell did I know?

The water starts turning cold halfway through rinsing my hair, which I’m willing to accept as a Christmas present from the universe. Usually, the hot water runs out before I can even finish lathering.

I step out with a shiver, briskly running the threadbare, motel-branded towel over my arms and chest. I give my hair atight wring and wind the towel around my body, sprinting my way toward the blankets on the bed.

Two feet off the tile, I skid to a stop.

Pretty Nick is perched on the foot of the bed, elbows resting on his knees, gloved hands deftly unloading a clip from a black pistol.

My blood turns to ice, and it's only half because of the chill against my damp skin.

There's a long, dark spatter of blood across his white t-shirt.

He doesn't look up at me, even though I see his blue eyes give my feet a brief glance. Instead, he tucks the clip into his pocket and empties the chamber, catching the casing in his palm.

I take a step back. "What are you doing here?" The question comes out both hard and soft—indignant and apprehensive. I haven't seen him in five days, and the last visit had been hurried and curt. A plastic grocery store bag with tampons, crappy microwave meals, and a Kit-Kat bar thrown carelessly into my lap before he swept back through the door, locking it behind him.

Now, his eyes are fixed on the wall as he tucks the gun into a black backpack at his feet. The shitty TV in the corner that only gets two channels has been playing Carol of the Bells on a loop since midnight, which isn't the worst Christmas song by any metric, but still is like having an ice pick stabbed into my temple.

"Boss man sent me here," is his low, bland reply. "Need a place to lie low until morning."

I tighten the grip on my towel, heartbeat ratcheting up. "Why?" When he just looks up at me, face emotionless, I swallow. "Did you kill someone?"

He answers without reservation. "Yes."

My mouth scrunches into a tight purse as I process this, glancing at his hands as he

slowly shucks his gloves. I think I mean to ask him why, but what comes out is, “Did they deserve it?”

Something about the question makes a coldness settle over his features, and when his blue eyes meet mine, they’re sharp enough to pierce. “What the fuck do you know about what’s deserved or not?” He pushes to his feet, and it doesn’t matter that I lift my chin defiantly.

I still stumble back two steps at his approach.

“Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t,” he says, voice hard as he bears down on me. “Doesn’t matter to me. I take care of me and mine, and if that means burying a bullet into some junkie’s skull, then that’s what I do.”

“Merry Christmas, right?”

He grins, and without warning, his hand shoots out to grab my towel, yanking it.

I struggle against his grip, yanking it back with a panicked motion. “You can’t touch me,” I insist, voice pitched high and alarmed. “I belong to Daniel and the Kings!”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

His jaw goes tight, eyes narrowing. “They never said I couldn’t look.” He gives the towel an aggressive tug that sends me stumbling toward him. The thought of crashing into his chest, against that still-wet blood, is the only reason I let it go. I stiffen at the air against my bare skin. He easily rips the towel from my hands, dropping it to the floor before his cold gaze descends upon my naked body.

I rigidly cross my arms over my chest. Not that it’s hiding much. There’s a camera in the corner, but he doesn’t even spare it a glance. He just maps my body with his eyes, resting a wide palm on the wall over my shoulder like he’s getting real comfortable about it.

His tongue peeks out to wet his lower lip. “Such a waste,” he mutters, gaze zeroing in on the swell of my tits. “Keeping you all hidden away like this. Tucked away like a doll in a case.” His other hand reaches out, but I don’t flinch as it pauses, hovering a hairsbreadth from the skin of my hip. His eyes flick up to mine, so full of intensity that it sends a shiver up my spine. “If you were mine, I’d be raw dogging your pussy every night.”

I clench my teeth as his hand moves, an invisible caress up my ribs. “Thank the fuck I’m not yours,” I remind him. “I’d have to slit my wrists.”

So quiet that I’m not even sure he intends for me to hear, Nick mutters, “You could be.”

Well, that’s a terrifying thought.

The harsh, grating sound of his phone shatters the silence. I jump at the intrusion,

erasing the distance between my side and his calloused fingertips.

“That’s Daddy Payne calling,” Nick says, eyes dropping to where his fingers rest on my skin. “He’s watching on the camera. You should know that about him, Little Bird.” His face remains impassive, unreadable. “He’s been watching you nonstop these days. He barely even goes home anymore. What do you think that means?”

My throat jumps with a swallow. “Probably that he’s a sick fuck.”

Nick’s silent laugh collides with my chin in a warm puff of beer-scented breath. “You have no idea.” He tilts his head and watches me, inspecting me even as his phone continues its loud, jarring chime. “The things he wants people to do to you? It’d make you want to turn those bed sheets into a noose.”

But as he reads me, I struggle to read him. That’s the thing about Nick. He’s got two settings—unbearably cocky and unreadable mask—and sometimes one stands in for the other. It doesn’t really matter. I never forget what he is. The Kings are only as strong as their foot soldiers. The people they pay to take out the trash and beat loyalty into others. Nick Bruin is a trigger finger with the barest glimmer of sapience.

So when the phone stops ringing, the last thing I’m expecting him to do is turn his back to the camera and say, “We can run. I’ve got a car outside.” His gaze moves back and forth between mine. The lock of hair falling in his eyes makes him look, for a moment, haggard and harried. “Fuck Daniel. Fuck the Kings. You don’t want to belong to them.”

Setting my jaw, I ask, “You think I want to belong to you?”

“Why not?” I’d expect the cockiness here, but that’s not what I see. I get the hot edge of his anger instead, the flare of his nose, the tick of his jaw. “I’d treat you good.”

“Says the murderer who wants to fuck me raw.” I scoff, pulling my hip away from his touch. But it’d be a lie to say I don’t think about it, and I can tell from the spark in his eyes that he realizes I’m turning it over.

I’d throw on my clothes and leave everything else behind. We’d fly down the stairs and jump into his car. He’d load his gun, peel out with his foot on the gas, and race us down the Avenue toward whatever new, fickle freedom awaits. I’d have to let him fuck me, but he’s one person. I could get away from him. He has to sleep. Nick wouldn’t be able to watch me all the time. Plus, a little sex for my freedom? Doesn’t sound too bad. Fuck it, maybe Nick’s a decent guy. He hurts people, but he’s never hurt me. Even now, standing in front of him naked and defenseless, knowing that he wants it, he wouldn’t make a move. If he wants me, he can be manipulated.

I exhale, all the hope bleeding from my lungs. Running isn’t an option. Not yet. I still have things to do in Forsyth. Scores to settle. “We wouldn’t get past county lines before they found us, and you know it.”

“We would,” he says, all looming and dark-eyed. “All it’d take is a little information.” Leaning closer, the tattoo on his temple fills my vision when he whispers, “Just tell me where Leticia is.”

I freeze, lungs aching with an aborted breath. “What?”

But it’s drowned out by his phone going off again, the shrill tone mingling with the Christmas music from the TV.

“It’s all he wants,” Nick says, voice urgent. “If we give him Leticia—fuck, even if it’s just her body—we can—” he jumps back when he spots my knee coming toward his groin. He wrestles me into the wall, his unyielding body pinning me against it. “Ah, Little Bird. I know you like shit rough, but no hurting the goods.” His breath is warm on my ear. “One day, that pussy is going to be mine.”

His body is taut with hard muscles. I have no problem fighting back, but I'm well aware of how dangerous he is. There's a line and I can't cross it. Not until I'm ready. Standing here naked and cold isn't ready.

"Are you done?" he asks.

I look away, jaw locking. "Yeah." I'm more pissed at myself than him, anyway. Nick belongs to the Kings almost as much as I do. Fucking stupid to think he gives a damn about taking me away. He just wants some juicy intel to take back to his bosses.

"Good." He holds onto me one last moment, then releases me. "No need for a Christmas massacre." Taking his phone from his pocket, he slides his thumb across the screen, answering, "Hey boss." He idly tosses me my towel as his gaze flicks to the camera. "Yeah, we're playing nice. Just a little tussle. No big." He listens and watches me re-wrap the towel around my body, an involuntary shiver making my shoulders tremble. Suddenly, his eyebrow raises, a small, dark grin twisting his mouth. "Well, I appreciate that. Thank you. And Merry Christmas to you, too. Give Posey my best."

Whatever Daniel says to him, he doesn't share. He just sets his phone on top of the television and begins pulling off his blood-stained shirt. It's hard not to look at him, his warm skin covered in ink and hard muscles. He looks even more dangerous like this. Raw strength. I realize exactly how stupid it's been for me to fight him. He could take me out easily if he wanted to, like squashing a bug.

If Daniel would let him.

He raises his chin, dark eyes staring down his nose at me. "Like what you see, Little Bird?"

"No." I drag my eyes away, but not before I notice the cut on his side. The gash is

edged in angry, singed skin. Not all the blood is from the victim. I nod to the obvious bullet graze. “He got you before you killed him.”

He touches it gently, shrugging. “It’s nothing. Just a scratch.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

I snort. “Just a scratch? A couple inches to the left and that bullet would have torn your gut up. You got lucky.” He doesn’t look surprised that I recognize the wound. I’ve seen the injured soldiers come through my father’s door, most late at night, all needing the type of care that would provoke too many questions from an actual hospital. Leticia and I learned to administer first-aid from an early age, which was handy for me whenever my father got a little too punchy. Sighing in resignation, I say, “I’d at least clean it with soap and water,” and start looking for a shirt in the pile of clothes on the chair.

“Would you now?” His eyes narrow at the T-shirt in my hand. “Did someone tell you to get dressed?”

I whip around to glare at him. “It’s fucking freezing in here.”

Holding my gaze, he flicks the button on his jeans and instantly drops them.

He’s not wearing underwear.

And his dick is hard.

I hide my apprehension by arching an unimpressed eyebrow at it. “Like I said. It’s cold. I won’t hold it against you.”

“You can join me in the shower,” he replies, spreading his arms, perfectly comfortable showing off his body. “We can warm each other up.”

I pointedly ignore the innuendo. “Trust me, nothing about a shower in this place is

going to be warm.”

I’m half hoping it puts him off the idea, but instead, he bends to pull something familiar from his backpack. Zip-ties.

Groaning, I gesture to the strips of plastic. “Seriously? I’m already locked in here!” It’s no surprise when he catches my wrist, easily manhandling me to bind my hands behind my back—not that I bother fighting. Nick’s been assigned to me for a reason. He’s pretty, but he isn’t dumb.

I don’t expect him to drag me into the bathroom with him, though.

He notices how rigid I’ve gone. We’re both naked. His dick is standing at attention. The camera doesn’t see in here. Nick lets out a low laugh. “Relax. Can’t have you roaming about unchecked when my gun’s so close, can I?”

Fair point.

He turns on the shower, using his hand to test the temperature. I can tell from his subtle flinch that it’s just as cold as I knew it’d be, but he doesn’t seem to care. He grabs his phone and flips through the screen, making my shoulders curl protectively inward. I wouldn’t put it past him to record me in this humiliating position.

Instead, a blast of music comes from the speakers.

Christmas music.

“You’ve got the right idea,” he says, stepping beneath the weak spray of water. “Me and you are living the South Side life, Little Bird. The Lords aren’t even throwing a party this year. Too paranoid. Shitty music and depressing bible snowflakes is all we get.” Beneath the derision and pointed attempt to make us seem on the same level, I

think I detect a trace of wistful melancholy. Briefly, I wonder what his family is doing this time of year. I doubt post-murder motel hide-outs are a Bruin tradition.

Leaving the curtain open, he ducks under the showerhead and lets the water lazily roll down his body, taking the blood and grime with it. Nick showers like I always imagined a typical guy might. Quick, efficient, unconcerned about being watched. Picking up the shower gel, he mutters a soft curse when he realizes it's empty.

"Oh yeah, by the way," I say, shivering on the toilet seat, "I need new soap."

He tears off the cap and runs the water inside, shaking it. When he turns it upside down, it gushes out, watered-down but still soapy. "Guess rich girls like you never had to economize."

I want to tell him that he knows precious fuck-all about what growing up in my house was like, but I swallow it back. Nick doesn't need to know more about me than he already does. He lathers up his body, taking care to clean the fresh wound, and then dips his hand between his legs to idly stroke his cock as the water washes the suds away.

"You want to know what Daniel said on the phone?" He turns off the water with a sharp squeak, shoulder muscles flexing.

I avert my eyes, trying not to look at his growing erection. He's obviously impervious to the cold. "Not really."

"He said I've been a valuable member of the team this year. Helped him out of multiple jams. Called me reliable." Laughing quietly, he adds, "More reliable than his son, seeing that Killer's too occupied being all pussy whipped over his Lady to be a proper bullet gopher."

I shift uncomfortably on the toilet seat, eying the door. “Good for you.”

“And for my hard work, I’ve earned a Christmas bonus.”

“Oh, let me guess. A new gun? Another kidnapping victim? Maybe a few hookers from his brothel?” I roll my eyes.

He steps out of the shower, hand still gliding up and down his cock. “He told me I could do whatever I wanted to you. Well, so long as I keep my hands to myself.” For emphasis, he toys with the tip of his cock, jerking his chin at me in an authoritative nod. “Show me your tits.”

With my arms pinned behind me, I’d managed to keep the towel secure under my armpits. If Nick has learned anything about me by now, it’s that I’m not doing his shit-work for him. He steps toward me, hand still running along this length, and easily snatches the towel off. Frigid air hits my already shivering body, but the heat in his eyes as he inspects me is almost enough to burn. He rakes his bottom lip through his teeth, nodding approvingly. “Don’t even need to touch you to get nipples hard.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Trying to hide my rising alarm, I bite out, “Because it’s cold, you fucking idiot. It has nothing to do with you. You’re disgusting.”

He shrugs, not denying it. The glint in his eye makes my pulse quicken. Nick has been circling me for months, but until tonight, I’ve held my own. The verbal jabs and occasional scuffle have been the closest things I’ve had to stimulation since my father handed me over. Now, seeing his thick, stiff cock in my periphery, I feel a dormant wrongness waking inside of me. I won’t deny he’s good looking. Nick has the body of a god, the face of a devil, and all the raw power to back it up. But everything about him repulses me—especially his devotion to a King. Daniel Payne, to be specific.

His lips part on a slow exhale, head tilting. “I’d love to tell Santa you’ve been a good girl this year, but we both know that’s not true. You had to have done something naughty for your daddy to sell you off to a man like Daniel.” The muscle in his forearm tenses, rippling as he strokes up and down his shaft. “But I’m not a monster. I’ve got a little something for you. Call it a gift.”

I keep my mouth shut, sensing that he’d probably just get off on me sniping back. The inner mantra I’ve got going about him not being able to touch me doesn’t make this any less of a violation. Studying under Daniel has probably already taught Nick something invaluable.

Sometimes the worst way of touching someone has nothing to do with physical contact.

He shuffles closer and I strain back, turning my head as he puts his cock in my face. He spits a soft curse. “You’re so pretty when you’re pissed like this. Your body gets

so tight. I bet your pussy does, too. I bet if I were inside you right now, your cunt would be strangling me.” He pleasures himself to his own words in long, deliberate motions. He’s not in a hurry, enjoying torturing me as long as he can. I try to focus on another time, another place—on what I’ll do when I finally get out of here.

I try to imagine getting away.

His loud, ragged breaths drag me from my fantasies, which is the only reason I look up to see his jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck strained. A sensation ripples through me, strange and obtrusive. My skin is no longer cold, but warming with every pass he makes on his cock. I don’t want him. I don’t. I don’t. He is a monster.

But fuck, I’ve been here a long time.

The motel walls are flimsy. I spend basically half of my time listening to other people fucking. Sometimes it’s hard and fast, and sometimes it goes on for hours, moaning and thumping and grunting. I usually lay in my bed and alternate between imagining what they look like and doing my damndest not to even think about it.

I blame that for the way my body responds to the sight of him, coiled tight as he towers over me, fist gripping his thick shaft. Suddenly, he’s fucking gorgeous like this, a perverse study in eroticism, his blue eyes holding my body captive. Heat builds between my legs, liquid fire descending my spine. But he’s too involved with himself to notice, eyes growing hooded and heavy. Cheeks going red, his lower belly caves, dipping in and out with his shallow breathing. It’s strangely mesmerizing to watch a man pleasure himself. To see him so disarmed. To witness the crack in his armor as. To hear his grunt and the small dolent sound that’s hidden within it. To see his fist tighten around his dick. I’m no expert, but I know the signs of a man about to orgasm.

I also know where he intends to put it.

His eyes slit open, and his tongue swipes out, wetting his bottom lip. “Open your mouth,” he commands, voice full of gravel.

I lurch backward, banging into the toilet. “You’re not putting that thing in my mouth!”

He just moves closer, the tip of his cock a hairsbreadth from my closed lips. “Never said I was,” he answers, stiffening. His hand tightens on his cock, but even though I squirm back, it’s no use. There’s nowhere to go. The room is hot now, sweat beading up on the back of my neck as I watch him seize, abdomen caving. It’s impossible to even hear myself think over the sound of Christmas music and his choppy breaths. None of it is as loud as the sound of the groan ripping through him. His hand thrusts out and slams over my head, palm flat against the bathroom wall. The other grabs my chin and works my jaw until it’s open, which is against the rules. We both know it.

But the second I part my lips to say so, it happens.

His face collapses in an agonized expression as the first hot ribbon of cum lands on my lips, my tongue. I gasp and try to clamp my mouth shut, but that’s almost worse, taking it inside me, tasting it, feeling it against the roof of my mouth. Instead, I turn my cheek, holding my jaw open like I’ve tasted something horrible. But Nick doggedly chases me, shooting another thick spurt onto the flat of my tongue.

“Ack!” is all I manage to say before he’s rubbing it in, sliding the tip of his cock against my lower lip.

“That’s my sweet Little Bird,” he rasps, voice harsh and low. His forehead creases and he exhales, pumping out the last of his cum. It lands on my chest. “Fuck, I knew you’d look so good covered in my cum.”

A million ‘fuck you’s’ burn on my tongue, but I’m too busy lurching to the side and

spitting his release onto the grimy tile floor to voice them.

Luckily, he lets me.

I can practically hear him rolling his eyes as I retch into the little waste bin beside the toilet.

“Bit dramatic,” he mutters, pushing off the wall and wiping off his cock. I barely notice him leaving the bathroom, vision distorted by the tears that spring to my eyes from the gagging, but I don’t miss that he returns with a knife. Gasping, I straighten my shoulders, heart pounding, but when he grabs me, it’s just to wedge the knife between the zip tie and my wrist. With one clean jerk of his wrist, he frees me.

“Clean up,” he says, grabbing his phone and walking out of the room again. I don’t move, still shocked. I hear the zipper on his backpack and the sound of him rummaging inside. A moment later, he peeks his head in. “I’m getting some snacks. Want anything?”

Do I want anything?

A vision of me taking the knife and slicing off his balls comes to mind.

I shake my head infinitesimally, unsure of my ability to speak.

He shrugs and steps back out. The click and lock of the motel room door echoes back to me a moment later.

I exhale, deep and shuddering, and drag the back of my hand across my mouth, sliding against the cooled cum. Like a sick, cosmic joke, the heat between my legs still radiates, clit throbbing with the hope of a release it hasn’t gotten. It doesn’t care that Nick is vile. It doesn’t give a shit that rubbing Nick’s sticky release between my

fingers is disgusting. It couldn't give less of a damn that doing anything about it would be beyond shameful.

My eyes dart to the bathroom door, but it's silent, other than the TV.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

I don't let myself think too much as I slip my fingers between my legs and spread the cum over my clit. A white hot current surges along my nerves, and it's easy then. I deserve it; I tell myself. It's Christmas. I have nothing, no one. I can give myself this. Use him the way he used me.

I scoop more of the cum off my body and use it for lube, coating my fingertips and getting my clit good and sloppy. It's fucking obnoxious how much better this is than using my own spit or the dregs of the shower gel. I close my eyes and the first image that pops up is Nick in the shower, body on full display. I shake that off, but am struck by the sight of him jerking off in front of me. It shouldn't have been hot—it wasn't—but fucking hell. He's all man, with the muscles and the ink and those eyes.

Warmth spreads from my core throughout my limbs, my breath coming in short, choppy bursts. I work fast, knowing that even if he has to fight with the ancient vending machine, he won't take long. I flick and rub the nub between my legs, stopping short of fingering myself. I draw the line at his semen being inside of me.

A girl's gotta have some standards.

From the other room, the sound of Christmas bells ringing carries into the bathroom. I find a rhythm, something to focus on, ding, dong, ding, dong, driving the pulsing beat between my legs. Inside, something catches, then shatters, the orgasm cresting over me like a tidal wave of sharp embers. I press my fingertips against my clit, riding out the swooping fall of it. My breath is ragged, hands shaky, but as much as I'd like to bask in the glow of a hasty orgasm in a shitty motel, I don't push it, grabbing my damp towel off the sink. Still feeling the lingering effects, I wipe myself off. Face, body, between my legs. After hastily brushing my teeth, I hustle to the other room,

grab panties and a T-shirt, and dive for the bed.

I'm still breathing hard when he opens the door.

He steps in, clutching a mountain of snacks, bicep holding them against his chest. He pauses halfway in and breathes deep, then looks over at me on the bed. I've got the phone book open—only reading material left after the bible thing—eyes half-focused on the page.

He sniffs the air and tosses the food on the foot of the bed, the packages landing flat. There's no spring in the mattress. He eyes me suspiciously, like he knows what I've done—like he can smell it in the air—but I quickly avert my gaze.

I pick through the snacks and laugh darkly to myself. A break from the nightly monotony of the motel, a nerve-shattering orgasm, and junk food. "This probably isn't even the worst Christmas Eve dinner I've had." I say it more to myself than him, but he grabs the hard chair from the corner and drags it over, grabbing three bags off the bed and tearing into them.

He shoves a crumbling cupcake into his mouth and asks, "What, no sixteen-foot tree in the Count's mansion?"

I settle on Chex Mix—the closest thing to holiday fare—and pick through the pieces in search of pretzels. "Not that I have to explain myself to you, but just because something looks pretty doesn't mean it's not rotten inside." I give his face a pointed look.

A group of crumbs cascades from his lips when he says, "Nah, I'm a fucking saint." The fact that he's put his soiled shirt back on underscores the irony. Blood still spattered to the front and staining the side.

My eyes narrow. “Don’t you have somewhere better to hide out than here? I know you have a family—a real family who presumably doesn’t want to see you killed.” Not that I’d know what that’s like.

A shadow falls over his eyes as he ducks his head, picking at the cake. He’s a Bruin. Everyone in the Royal world knows his history. I also know it’s a sore spot that he left to join up with Daniel Payne—a betrayal to his family—and the curve of his shoulders looks all at once dejected and defensive. If he wants to pick at wounds, he’s chosen the wrong girl to do it with. I come bearing salt.

He tosses the cupcake wrapper toward the trashcan and it bounces off the edge, just like my comment bounces off his skin. “I’m right where I want to be, Little Bird. Sometimes a family is what you make of it. The people who are there when you need them—not just the blood that runs through your veins.”

It’s ominous, but the weird thing is that I know what he means. Family is tricky—especially families like ours. The TV jolts across the room and Carol of the Bells mercifully stops. Different but familiar music comes through the speakers, along with bold cartoon lines on the screen.

“Yes!” Nick says, hopping from the chair to the bed, knocking the snacks around. “Charlie Brown Christmas. Score.” I flinch, jerking aside to avoid touching him. But even as I give him a long, incredulous glare, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a candy bar. My favorite candy bar. Wordlessly, eyes still fixed to the screen, he offers it to me.

I flick my eyes from the candy to the TV, back to the man lying next to me. He’s all relaxed, a soft heaviness to his eyes that could be owed to Charlie Brown or the afterglow of an orgasm. But either way, it’s like he didn’t kill a man tonight. As if he didn’t force me to eat his cum. As if he’s not my jailor, holding me here against my will.

No, he acts like it's the most normal moment in the world, and although I never, ever, let my guard down, I do allow myself to snatch the candy from his hand.

Buzzzz!

I startle at the sound, and Nick's loose shoulders stiffen. He picks up the phone, blue eyes jumping up to the camera in the corner before answering.

"Yes, sir?"

The sound of Daniel Payne's voice barks through the line, "I said a Christmas bonus, not a Christmas vacation!"

Nick slides off the bed, dragging the yellowing bedspread with him. "I know. Just lying low like you told me to."

Daniel isn't as audible once Nick moves away, but I can still make out, "Get your ass downstairs in three minutes. Someone will pick you up."

"Yes, sir."

Nick hangs up, but he doesn't speak as he grabs his things, pushing his feet back into his boots and shrugging on his jacket. I watch from the bed as he methodically checks his gun, sliding the clip back in. His eyes flick back and forth between his things and the screen, a subtle thread of a weariness flickering in his features before it hardens back into the sharp lines of a soldier. I'm struck by a moment of weakness. I'll come to feel embarrassed about later.

I think I might feel bad for him.

It isn't until he's at the door that he finally looks at me again. When he does, it's just

to tip his chin in a nod, eyes snapping to the camera once before he says, “Merry Christmas, Little Bird.”

And then he’s gone, melting away into the frigid chill and oppressive darkness, the door closing behind him. My makeshift paper snowflakes rattle in the breeze before stilling. On the screen, Lucy is hounding Schroeder to play a Christmas song.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Jingle Bells! You know, Santa Claus and ho-ho-ho. And mistletoe. And presents to pretty girls.”

I turn the candy bar over in my hands and resolve not to eat it until morning. After all, this is South Side and I’m a prisoner. Maybe tattoos, gun-shot wounds, and shameful orgasms are as close as it gets to being visited by Saint Nick in this place.

2

ARCHDUKE OF MAYHEM

Cast out?

Abandoned?

I shiver against the wind that ruffles my majestic fur, surveying my Kingdom. Below, there’s a street. Ahead, there are structures—the living quarters of my unwitting subjects. The Angry One tossed me out here, on the balcony, yet again. Perhaps they want me to understand the scope of my inheritance, and truly, it is a sight to see. So vast, the world before me.

Danger!

I jump, turning to hiss at the fiend.

Oh, it’s just a car parking below.

I return to brooding.

Like I was saying.

I've been cast out, thrust to the mean streets of East End like so much fodder, but I've accepted this duty. A ruler must know one's territory, although I must admit, the thought of venturing out there seems daunting. I could jump through the bars, but that seems perilous. The drop is quite steep.

I turn back to the glass door, watching the people mingle inside.

Inside, where it's warm.

I press my paw to the glass.

Perhaps there's food, as well.

Mew?

Receiving no response, I settle in for another solitary evening, paws tucked under my chest as my eyes track the movement inside. Tonight there are other people. New people.

Predators?

Fiends?

Perhaps.

I keep my wits about me, as any warrior should. Inside, the Sad Girl spares me a glance or two, but there's no compassion in it. I don't think she likes me much,

though I don't know why. She never smiles.

I bat a paw out, claws extended.

Mew?

Am I not a good protector?

She ignores me, as usual. I spend a while cleaning my fur, making sure to fluff it out nice and clean. Just in case she decides to retrieve me, she'll see that I'm a good cat—clean and hardy, and certainly more so than Angry Guy.

Look at me, Sad Girl.

Won't you smile?

Opposable thumbs are overrated.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Suddenly, another girl appears. This one has strangely colored fur-hair, and she's talking to Sad Girl. It's instinct to wonder if she's a fiend, but I don't think so. Her expression is hard but her eyes are sad, just like Sad Girl. The real fiend enters the kitchen behind the glass—Angry Guy.

I don't like him.

He smells funny and is constantly barking, and he makes me lay out here in the cold.

I press my ears flat to my head as I watch him approach New Sad Girl. My fur rises, puffing me out to full fluff, and I hope it makes me intimidating, because Angry Guy is getting that look on his face. That fiendish, angry look.

Pop!

I jump back, hissing at the loud sound that hurts my ears. Angry Guy falls over, slapping limply against the floor, and Sad Girl is howling. I've never heard Sad Girl meow before. It makes my hackles rise even more.

Angry guy doesn't get back up.

Hm.

I pace in front of the door as I watch all the commotion going down in the kitchen. There are other men. Angry men. Surprised men. Big, strong men.

Fiends?

But one of them is gently cleaning New Sad Girl's face.

Not a fiend.

Protector.

I swipe my paw against the window, but I'm not sure why at first. These are strange people with strange fur and strange meows, but I can be a protector, too. They'll see, won't they?

I watch as New Sad Girl approaches Sad Girl and yells at her. It makes me suspicious, but then she looks at me.

At me?

At me!

I puff my chest out to show her what a big, strong cat I am. A good cat. A cat someone could be kind to. A protector. A fighter.

Mew?

When she slides the door open, I dive for her knee, pulling myself up.

New Sad Girl catches me, pulling me into her chest, and we spend a moment staring at one another.

Slowly, she smiles.

MADAM OF MAYHEM

“ALipitor for a Percocet?” Scoffing, I push the cards back to Barb. “Do I look like I care about how well-fucked my arteries look? Come back when you have something real to sling.”

Barb, this dirty old bitch from North Side, grumbles, “I guess you’d need a heart to have cholesterol problems, wouldn’t you, Delores?”

“Guess I fucking would.”

It’s bridge night, and all of us withered old shits are sitting around a table with our pills out. Mr. Rosenstein has a pile of hydroponic pot that I could smell the second I walked into the room, and that’s what I’ve got my eye on tonight.

I’m just eying it up, sipping on my gin and grapefruit juice, when the Three Fucksketeers roll up.

“Delores Crane?” the big one asks, sending a shifty glance around the table.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

I dip my sunglasses down, assessing them. The big one is a King, not that I give a flying rat's ass. The one to his left is his brother, all blue eyes and pretty face. I know Nick Bruin plentywell enough. The one to his right looks like he's about to stain his shorts.

"Is that Percocet?" he asks, all but drooling.

I jerk my chin at Barb. "Fuck off, you dusty old cunt. I've got real business to do."

Snatching her Lipitor, she hisses, "I hope you forget your bank pin when you're getting robbed."

"Your grandkids' nightly prayers are wasted on you," I call to her back as she storms off. Slowly. Hunched over a walker. She peers up at the Dukes with a glare as she passes. "Well," I say to them, shuffling the cards. "You three certainly look like you know which color crayon tastes best. Sit down and tell me about it."

"Blue," the white-haired says without missing a beat, dropping into Barb's seat. "The grays are kind of chalky."

"You know," Nick says, "we usually like to conduct our illegal gun-running business somewhere a little more discreet than the Forsyth bridge club."

"You'll conduct my business where I fucking tell you," I reply, kicking out a vacant chair. The boy glares, but does as he's told, arms folded as he eye-fucks Janice's bottle of blue pills. "They're laxatives, not Viagra," I tell him. "But since you just blew in from Stupid Town, I'm betting you're plenty full of shit. She'll probably let

five go for a picture of your cock.”

He gives me a chilly grin. “No thanks.”

The big one sits down last, heavy and glaring. “We’re doing this as a favor to Payne. You should show us some respect.”

Nick gives his brother a sly look. “This is Mrs. Crane. She only respects two people. Her pharmacist and the guy who invented the iron maiden.”

The white-haired one—Maddox’s boy—glances between us. “You know each other?”

I laugh, low and raspy. “Oh, this one and I go way back.”

Nick’s eyes narrow into slits. “She tried to turn me out once.”

“What can I say?” Shrugging, I stab out my cigarette. “Nice ass is nice ass. What’s your story?” I point the dying ember of my cigarette at the Maddox kid. Green eyes. Covered head-to-toe in tattoos. I don’t know him half as well as I know his daddy.

“My ass is pretty nice, too,” he replies flippantly. “But it belongs to my girl back home. Has her name on it and everything.”

I look between the brothers, Nicholas and Simon. I know their parents pretty well, too. “So here you are. Bruin and Perilini’s best swimmers, eh? The good sperm must have dribbled down your mother’s ass crack.”

Simon’s teeth clench. “Do you want the gun or not?”

I nod. “Show me.” Maddox Junior is the one to pull it from his waistband, moving closer as he gives me a glimpse of the shiny silver. I blink at it, lips pulling back into

a snarl. “What the blue-crayon-flavored fuck is this?”

“It’s easy to hide,” he says, turning it over in his palm. “Good grip for small, arthritic hands.”

“It’s a bitch pistol,” I point out. “Do I look like a bitch to you?”

Simon leans back, expression deadpan. “That’s exactly what you look like. An emotionally fragile grandmother.”

“You look like a magician whose only trick is turning liquor into domestic violence.” I gesture at the tiny pistol. “Who am I going to kill with this? A cricket?”

“It’s supposed to be for self-defense,” Nick points out.

“The next time you three pass around that withered brain cell you all share, you should use it to ask yourselves what I’m defending myself from.” Rooting around in my purse, I extract my small tub of Vaseline, slamming it on the table. “Here.”

Maddox raises an eyebrow. “Lube?”

“To ease the way when you shove that bitch pistol up your asses.” I raise my chin, swiping up my glass of gin. “Now show me the real stuff.”

Nick nods at the gun. “That is real stuff. It’s small, but it packs plenty of punch.”

“I’m not as stupid as you look. You’re Dukes. You’re pulling more than one sale today. Show me what you’re slinging to whatever dimwitted turd of a frat boy you’re paying a visit to after me.” A glance passes between them. Some eyebrow wiggling. Some glaring. An eye roll. Finally Nick sighs, bending over to pull a gun from the small of his own back. “That’s more like it,” I say when he slides it over the table.

Beside me, Francine pauses her game of rummy to ogle the Glock.

It's bigger than her shitty revolver.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Simon watches me handle it, his big eyebrows crouched low. “Killer said we shouldn’t let you bully us into—”

“This thing come with ammo, or does it shoot the blanks your daddies should have?” I look up at them, waiting.

The Maddox kid lets out a laugh, head shaking. “You’re a real bitch, you know that?”

I stare at him. “You look like a bored middle-schooler’s vandalized desk.” His jaw drops in silent outrage as Simon pushes a box of bullets toward me. I finish off my gin. “Tell me about the Lucia girl.”

“She’s not a part of this.”

I laugh at Maddox. “Oh, kid, you’re not pretty enough to be that dumb. He is.” I nod at Nick. “But you’re not. She’ll always be a part of this. Rain or shine, duck or run.” I ask the next question to Simon, because he’s the King. “You treating her right?”

He looks startled, but only briefly. “Trying to.”

“You want to know the secret to loving a Royal woman?” I ask, tucking the pistol into my purse. “Give her one of these, teach her to use it, and pray to whatever god you believe in that she never turns it on you.”

The pity in Nick’s eyes almost makes me want to turn the gun on him. “Times change, Delores. Not all men are like Mr. Crane.”

I fix him with a stern look. “I’m willing to be proven wrong. Bring her with you next time, and maybe I will.” Before any of them can accuse me of being disappointed that I didn’t get a chance to reacquaint myself with the Lucia girl, I pluck my cards back up. “It was a business doing pleasure with you, boys.”

They stand slowly, like they’re unsure if they’re being dismissed. But then Nick sighs. “Are you okay? Because if you need protection from someone in particular, then—”

“Don’t patronize me,” I snap. “I’ve had messier kills than you, Bruin.”

He glances at his brother, almost as if he wants to argue that fact. He doesn’t. “Stay safe out there, you wrinkled old cunt.”

I flip him off before calling out, “Rosenstein! Roll your decrepit ass over here and get me stoned.”

4

WINGS OF MAYHEM

I whistle a jaunty tune as I waltz up the sidewalk toward the gym.

It’s a good day, nice and warm. Blue sky, glittering roads, and rebel bugs. A little old lady passes me, giving me a kind smile as I move aside for her, sweeping my arm out dramatically.

She giggles like she’s twenty-two again. “Aren’t you a gentleman?”

I tip an invisible hat. “Good day, ma’am.”

Leaving happy colors in my wake, I continue on my journey, dipping down to pick a purple deadnettle that's climbing from a crack in the pavement. Even our weeds are badass. West End is the best in the summer, from the laughter of the kids playing in the newly restored park fountain, to the way the metal roofs of the warehouses reflect the sun like diamonds.

Also, Lavinia walks around the clock tower practically naked.

Summer's where it's at.

When I step inside the gym, I whip off my shades and am immediately greeted by whistles and hoots.

"Getting another one, eh?" Kaz gives my shoulder a brotherly punch, grinning from ear to ear. "There's only reason she'd call you in on a weekend."

I spread my arms wide, not bothering to batten down my grin. "What can I say? Mama B knows what's good."

Weasel snorts. "Maybe try not to get stabbed in this fight."

Holding up a finger, I explain, "Stabbing is a radical exaggeration. It was a cut, and frankly, my Duchess cut deeper."

"I bet she does," Kaz laughs.

I flip them both the bird as I saunter toward the back. Usually, a Duke wouldn't be assigned a Fury so soon after his last one, but Mama B called me in and I'm going to do my Dukely duty.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Can't hide talent.

On the way past the training area, I give a punching bag a little taste of what my opposing Royal is going to get, jabbing it with a series of lightning-fast, effortless punches. Will it be South Side? Fuck, a match between me and Rathbone would decimate this city with the flood of ensuing wet panties. I'd beat him. Naturally. But then again, maybe it's East End. A rematch with Pace would be just the thing, and I practically get drunk on the thought of feeding Dicker Ashby a few of his sparkling Prince teeth.

It doesn't matter, though. Either way, it's going to be the match of the goddamn year.

Pausing at Mama B's door, I smooth down my shirt, hiding the deadnettle behind my back before rapping on the wood. When I hear her greeting, I sweep in, presenting her the purple flower.

"Mama B," I say, whistling. "You look fine today."

Still behind her desk, she gives me—and the flower—a not altogether flattering look. "Boy, you'd better not be on drugs again."

Undeterred, I lean over the desk, tucking the flower neatly into her cup of pens. "I'm high on life, Miss B. Well, and the promise of glorious, crimson violence." I bring my hands together in a resounding clap, giving my palms a rub. "So who am I fighting?"

Pushing to her feet, she reaches down, lifting something heavy from behind her desk. "This little fucker."

I pause before leaning back, totally baffled at the sudden appearance of a cage. The strange little creature inside of it inspects me in much the same way, like I'm similarly as unexpected. Looking at Mama B, I point at the cage. "That's a bird."

"Dumbass," it squawks, wings giving an abrupt, clattering flutter. "Suck my balls."

I lift a fluttering hand to my chest, giving it an affronted stare down. "That's shit-talkingbird."

"Yes, she certainly fucking is," Mama B says, bracelets jangling as she struggles to balance the cage. "I have a little eye procedure that's going to put me out of commission for a hot minute, and since getting my daughter to trust me again hinges on the welfare of this shit-talking, little ass-fuck bird, I need someone to watch her for the day."

I stare at it, totally at a loss. "And your first thought was me?"

"My first thought was Simon, but he's still taking his finals. My second thought was Greta, but same issue. My third thought was Sara, but she's with a client all day. My fourth thought was your Duchess because she managed to take care of a cat, so she has more chops than most of you, but she's escorting Nick to something in North Side." This goes on for quite a while, and it's actually a little impressive how many people Mama B knows who are just too busy to play birdsitter. But then it keeps going. And going. And going. "My thirty-fifth thought was that hobo down at the end of sixteenth. You know, the one who always smells like fish and cinnamon? Go down that list about a dozen more, and then there's you, Remy."

I blink. "I'm inspired by your confidence in me."

"You're inspired by the threat I'm about to make." She all but shoves the handle of the cage into my hand, jamming a pointed, glittery acrylic nail in my face. "If

anything happens to this bird,” she growls, bracelets clinking with every punch of her finger, “I will cut your balls off and shove them down your throat.”

“Suck my balls,” the bird screeches. And then a pretty, trilled, “Wiiicker.”

“Wait.” My eyes narrow. “Whose bird is this?”

Mama B starts looking a little shifty. “She belongs to Pace Ashby.”

My jaw drops in outrage. “I’m not going to watch his bird. He stabbed me!”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t exaggerate, you big baby. Hecutyou.”

“It was a stab!” I grab the hem of my shirt, tugging it up. “Look at this, he messed up my frat letters! I’m lucky he missed my liver!”

She gives me a look, like I’m an idiot. The nerve. “Your liver’s on the other side.”

“Then my gallbladder,” I reply.

“It’s also on the other side.”

“My appendix!”

She pauses, brow furrowing. “Weirdly enough, that’s also on the other side.”

I gape down at the stab scar. “Jesus fuck, do I have any organs on the right side?”

“Just the organ where men store their baby tears.” She walks to the file cabinet and grabs the bag sitting on top of it. “You call yourself West End, but you can’t take a little competitive stabbing? Here.” She thrusts the bag into my chest until I cradle it

with my free arm. “Feed her this. I’ll come to your place to pick her up at eleven tonight. No sooner—no later.”

I heft the cage into the air, peering into black, beady eyes.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Orange beak.

Fuck.

Setting the cage on the counter, I take off my shades, tucking them into the neck of my white designer tee, then I cross my arms.

It'll probably be fine, right?

I've taken care of a little bird before.

"I'm not going to hold you to the sins of your father," I decide—really magnanimously, I think. "Although, you should know he's a giant dick. But so is mine. I mean, my father." After a second. "Also my dick."

The bird—Effie, Mama B called her—cocks her head to the side. "Gentle," she coos. "Gentle, gentle."

Oh.

Aww.

Sighing, I uncross my arms, reaching for the door clasp. "We don't cage little birds around here. So you're just going to have beha—ah, shit!"

The bird zips out of the cage and onto the counter, and the thing is, I'd been prepared for flying. But her little legs are fucking Usain Bolt levels of fast, and before my

morning brain can catch up, she's clear across the kitchen.

Fucking orange shenanigans.

"Hey!" I bark.

"Dirty bird," she squawks, snatching a magnet off the fridge and flinging it to the floor. "Effie is a dirty bird. Suck my balls! Dumbass."

Normally, hearing a bird cuss me out would be the best thing that could happen to me in a day, but she's going fucking crazy. With a screech, she flings Sy's breakfast plate onto the floor, shattering it to pieces.

"Dirty bird!"

Next, she zips to the other side of the counter, and I fling my hands out in alarm, because Vinny's amassing a little collection of weapons by the toaster, and this fucking bird...

"Whoa!" I yell.

She's got Vinny's knife in her goddamn beak.

Her little head is too small to lift it, so she's ducked low, barely able to waddle around with the weight of the blade. It was a gift from Nicky, so it's understandably a little overboard.

This bird looks like she wants to stab me.

"Let's just think about this," I say, advancing on her slowly, cautiously, like a man trying to talk a crazy person down from a ledge. Effie's got a shifty look about her,

like she's one frayed thread from snapping, and I think I might recognize that wild gleam in her eyes.

It's not that she looks scared.

She just looks so fucking angry.

"You're mad, right?" Of course she is. She was taken from her home and given to someone who gave her to someone else. If West End's own little bird has taught me anything, it's that it can be hard being shuffled around, lost, adrift in a strange place with strange people. "You miss home," I'm guessing. Effie gives me a cagey look as I advance. "There's no need for all the red, pretty bird. You're gonna go home soon, I'm sure."

But I stop in my tracks when I notice him. He's sitting between the railings of the loft, his yellow eyes narrowed in on her with all the focus of a stone-cold killer.

The Archduke.

"Everybody just stay chill." Stepping between them, I throw out my hands and give Archie the eye. "I know you're her natural predator, but she's East End. We've already started one war on account of a little bird." Archie has gone completely still, his eyes trained on the bird, who's too focused on me to realize she's become the prey. "Look, guys, Mama B and Verity will castrate me if the bird gets hurt." I swallow. "And Archie, you know Vinny will never forgive me if anything happens to you. What we need here is a truce. We're all mature, rational beings, aren't we? Let's get blue, guys."

Effie bobs her head, the knife stabbing out. I hold my ground because even if I run, this little bitch can fly.

Over my head, Archie lets loose a long, spine-tingling hiss, and Effie's head twists, the blade slashing as she moves.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

What happens after that is a blur of white fur and black feathers that propels me stupidly into the conflict. Wings flutter. Archie cries out. A claw slashes my neck, and then a talon swipes at my arm. The bird shrieks a long, shrill war song, but finally uses her wings to sail away.

At the end of it all, I'm peering up at where she's perched in the rafters above, Archie's claw mark slashed into my neck, and panting like I've just done eight rounds with Payne in the ring.

The cat skitters away, a gleam of purpose in his eyes.

"Honestly?" I growl, ripping a paper towel from the roll beside the sink. "I'd rather have fought a fucking Royal."

Above me, Effie emits a trilled, "Suck my balls," and for a moment, I get this notion that I just have fought a Royal.

"Bring that back!"

An hour later, I'm shouting up into the eaves like a fucking maniac. I really try to sell it, though. I give the menacing finger wag and everything.

On the wooden crossbeam above me, Effie parades her spoils, head held high as she zips across.

With the cap to my marker.

It's the fourth one she's taken.

"All my markers are going to dry out!" I whine. I'm in the middle of a piece I'm thinking of inking on Nick, and this bitch is really putting a damper on my plans. "Where are you even putting them all?"

Undeterred, she struts toward the clock face, howling, "Meow!"

Yeah, that's going to be hard to explain.

Balancing precariously on the railing around the loft, Archie gives a long, plaintive howl. The bird has somehow absorbed it as her own, just meowing back at him. I can't explain why, it just feels incredibly fucking emasculating. For him, I mean.

Well, also maybe a little for me.

Growling in frustration, I snatch a green marker from the pile and turn back to my canvas, trying to get back in the zone.

"Meow!" Effie howls. "Dumbass!"

By three in the afternoon, I feel like every last nerve has been wrung dry.

"Suck my balls!"

I mostly try to ignore her, scowling down at my sketch pad as she flutters from one end of the tower to the other. The weirdthing about her is that she never goes far from me or Archie. It's almost like she's enjoying annoying the shit out of us.

"Meowww!" she mocks.

Archie curls at my feet, already bored with the whole damn thing.

I reach down to give his head a little scratch. “You and me both, buddy.”

“Come on,” I coax, watching her hop from beam to beam, those beady eyes fixed on the little tray of birdseed. “I know you’re hungry, pretty girl.”

She looks very skeptical. “Pretty bird?”

I perk up, agreeing, “Yeah, you’re a pretty bird. Don’t you want some yummys?”

She kinda looks like she wants to stab my eyes out still.

But she’s hungry, too.

So she falls for the bait.

A couple more hops and a startling flap of her wings bring her back to the kitchen counter, scurrying toward the little feeding tray.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Ha!” I crow, victorious as I shut the cage door behind her. Then, aggressively, I show her both my middle fingers, “Fuck you!”

She’s too busy eating to care much.

I collapse on the barstool beside the counter, feeling way too tired, and strongly reconsidering my stance on the caging of little birds.

But not really.

Picking up the cage, I make a decision. “Hey,” I ask her, “you wanna see something cool?”

She cocks her head in my direction, trilling out a low, “Suck my balls.”

I nod solemnly. “It’s a date.”

I bring her up to the belfry at the perfect time.

It’s half past seven, so the sun is still an orange glow in the distant sky, painting the little wisps of clouds with reds, magentas, and golds. Violent colors. But the city is already alive with its ground-stars, lights blinking on along the avenue, in high-rises and headlights, speckling the landscape with its exciting cosmos pinpricks. It’s the best of both worlds, this little patch of day-dusk.

I set the cage down next to me and produce the joint I’ve been saving for the perfect evening. This is not the perfect evening because my Vinny isn’t here. But I’ve still got

a sad, little bird, and it makes my chest ache for her in a way I'm not expecting.

"Sorry I can't let you out," I say, flicking the flame on my lighter. "If you were my little bird, I'd set you free and hope you came back. But your little fuckhead Prince would probably stab me again, eh?"

When I turn, I see Effie staring out over the city with wide, black eyes. Her head is jerking from side to side, like she's struggling to take it all in as fast as possible. A gentle gust of wind arrives, stealing the tendril of smoke I exhale, and I'm startled to watch her extend her wings.

The feathers on her underside flutter in the breeze.

"Sunlight," she trills.

"Not much of it, I'm afraid." I take a draw from the joint, watching her closely. She has an odd teal about her all of a sudden, completely different from the fuchsia she exhibited downstairs. It's as if it took seeing the sky for her to understand what she is. For her to be at peace. Quietly, I muse, "It must be pretty cool to be a bird. To never fall, only glide." I follow her gaze to the skyscape, watching as a flock of geese drift by in the distance. "Well, I guess it sucks if you're always in a cage."

There's a long moment of silence, which I use to puff on the joint.

Until she croons, "Effie loves Pace."

I give her an affronted look. "I wasn't making any moves. I've already got a little bird, and to be honest, she's a lot less complicated than you." Huffing, I concede, "You're a cute little fucker, though."

She agrees, "Little fucker."

“Cutelittle fucker.”

She cocks her head in my direction, and I get an eerie feeling that she’s analyzing me.

“Little fucker.”

“Cute,” I stress.

Maybe it’s the weed, or maybe it’s justher, but she looks me in the eye and I get the impression that this little bird has too big a soul. It’s the same feeling I get with Archie sometimes, like there are corners of his destiny I’m just not qualified to quantify.

For a brief second, I think about freeing her, despite the fact it’s not my right.

And then she spreads her wings again, cooing, “Cute little fucker.”

I give the cage a pat. “That’s a girl.”

A bird like Effie couldn’t make it in these bleak Forsyth skies. She needs sunlight and voices and the bluest of blues.

And only her Prince can give them to her.

“Watch this,” I press the rewind button and restart the TV. On the screen, two fighters circle one another, jabbing and ducking punches, until one kicks out, leg and foot arcing through the air. It lands, foot slamming into his opponent, knocking him back three feet. “That’s an epic roundhouse kick. See how clean it is?”

Effie’s on the back of the couch, marker cap in her beak.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Your legs are too short,” I mention. “Which is probably why you’re so quick to use the talons—which is illegal, by the way.”

Archie sits across the room, tail flipping in annoyance. “Look,” I tell him, “I gave you the dry food Vinny says is perfectly acceptable. If you want to wait for Sy to feed you something more bougie, go for it, but don’t give me that pissy look.”

“Meow.”

The whir of the elevator echoes up the shaft and Archie perks up, back arching. The doors slide open, and Vinny and Mama B step out.

Archie trills, running over to his mama. Traitor.

“Remington,” Mama B’s using her scary tone as she surveys the loft through a pair of those flimsy but dark eye-doctor shades. “What the hell happened here?” Snapping off the TV, I stand and she takes in my wounds. “What the hell happened to you?”

Yeah, they got some licks in. The slash on my neck has stopped bleeding, but it’s red and vivid. The talon cut on my temple is deeper, but smaller.

“I just did what you asked me to,” I say, lifting my chin proudly. “Watch the bird.”

She glances at Vinny, and says, “The next time you talk to Verity, make sure she knows to never let Remy babysit.”

“Hey!” I squawk.

“Hey!” Effie also squawks. “Suck my balls! Cute little fucker.”

“Thank you,” I tell her, always grateful to have someone on my side. “We’ve had a very enriching time, actually.”

Vinny drags both hands down her cheeks as she inspects the toppled bookshelf. “How the fuck, Rem?”

Mama B adds, “Why isn’t she in the cage? You can’t just let a bird loose in a loft with a cat!”

“First of all, you’re underestimating this bird.” I gesture to where Effie is looking all innocent and very unlike a bird who brandished a knife at me twelve hours ago. “Secondly, I’m, like... building bridges between houses here.”

Mama B doesn’t seem to care about that much. She rolls her eyes and goes to get the cage. Most annoyingly, all she does is let out a sharp whistle, and suddenly Effie is fluttering into the goddamn thing, happy to have the door shut behind her. “Thanks for your help, Remy.”

She even sounds about halfway sincere.

It isn’t until she reaches the elevator, shutting the cage, that Effie leaves us with one parting jab.

“Meow!” she says, the elevator door sliding closed between us.

“Say the word, brother, and he’s gone.” Nick holds the gun at arm’s length and squints, counting the bullets in the chamber. He and everyone else in the room are cloaked in a haze of red. “They probably haven’t even left the parking lot.”

“Jesus,” I hiss at the splash of rubbing alcohol and wince at the pain. That Prince pussy brought a knife to a fistfight. I should let Nick go after him, but not yet. If anyone is going to take him down, it’s going to be me and not with a bullet. “Fuck! What the hell, Pauly?”

“Put the gun down,” Sy says, forehead creased with worry. His eyes dart from the wound to our medic-slash-trainer. “You sure nothing internal got nicked?”

“Seems clean,” he says, poking around. Pauly’s a lot of things, but a gentle touch isn’t one of them. When he hits a tender spot, I fall back on the table and groan.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Here,” Vinny says, thrusting a bottle toward me. Her soft hand cups the back of my head and tilts it up, pouring the whiskey on my tongue. The burn feels nice as it goes down my throat. She pushes my hair off my forehead, and I tug her down, wanting her lips on mine. Our tongues mingle, the taste of whiskey shared between us. Blue starts to mingle with the red, turning purple. Fuck yes. That, more than anything, makes the pain slip away.

“Better?” she asks after Pauly clears his throat, forcing her away.

I look up at her, at the glare of white coming off my girl, peaceful and true. “Hey, if I can survive being stabbed by you, I can take a little swipe by that prick.”

She grimaces, but I know she doesn’t regret sticking me in the gut. I may have had it coming. Things were complicated then.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“I’ve got something better than Jack,” Pauly says, looking up from his needle and thread. The tremor that often runs through his hands isn’t present, thank God. “Perc, Oxy, Scratch?—”

“No.” Sy’s response is firm. Unrelenting. “Absolutely fucking not.”

“I’m off all that shit.” I reach for my girl and tug down the little skirt she’s wearing. My thumb finds the star, and I brush over it. “But thanks for offering.”

I don’t miss the look between Sy and Nick. Pauly’s stash will be gone before the night’s over. Flushed down the can. Oh well. With the way Scratch has been flooding the streets lately, I’m sure his stock will be back up soon. When my girl blew up her daddy’s house to smithereens, the cockroaches survived and took shelter elsewhere.

Lav holds my hand and feeds me whiskey while he stitches me up. I watch the needle work its way in and out of my skin and shake my head. “I can’t believe I let that kid get me with a knife. I didn’t see it coming.”

“Well, you should have,” Nick says, fidgeting with the supplies on Pauly’s worktable. “He couldn’t beat you fair. That’s the only goddamn reason to bring a knife to a fistfight.”

“Are you saying you couldn’t have beaten Perez?” I smirk.

“That was a message.” He slides over to Vinny and pulls her hair off her neck, bending to suck her skin. “To everyone.”

Her nipples peak from his kiss, hardening under her shirt. I'd call him on his bullshit, but if it weren't for Nick and his obsessive ways, Vinny wouldn't be in our lives. His blue eyes are on me, and I feel a shift in his energy. "What?"

"You realize you can't come in the tower tonight, right?"

"Fuck that." Sure, the rules say that if you lose a Fury you can't come in the tower. But I'm a fucking Duke, not some cub. That's my home. My bed. My girl.

I look toward Sy and his expression isn't helpful. "He's right, man. Three days."

"You're not serious," I argue. "He cheated!"

"Those are the rules," Pauly says, looping the thread and making a knot. He snips them with the scissors and nods at his work. "Always have been, always will."

"Oh, suddenly you're the expert?" I snap. Pauly's history is murky as fuck.

"I got my ass kicked by Daniel Payne sophomore year."

"Daniel Payne." Nick's expression is incredulous.

"Yep."

"You're serious?" I ask, bringing up the image of that suit-wearing, scummy business man.

"Back in the day, Payne was like his son, a football player for the team. Not as big as Killian but big enough and that fucker was faster than he looked for a guy his size. I had to spend three nights on a friend's couch."

“Girl friend or guy friend?” Nick asks, eyebrow raised.

He smirks. “That information is in the vault, my friend.”

“Whatever.” I’m not interested in Pauly’s sob story. He got his ass kicked by Daniel Payne of all people. I got stabbed by a cheating ex-con. Slowly, I swing my legs over the side of the table, fighting a groan. Jesus Christ. This hurts a lot more when I’m not flying high. Sy loops his arm beneath mine and eases me off the table. “I’m good.” The three of them share a look. “Fine. It hurts like a motherfucker, but you’re right. Three days is the rule. I can do it.”

Vinny steps forward. “I’ll go with you.”

“Yeah?” I ask, feeling a bit of the anger dissipate.

“Come again?” Nick says, already shaking his head. “There’s no fucking way you’re going out there with Remy. It’s fucking dangerous enough for a Duke to be homeless for three days, but you too?”

“Remy is my Duke as much as you are.” She cuts him off in a way no other person dare speak to him. “He needs my help and I’m trained for it. Won’t be the first time I’ve nursed one of my men back to health.” No one misses the look she gives Sy. “And as much as I hate to say it, probably won’t be the last.”

Sy grabs her by the waist and pulls her against his body. “You’ll have eyes on you every minute of the day,” he tells her, “but if you need anything, call us, okay?”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Nick shouts, “you’re seriously letting your Duchess, basically your Queen, roam the streets with a loser?” He cuts me a look. “No offense.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t pretend like you’re worried. We can handle ourselves. You’re just pissed she’s not sleeping in your bed tonight.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Damn straight I am.” Nick turns to Vinny and pouts. “Baby—”

“I’m going,” she reiterates. “I can take care of it—” she glances at me and quirks her lips, “him.”

Sy grunts, brushing his lips across hers, and presses something into the palm of her hand. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I’m not okay with this.” Nick lifts his foot and rests it on the metal chair next to the table. He pulls a knife out of his boot and holds it out to Vinny. “But if you’re going to be stupid, take this.”

“I’m armed, Nick.”

A slow grin spreads across his face. “Of course you are, Little Bird, but for my sanity, take the knife.”

She holds out her hand, and he grabs her by the wrist, dragging her against his body. His hand cups the back of her neck, pulling her by the hair until she’s looking up at him. “Stay safe. I don’t have time to go on a vengeance murder spree right now.”

His mouth covers hers, hard and possessing, and my dick twitches wanting in on the action, but then a twinge of pain from my side joins in and I think I may throw up.

Bending down, Nick tucks the knife into her boot and then releases her to me. Vinny

wraps her arm around my waist, and I try not to lean into her as we walk to the back door. “Hey,” I call to my brothers. “No one gets ink while I’m gone. That’s my job.”

The last thing I need is some other guy encroaching on my territory.

“Got it, bro,” Sy says. “See you in three days.”

The door closes and the two of us are alone in the back alley. I’m tired, sore, and probably a little drunk.

“What now?” I ask, pushing her hair off her cheek.

She holds up the object Sy passed her. It’s a set of keys. One to his car, the other older, bulky, and made of brass. The letters ‘RG’ are engraved on the side. There’s a reason Simon is king.

He’s always one step ahead.

I manage to not just stay awake as Lav drives through West End, but to give her coherent directions. “Are we staying with Jade?” she asks, pulling the SUV to the curb. My friend Jade’s storefront is across the street. “It doesn’t look like she’s open.”

The shop’s windows are dark—as they should be. It’s late. The Fury wasn’t over until well after midnight, and then I had to get stitched up. The only sign of life on the street is the faint strains of music coming from the dive bar down the road. I shift in the seat, trying not to grunt at the radiating heat in my gut. I jerk my chin to the four-story building I had her park in front of. “We’re staying here.”

“An abandoned building?” She peers out the window. “What does that old sign say? Royal...”

“Gazette. It’s the old newspaper building.”

Vinny gives me a look. “What are we doing here?”

“Remember when the lawyer came by and gave Sy all that paperwork from Saul’s estate?” I ask, resting my hand on her thigh.

“Yeah. He shoved it in a drawer and ignored it.”

It’d sat there for weeks, a darkness radiating from the closed drawer. Like Sy, I thought it was best to just pretend it wasn’t there—but avoidance is my nature. Nick on the other hand wouldn’t let that shit go. He was dying to know what was in there, probably because he worked so closely with the King in South Side that he had an idea of what may be in there.

He wasn’t wrong.

“Nicky finally made him take it to his parents and they helped him go through it.” This isn’t really my story to tell, but Sy’s the one that gave her the keys. “Turns out he inherited more than just Saul’s ring and title. There were bank accounts, investments, business holdings, not to mention bills that needed to be paid, and...” I nod to the building, “properties. This is one of them.”

“A dusty, abandoned, newspaper building?”

“Well sure,” I admit, “but Saul was using it as a little hidey-hole for his current fuck buddy.”

She makes a face at the term, but it is what it is. Saul had no wife—no one ever met his standards. He didn’t have the need to keep his rotating lovers secret, but he was a controlling bastard. Keeping some girl, probably a student—, a virgin, and with

enough royal blood to satisfy his kink—, tucked away in an abandoned building to meet his needs is on brand. Fucker.

“I mean, I guess I’m not surprised. My father definitely had investments, and Saul had to do something with all that gun money.” She unbuckles her seat belt. “How’s Sy handling it?”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“With a quiet fury,” I say with a laugh. “He hasn’t said much to me or Nicky either. I think he’s still processing everything that comes with leadership. You know what they say, ‘It’s not easy being King’,”

Vinny climbs out of the car and walks around to the passenger side, opening my door and helping me out. It takes everything in me not to cry like a fucking baby from the pain.

Vinny’s arm is back around my waist, and her body is warm, and despite her size, strong. She angles us toward the door and takes the key from me, shoving it into the lock. It takes a minute, but the lock gives, and a moment later we’re inside. The lights work, and I jerk my chin down the hall.

“There’s an elevator.” Lav hesitates. “Aw, fuck, Vin.”

I’m a dick.

“It’s fine,” she promises.

I shake my head. “We can take the stairs. It’s only four flights.”

“No, you can’t. You’re barely upright,” she says. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “We’ve got this.”

Once her mind is made up, Vinny works fast, getting us inside and helping me lean against the wall. Through gritted teeth, I tell her “Top floor.” She takes another deep breath, stabs the button, and the doors slide shut. I squeeze her hand and say,

“Hey...”

She looks up at me, eyes wide, and I distract her the only way I know how. I kiss the hell out of her.

The box zooms upward, but all I feel is the pinch of her nails in my forearms as she holds onto me and heat of her tongue in my mouth. My cock joins in, trying to break free of my shorts. She tastes so good. Feels so good. Better than a million hits of scratch. With my good side, I lift my hand to cup her breast but the elevator jerks to a stop, and the bell dings, ending the ride. Thank fuck, because my legs are about to give out, and my abdomen feels like it's being stabbed by not just one blade but a million.

At least I got to feel her boob.

“You okay?” I ask as she helps me out.

“Yeah.” She grins. “We did it.”

“Fuck yeah, we did.” I sway to the side, and she catches me. “Oh, shit.”

“Bed?” she asks.

“That door over there.” I don't even take in where we are, the room growing hazy around me, but I feel her hand in mine.

The last thing I remember before falling asleep is soft sheets and the feel of Vinny next to me, content with the knowledge that despite losing tonight, wherever she is, I'm home.

“Turn over.”

She rolls across the mattress, exposing her backside to me, and I press the soft felt tip against her skin. She's in tight little shorts and a tank pushed up around her neck—both delivered by Jade. There's no way she got Vinny's size wrong, so I'm taking the skimpy outfit as a get-well-soon present. The knife wound continues to hurt like a motherfucker but the injury had no effect on my cock, which has been somewhere between half and full erect since we got here.

Unfortunately, someone doesn't want me to overexert myself, and I've had no fucking relief.

We're two days into exile, holed up in Saul's lover's old apartment on the top floor of the Gazette. It's not too shabby, with an updated kitchen, bath and bedroom with a nice-sized bed. There's at least one other room, and an office, but I haven't had time to explore much since I slept the whole first day. The only time I was awake was when Vinny gave me antibiotics and forced me to eat and drink. It hurts less in my sleep—the wound and my pride.

Today I feel a little better, and my hands are twitching, eager to get moving. If Vinny isn't going to let me finger her sweet pussy, then I'll do the next best thing: mark her up.

I start my work up at the brand and move out, creating a constellation of Orion—visible on clear nights right now. Propped on her elbows, Vinny holds a brittle, yellowing newspaper between her hands. Our circumstances may not be ideal, but the unlimited supply of reading material has my girl pretty content.

“Jesus Christ.” She abruptly sets the paper down. “Just when I think Forsyth can't get any more fucked up.”

“What are you talking about?” I connect the lines between the stars in the dip of her lower back.

Her neck turns, looking back at me. “Did you know there was a serial killer active in the city about twenty years ago?”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, he even had a creepy moniker: The Forsyth Carver.”

Well, that doesn’t leave much to the imagination. “Knife kink, huh?”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Apparently.” She picks up the paper again and starts reading, ““Police have identified what they believe is the sixth victim of the brutal killer coined The Forsyth Carver. The nickname was earned because of the nature of the murders, where the victims were methodically tortured with a sharp blade. A source told the Gazette that the most recent body was discovered along a hiking path on the edge of the University, near the river. At the time of this report, the police have no suspects, suggesting that students take caution and travel together’.”

“Fuck, that’s dark.” I place a hand on her back, forcing her to still. Reading gets her all worked up. “But I can’t say I’m surprised. Forsyth seems like fertile ground for a homegrown killer.”

“You know, I bet my father knew about it.” She props herself on one elbow, giving me a flash of side-tit. Furrowing her forehead, she adds, “And your dad.”

I grunt because, yeah, probably.

“I mean, who’s to say one of them wasn’t the killer?” she continues, her mind exploding with theories. “We know they’re both sociopaths.”

“Add in Saul, Rufus, and Daniel...” I place a hand on her side, fingers grazing the underneath of her boob, and push her backover so I can add the final star. “You’ve got enough for a Royal line-up.”

“Yeah, but none of them seem like the type to move around in secret,” she admits. “Those bastards like to do their torturing and murdering in the wide open.”

“Well, did they ever solve it?” I ask, capping my pen and rising to my knees to get a good look at my work.

“I haven’t gotten that far yet.” She reaches for another newspaper from the stack beside the bed, but I lean forward, grabbing her wrist. “Hey!”

“Sorry, Vin, but we can follow up on your serial killer later.” I fight past the lingering pain in my gut and press a kiss to her shoulder, fingers grazing over the fresh ink. “I don’t think he’s going anywhere.”

Her breath hitches when I lightly touch her sides. Vinny gets me, but she’ll never understand what it’s like to connect my art with her body. She turns every stroke into a living creature. Sure, the same could be said about all the tattoos I’ve inked on people, but she’s the only woman who carries my marks all over her body, permanent and temporary.

She’s my muse.

Vinny shifts, looking over her shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I can cough without wanting to cry.”

“That’s progress.” Her pink lips lift into a smile. Fuck, I just want to kiss her. Well, not just kiss her. I want to bury my cock deep inside her tight little pussy and spend the rest of our time here in fucked out bliss. If she has the same idea, she rejects it, and says, “I should probably check your wound and change the bandage.”

She stands, pulling down the thin tank. Deny me all she wants, my girl is horny. Her nipples poke against the cotton, dark shadows taunting me and I know if I touch her between her legs, she’ll be wet. I watch as she walks over to the bathroom, the booty shorts inching up with every move. Thank you, Jade. She returns with the first-aid kit.

“Lean back,” she says, nodding at the headboard. Every movement still hurts, but I follow directions. Once settled, she glances down at my cock, tenting in my pants. “Seriously?”

“It’s been two days, babe, and I can see your nipples and your shorts keep riding up your ass. This boner is totally your fault.” Two strokes is all it’d take, and I’d come hard and quick.

“It’s not my fault Jade sent over these clothes. They’re cute, and I appreciate it, but she clearly underestimates my size.” She tugs at the tank, trying to cover her belly, but all it does is make her tits spill out the top.

“There are ways we can fix the boner, you know, other than changing clothes,” I give my cock a good squeeze, “which wouldn’t make one bit of difference.”

“This isn’t just a cockblock,” she informs me. “As much as I’ve improved with my nursing duties, I don’t want to redo Pauly’s stitches.”

I look down at them. “They’re tight, right?”

“He’s got a shockingly steady hand.”

I take her hand and rest it on my cock. “Your hand feels pretty steady to me.” She squeezes the hard length before pulling away and rolling her eyes.

“Really, though,” I tell her, “you’re getting good at this. Better than what I had growing up at least.”

“Who cleaned you up then?” She wipes down the stitches with antiseptic. “

I shrug. “Mostly nannies, I guess. I had this one, Justyna, who was around during the

skateboard years, when I came home busted up almost every day.”

“Justyna is a pretty name.”

“She was from Greece. She was super into holistic shit, making her own medicines and salves with herbs and plants. She had a whole section in the greenhouse for it.” I wrinkle my nose. “I swear I smelled like compost for a year. Total game killer.”

“I’m sure,” she says, rolling her eyes, before dropping her gaze to focus on changing my bandage. “Was she nice?”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“I guess.” I narrow my eyes. “You jealous of someone else taking care of me?”

“After our mom...” she swallows, “died, we had nannies too. Most of ours were young—au pairs, from like France or Switzerland.” She pulls the backing off the adhesive. “I’m pretty sure that was more for my father’s benefit than ours.” She spreads the adhesive over my skin, fingers gentle. “They were all attractive and generally inexperienced. I just figured maybe you had a few hot nannies of your own.”

I snort. “The opposite, actually. Grandmotherly, Mrs. Doubtfire types. I guess it makes sense now, knowing that my father’s the Baron King.” Who has a reputation for cozying up to the much younger Baroness. The pieces of my childhood are easier to click into place now that I know his true identity. He never needed my mother, not when he’s had an endless string of house girls at his disposal over the years. It was well known in royal circles that the Baroness belonged to the masked Baron King first, and the current crop of barons, second. With that perspective, it begs the question, who needs to fuck the nanny when you’ve got a girl contractually bound at your whim? Apparently not my father.

“And your mom?” she asks, putting away the supplies. “Was she ever around?”

I lean back against the pillow. “Nah. She was never really part of my life. We mostly went to see her.”

“At the hospital?”

I nod. I don’t talk very much about my mom, Amber, very much. Why would I?

She's just another thing taken from me by my father. Another secret and mystery. Is anything I know about her real? My father deals in lies; I can't trust anything he's ever told me.

"That must have been hard." She inches up the bed, curving her body against my side. She's careful not to touch my stomach, although I'd give anything for her to counteract the pain.

"We had to visit Amber at rehab once or twice. It was... not great." I can still remember walking down the long corridor, the walls a muddy brown, a sign of the chaotic emotions locked inside. "The hospital wasn't so bad—I guess that's what money gets you." I push down her shorts, seeking the star. "Lots of sunlight and open spaces. Amber... she just always seemed kind of out of it, like half in this world and half in another." I recognize the irony here. When I'm off my meds, it feels the same. "There was always this tension between her and my dad." So much orange. "I'm not sure why he never divorced her."

I know why: control.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"It's been a while. He moved her farther away." Like he's always trying to keep her out of reach. "It's fine. It's hard to miss what you never had."

She leans into me and kisses me. Soft and gentle, which is nice, but fuck, I miss hard and ruthless. It's been nice having her here alone, but also a misery, not being able to have her like I want.

I may not be able to get off right now without busting a stitch, but there's no reason my girl can't. I push my fingers down the front of her pants, running them down the curve of her body until I find her clit. She's warm, and it only takes a few strokes to

get her wet.

“Rem,” she breathes, “I don’t want you to?—”

“I’m going to,” I reply, licking into her mouth, “and I’m not stopping until you come so hard, they’ll hear your screams down on the street.” I pull away. “Now be a good girl and take off those shorts so I can eat your pussy.”

Her gaze grows heated, and she actually cooperates, easing out of the tiny shorts. I inch down the headboard and lie on my back. She climbs on top, straddling my hips. “Is this okay?”

I reach out and push her tank up, exposing those pretty tits. “There we go.” I gesture her forward. “Come here.”

She’s careful around the wound, but I can smell her as she inches closer—see the slick residue between her thighs. “Fuck, I just want to taste you.” I run my fingers over her clit. She’s bare, skin soft and supple. Parting her folds, I give her a slow, teasing lick. Her pelvis bucks, and I clamp my hands around her hips, guiding her down, getting the first taste.

Fucking heaven.

Her groan bounces off the high ceilings, and she grabs the headboard with both hands. The view from beneath her is a dream, her tits heaving with every thrust. I’d stare at them all day but I’m too consumed with how hot her pussy is against my tongue.

Once she finds a rhythm, she breathes, “Remy, I’m close.”

“Not yet,” I command, pulling my mouth away and dipping my fingers into the

sloppy heat of her pussy. I wet my fingertips, then grip her ass, pulling her cheeks apart, seeking her tight, puckered rim. Making tiny circles, I warm her up, testing to make sure she's ready.

"You're wicked," she tells me, pussy thrusting desperately at my face. I flick out my tongue, giving her a tease.

"Baby, you've been toying with me for two fucking days playing nursemaid. This is just a little payback." I push in a finger, and she moans as I stretch her out. "You want more?"

"Mmhmm." Her words are lost as she bites down on her bottom lip, head nodding furiously. It's time to give my girl what she wants, sliding in another finger and spreading her hole. Swiping my tongue flat over her pussy, I cover her with heat. My fingers chase her thrusts, fucking in and out. Her breath comes in short gasps, slipping into a groan when I feel the tremor run through her body as she gets closer and closer.

Then I do what I've been itching to do this whole time—the thing we do the best—fall off the edge to oblivion.

Lavinia

It's day three, and I finally convinced Remy to leave the comfort of the top-floor apartment. Although he doesn't need to overdo it, it is important to keep his body moving, and I figured exploring the building a little more couldn't hurt. I take him straight to the Gazette archives.

"You're addicted." He gives me the once-over. "I can see it on your face."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“I’m not addicted,” I bite back. Although, obsessed may be the correct word. What started as a distraction from boredom ended with me going down the rabbit hole. Now I can’t stop digging through these old papers and reading up on The Forsyth Carver.

“It seems like he was active—on and off—for three or four years.” I push through the door of the room that has a plaque identifying it as ‘The Morgue’ on it. The scent of musty, dried-out newspaper slams into us. This is where I’ve spent most of my time while Remy has been recovering. There are no corpses here, like the Barons’ crypts, just the dead stories of old Forsyth. “Heliked co-eds, particularly ones with royal affiliations. Not actual royalty, but women the community would be less focused on.”

“Like the girls at The Hideaway,” he muses, looking around the dusty room.

I nod. “Or the girls in the Princesses’ court.”

“Vipers from North Side.”

“Or a cutslut.” My forehead creases. “Like Laura.”

“Hey,” he grabs my hand, “there’s still a chance she ran off.”

I frown, unconvinced. “I just don’t think she would leave the girls without saying something. Or Ballsack. He’s still upset about it.”

“Ballsy is a great kid,” he notes, “but he’s got too much heart. Which is one reason we sent him over to keep an eye on Verity. He needed something to focus on.”

“It just feels like no one in Forsyth gives a shit about women when they go missing. Not then, not now.”

Laura going missing landed like a punch. My sister, Leticia, was missing for years. Although she wasn't kidnapped, she was another victim of this city's ruthless patriarchy. It's not a surprise I'm drawn to the Carver story. It's just more spilled blood. More lost females.

Remy pulls me to him and runs his fingers under my chin, tilting it up. “I'll talk to the guys, see if we can get some action on finding Laura, okay?”

“Thank you.”

“You don't actually think these are connected do you?” I ask. “The Carver and these new cases?”

“No. I haven't unearthed everything yet, but I did ditch the analog and went to Google. The Forsyth Carver case was officially closed when he and his wife were found dead in a murder-suicide.”

“For real?” he asks, eyes wide.

“Yeah. Twenty or so years ago, so unless there was a cover-up,” which none of us can put past the Powers-That-Be in Forsyth, “it wasn't any of the current Kings. Just some psycho over in the East End, who not only destroyed the lives of all those people he murdered but also his own family.”

“Well, that's a bummer.”

“It is, but it's also weird that it's happening again, right?” I ask. “I just can't help but think there's some kind of connection, even if it's just another home-grown psycho

trying to be a copycat.”

“I like this color on you.”

“What color?” I ask, moving into his arms.

“It’s kind of pink.” I run Sy’s chart through my head. I’m not familiar with pink.

“You’re all glowy.”

“I guess that’s what curiosity looks like?” I push up on my toes, preparing to kiss him, but a loud noise down the hall tenses us both. There hasn’t been a sound outside of our own in this building for three days.

“Did you hear that?” I mouth, eyes wide.

He nods, hand already on the gun tucked into the back of his jeans. Following, I bend, reaching for a knife, moving to step in front of him.

“The fuck?” He grabs me by the shoulder, yanking me back behind his lanky, muscular frame. A shadow shifts in the doorway. Again, I try to take a step forward.

“Stand down,” he hisses.

“You’re hurt,” I argue.

“Woman—”

A high-pitched scream cuts our argument short. Remy’s eyebrows shoot to the top of his forehead.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Oh my god,” Sy’s voice echoes down the hall.

“Shut the fuck up!” Nick snaps back. “Did you see that thing? It was fucking huge!”

A moment later, Nick and Sy appear in the doorway. Nick’s jaw is clamped tight, eyes darting back toward the hall. Sy is bent over in a state of barely contained laughter.

“Jesus Christ,” Remy snaps, lowering his gun. “You almost took a bullet.”

“Seriously. The last thing we need is another stabbing,” I add, taking a breath to settle my racing heart and put the blade away.

Remy narrows his eyes at Nick. “Was that you screaming?” He pauses, then adds, “Like a girl?”

“Shut up.” Nick glares at him while glancing back down the hall. “You didn’t see that thing.”

“He thinks he saw a rat,” Sy says through a gasp for air, while he shakes his head at his brother. “At least he didn’t piss himself.”

“Oh.” Remy scratches his forehead and nods. “Gotcha.”

“I never pissed myself,” Nick says defensively. “That was spilled beer.”

“Of course,” Remy says, sharing an amused look with Sy.

“What’s going on?” I ask. There are times like this when I see how deep their bond is, how far they go back. They know everything about each other, good, bad, and embarrassing.

“The great Nick Bruin is scared of vermin,” Sy says simply.

“I’m not scared.”

“Sure you’re not.” Sy rolls his eyes at his brother, pushes past him to wrap his arms around me, and lifts me off the ground. “Hey, baby.” He kisses me like it’s been a month, not three days. “Missed you.”

“I was just surprised,” Nick continues to argue, pushing him out of the way. “Those nasty fuckers carry diseases and you just know they’ll eat your eyes out if they get a chance.”

“When would they get a chance to eat your eyes out?” Sy asks. “You were walking down the hall.”

“How did you find us down here?” I ask as Nick kisses down my throat, sending a ripple of goosebumps down my arms.

“Tracker,” he says, pulling back and running a thumb over the spot. “It’s accurate as fuck.”

I used to fight against the tracker, but after Laura’s disappearance, and spending time down here, yeah, I’m okay with my men knowing how to find me.

“Should’ve known we’d find you surrounded by lots of words,” Sy says, thumbing through a stack of old papers. “Find anything interesting?”

“Don’t get her started,” Remy says, lowering himself into a wooden desk chair that creaks under his weight. I don’t miss the way he gently holds his side. “It’s all murder and conspiracy theories.”

“When were you planning on telling me about this building, anyway?” I ask Sy, happy to change the subject.

He grimaces. “Yeah, sorry. I didn’t mean to exclude you. I was just processing everything, I guess.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him. It’s been a wild few months for all of us. “It’s a cool place, and it definitely came in handy this weekend.”

Nick smirks. “You mean it makes a perfect loser’s den?”

“I may be injured,” Remy says, jabbing an inked finger in his direction, “but I will still kick your ass, Bruin.”

“The apartment needs some work, but it’s comfortable. There’s a nice view of the city, and there’s plenty of room.”

“Big enough for the four of us?” Sy asks, catching my train of thought. I love the clock tower. It’s cozy and more of a home than the cold house I grew up in, but we can’t stay there forever. That building belongs to DKS and my men are about to outgrow it.

“Maybe with a renovation,” I consider. “Saul put some work into the kitchen and main suite, but there’s more room than that. At least a guest room, maybe an office,” I raise an eyebrow, “or a library. Archie would love the windows.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Nick looks between me and his brother. “What are you thinking?”

“A new group of Dukes will come in next year and technically we’ll have to give up the tower, right?”

Remy snorts, wiping his finger through a thick coat of dust on the nearby desk before blowing it off in a puff. “You want to live surrounded by the ghosts of Forsyth’s past?”

“Someone needs to preserve this.” This town is bigger than what’s on the surface and the deeper I dig, the more I may be able to untangle the web of destruction in Forsyth. “There’s a lot of history here.”

“This whole side of West End is coming along too,” Sy considers. “For all his faults, Saul was pretty good at investing.”

“It’d be cool to be near Jade,” Remy says, and I think about her shop across the street. I watch him pull the marker from behind his ear and twirl it between his fingers before he announces, “You know, I’ve been thinking about finding a spot for a tattoo parlor, bringing in some of the other talent in the area, you know other body art like piercings, and setting up shop.”

“Oh,” I say, smiling at him, “I love that idea.”

“Yeah?” He grins back. “It’d be cool, right? It’d have to have a killer name like, like Bruin Ink, or Madman Tattoos, or...”

“Royal.” I hold up a copy of one of the yellowed newspapers, the name printed across the top. “Royal Ink.”

“Royal Ink.” Sy slowly nods. “I like the sound of that and I’ve got some inherited blood money I’d be happy to invest.”

Nick crosses his arms over his chest, a wicked grin lighting up his face. “It’s classy.”

Classy isn’t a word I’d ever choose for my rough and tumble Dukes, but the idea of building a life with them, having a home of our own, a business, and the future that comes with it, feels right.

6

UNSTOPPABLE

Lavinia

I’m already awake when I hear the quiet quick and soft thwack of the freezer door opening and closing across the room. Even half asleep, I know it’s a Prince—Lex in particular. He’s too quiet to be one of my men, plus Remy left earlier, fingers grazing over the star on my hip, with the whispered promise of making the streets of West End blue again. Sy’s arms are wrapped around me, his chest rising and falling under my cheek. He actually is asleep, finally succumbing to the exhaustion of sitting by while his brother is stretched out in the middle of the room, fighting for his life.

Even though Lex Ashby and I have forged a strange bond over keeping Nick alive, I pretend to be asleep as he passes the three of us, and he doesn’t hesitate before entering Verity’s bedroom. I don’t blame him. Sy and I are both down to our underwear, our outer clothes in a pile on the floor. I’ve read grief does strange things to you. Apparently, it makes us horny or, at the very least, desperate for connection.

When I'm sure Lex is in for the night, I disentangle myself from Sy's long limbs. Or try. His hands grip my ass. "What's wrong?" he asks, voice gruff with sleep.

"Nothing. He's fine. Go back to sleep."

His eyes flutter open, and I see the fear and anger in them. We've been through a lot in our time together, but none as scary as almost losing his brother.

He rubs his hand over his face. "I should catch up with Remy."

"No." My voice is firm. "You promised." I've got one man recovering from a bullet and another hunting down the shooter. The only reason Sy is still here is that I begged him to stay. "He's got backup and support from the other territories." Pace had been the one to get the intel on where Oakfield had been holed up since he made the biggest fuck-up of his life. Sy's a King now. He doesn't need to get involved in carrying out justice and revenge.

Also, we need him here.

Fine. I need him here.

"Head to bed." I press a kiss against his throat. "You're real bed. If shit hits the fan," which it undoubtedly will, "you need to be rested."

His fingers graze under my eyes. I don't need a mirror to know they're shadowed. "Only if you come with me. You've been up for two days."

I nod, but add, "Let me check on him one last time."

He lifts me off his lap and I get an eyeful of his body; the hard muscles of his chest, tapering down to the ladder of abs that come from Perilini genetics plus hours of

relentless training. His boxer briefs are tight, molded against his ass and thighs. There's no missing the thick line of his cock resting against his leg. That thing used to scare the hell out of me. Now, it ignites a warm pool of heat in my lower belly.

"Don't take long," he tells me, flicking his eyes over Nick's resting body, the soft sound of his breath rising and falling. The monitor Lex hooked him up to is beeping with regularity and the drip of fluids has another hour or two left. I watch as he crosses the room and enters our bedroom. We've only been living in this building for a short period of time, but it hasn't taken long for it to feel like home. It's nice no longer living in a glorified frat house overlooking Forsyth, but the cozy feeling is definitely marred by the sight of the den being turned into a makeshift hospital room.

The events unfolded in a way that there's no doubt in my mind divine intervention came into play. The universe wanted Nick alive. Otherwise, why would that shot hit the side of his neck and pass through? Why would Lex Ashby even be in West End, much less living in our house? Why would he have a refrigerated truck of blood at his disposal? Why would everything be aligned, perfectly in place, to save the man I love?

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Whatever it was, I'm not questioning it, because it's all too clear how close Nick came to dying.

Once Sy has closed the bedroom door, and I'm alone with Nick, I stand over him, staring down at the bandage covering the bullet wound. The opposite side is the tattoo where I kissed him after he won his fight. Slowly, even though I probably shouldn't, I peel off the bandage to inspect the wound. The bullet shredded his throat, nearly taking out his jugular. God, one millimeter over. Less than that.

I try to stop my hands from shaking as I replace the bandage, tearing off new strips of tape to keep it securely in place, but the wave of emotion has been building since this all started, and for once I can't hold it back.

This man has proven he'll do anything for me. He'll fight for me. Kill for me. I know he'll challenge me on my bullshit and insecurities. I love him for it. Which is why I finally blurt out what I've been holding in since I first saw him dying on the table: "I'm so fucking pissed at you."

Despite the tremble in my voice, my words come out harsh, especially in the quiet of the room. I know Nick can't hear me. As soon as it was safe to give him a sedative, Lex made sure he was out. Good. The last thing I need is for him to hear what I'm about to say. No. Unleash.

"You've hurt me before, Nick. You've scared me, but nothing like this. Nothing like seeing you with blood spilling out of your neck. Like seeing your skin pale as death and your lips turn blue." I take a deep breath, but it falters, slipping into a sob. "You almost died on me. On them. You almost changed our lives forever because you think

you're invincible." I steady myself. "You think that just because you ran around South Side and made it out unscathed, or got in the ring with Perez and won back your title, or held a gun to your temple in the Baron King's crypt and survived his fucked-up, insane games, that you'll live for-fucking-ever. Well, you won't. You're flesh and blood. You're human, whether you want to believe it or not."

I exhale, feeling a weight slowly lift off my shoulders, and take his hand, threading our fingers together. I flip them over and trace the letters on his knuckles.

"You can stop fighting now. Sy is King. Killian wants change. Verity is working to make East End different. My father..." I swallow, not allowing myself to think about what I did to my territory, of the destruction I caused. "Lionel is gone, which means that we should be able to take a breath and you can stay out of the line of fire."

Of course, this isn't entirely true. Brice Oakfield, looking to settle old scores, took a shot at Nick tonight. There are lingering factions of old-school Forsyth all over the city. There are missing girls, snatched right off the streets in broad daylight. Dealers slinging Scratch from the rubble in the North. Disgruntled former frat boys looking to make a mark. But I want it to be true. I need it to be, just until he's back to me, safe and strong.

"I know you took to the streets, took to South Side, for answers." I take a deep breath. "Well, you have them. You have your answers now. You have me. You have your brother and your best friend." I bend and press a kiss against his lips. "I love you, Nick Bruin. And if you ever do something like this again, I'll fucking kill you."

Nick

"You know, the polite thing to do, since I'm in some kind of medically induced sexile, would be to at least leave the door open so I can watch you have sex."

I admit it. I'm a terrible patient. Impatient. Bored. Irritable. And horny as fuck. Waking up to the soft floaty sounds of my girl's orgasm as she gets pounded by my brother and best friend in the next room isn't helping. The raging boner in my shorts isn't either.

It's not the fact that they're fucking that bothers me. It's the fact that they're fucking without me.

"What sex?" Remy says, tucking his shirt into his pants. He spares a glance at Sy and Lav, and I don't miss the quick wink. To their credit, I know they waited until I was asleep and probably made a valiant attempt at being quiet.

Unfortunately, my sex-dar is impeccable, even in my sleep.

"The sex that you reek of," I mutter from my spot on the couch. It's been a week or so since I refused to get back in the hospital bed they had brought in, choosing to camp out in the living room. I'm dressed in a half-zipped black hoodie and everytime Lav walks in the room her eyes skip over my chest and go straight to the white bandage that is still plastered over the wound on my neck. Underneath it's no longer bloody and raw, but healing. My eyes lift to hers and I shoot her a glare and add, "And that's all over your face."

"My face?" She touches the corner of her puffy, red lips, confirming my suspicion that she was just sucking one, if not two, cocks.

"I'm not talking 'bout jizz, although thanks for that visual." I roll my eyes. "Trust me, Little Bird, you have a completely identifiable 'I just got fucked' face."

Her jaw drops in offense. "I don't have a 'just got fucked face'."

My brother, best friend, and I look at one another and we all laugh—well, until the

twinge in my neck shoots a pain down my shoulder and arm. Fuck.

Remy circles his arms around Lav and traps her close. “You do, Vin, but it’s hot. Just makes me want to fuck you again.”

Jealous heat builds in my chest at the simple way he’s got his arms around her. I know I shouldn’t be petty about this. I’m alive. I’m off all the tubes and drips that had me chained to that bed. Even I can admit it was touch-and-go for a minute and I’m damned lucky to be here.

Fucking Oakfield. It’s always the times when everything seems to be going smoothly. It was just a regular exchange of some hardware, or at least that’s how it seemed, until Oakfield decided to sign his death certificate. Because that’s all it was. He didn’t even take me out. Nah, he took a shot at me and fucking missed. Remy said he cried when he was down on his knees and he asked him if it was worth it.

Didn’t even take it like a man.

Thank God, Pace filmed it. I’ve been watching that shit on a loop.

But now that I’m actually getting out of bed, eating real food, showering, and weaning off the meds, I’m impatient. I want my girl. I want LB and her sweet, tight pussy.

She slips out of Remy’s arms and sits beside me on the couch. I’m greeted by her well-fucked scent, making my cock throb between my legs. “How are you feeling?” She touches my forehead with warm, soft fingertips. Fuck, I’m desperate. “You look flushed. You don’t have a fever do you?” Ever since Lex drilled it into us that if I get an infection, he’ll have no choice but to send me to the hospital, Lav has been obsessing.

“I’m fine.” I rest my hand on her thigh, ignoring the strain down my side with every movement. I just want to touch her. Feel her and push aside the intrusive thoughts that I could’ve lost this forever. I dip my fingers below the hem of her skirt to feel the soft skin. “Just tired. But also tired of sleeping,” I add a dramatic groan, “and did I mention bored?”

It’s not that they haven’t tried to alleviate my boredom. There’s been a constant parade of visitors in the loft. Pop and Dad came as soon as Sy told them what happened. Our mother, Sarah, was noticeably absent, making it clear she had been left out of the loop—at least for now. God bless whoever lets her know. Mama B arrived with an army of cutsluts carrying enough food to feed an army, stocking the pantry and freezer. Since then there’s been a steady stream of frat brothers visiting, giving updates and reports on what’s happening in the territory. I’ve made a couple of trips out of the house. Nothing major—and nothing public. I went with the guys to meet up with the Royals at the Courthouse, but that was low risk. Even my quasi-doctor was on site. None of that is enough to make up for what I’ve been missing of life. There’s been no training, no family dinners, no Furies, and definitely no fucking.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“All of that just means you’re feeling better.” There’s no masking the worry that flickers on her face. It’s been there eversince I woke up. If the bullet didn’t kill me, seeing Lav upset almost did. I wanted to make that anguish go away, but at first all I could do was fight to stay alive. Now that I’m better, she can’t seem to let that worry go.

I’ve decided to take matters into my own hands and not only prove to my girl that I’m okay, but get some godforsaken relief.

“So I was thinking,” I say casually, rubbing my thumb over her flesh, “maybe I could go to the Fury this week. Just go. Not participate or anything. No booze,” I promise, my eyes meeting Lavinia’s. “I’ll sit up in the box and be a good boy.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” she says immediately. “Maybe next week?”

“That’s what you said last week,” I argue.

“Back me up here.” She looks over at the guys for support. “It’s too soon, right? Especially for something unpredictable like the Fury.”

Look. I get it. There are too many people. Too many unknown factors. The crowds get rowdy and the frat boys are often on edge, especially if their guy loses. And me... well, I’m not exactly known for my self-control.

“She’s right,” Sy says, giving me an apologetic half-smile.

“You’ve only just started making progress,” she adds. “Getting out of bed without

help. Going to the bathroom alone...”

Remy, who has been quiet other than tapping his marker against the arm of the chair, studies me for a long moment before saying, “Tell me something, Nicky...”

“Okay.” It’s impossible to know what Remy is thinking.

His eyebrow lifts. “Can you fuck?”

“What do you think I’m doing in the bathroom alone?” I snort, pumping my fist up and down. “I got shot in the neck. Everything down below is in top-notch working order.” I reach for the elastic of my pants. “Want to see?”

“Maybe later,” Remy says, pointing the marker between me and Lav. “But I think that if you can fuck Vinny you should be able to go to the fight.”

Lav swings her head toward him. “What? That is not an appropriate test!”

“Why not?” I ask, taking her hand in mine and placing it over my very hard erection. “I’ve been trying to get you to sit on my dick for a week now. You’re the cockblocker.”

“I’m not ‘cockblocking’. I’m being responsible.” She shoots Remy a glare but he just smirks in return. “Lex said no rigorous activity.”

“My rigor or yours?” I ask, getting a vision of her bouncing on my lap that’s so intense I have to adjust myself. “Because those are two different things.” I give Sy a pleading look. “Tell her it’ll be fine.”

Sy leans against the kitchen counter with his arms crossed over his chest. “It seems like a valid test. But,” he adds, “you have to get through the whole thing without

exhibiting any pain or discomfort.”

“Done.” I say it with absolute confidence but a streak of pain runs down my arm.

“This is ridiculous,” Lav argues, but I tilt my head and give her an appreciative once-over. Something in her expression flips and yep, my Little Bird is a goner.

The rest of the room must realize it too, because Remy strolls over, pushes her hair back, and kisses her. His tattooed hand lifts to her tit, and he tweaks her nipple, making it tighten into a hard point. When he withdraws his tongue from her mouth he asks, “You need any help getting ready for Nicky or are you still wet from before?”

“Sorry, bud,” Sy interjects, “but Nick’s going to have to do the work on his own—following the parameters.”

“Fine, but we get to watch, right?” he asks hopefully. “You know, for safety reasons.”

Sy raises his eyebrow at me in question. Can they stay? Sure. Do I care if they watch me and LB fuck? Absolutely not. But I’m feeling vulnerable as fuck right now and my brother doesn’t need me to say it.

“Come on, Rem,” Sy pushes off the counter, “let’s give these two some space. I told Kaz we’d go over that new order with him.”

Remy scowls, clearly not happy about that decision, but he stands, leans over Lav and gives her a hard kiss. “Fuck him good, okay?”

Once we’re alone, I exhale and reach for Lav. Normally, I would have picked her up and set her right on my dick, but I’ll fail the no-pain-test right away if I do that. Instead, I encourage her to come to me. “Come here, Little Bird.”

She stands and faces me, and I reach for the hem of her skirt, fingers curling underneath. Fuck, even that sent a twinge down my arm. She waits for me to drag her closer, to take the lead, but I'm frozen, gathering the fabric in my fist and holding tight.

Look. Nick Bruin is hard. He lives hard. Plays hard. Fights hard. And hefuckshard.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Even when my guard is down, and it's just the two of us, quiet and alone, I don't ease up. Sure, I'll tell my girl how I feel about her, that is never in question. I love her. Nah, I fucking worship her. I've got no problem saying those sweet words that get Lav all hot and bothered, her pussy dripping for me, but my motions—my hands and body—they're always harsh. Every thrust bruising—meant to claim. Every touch possessive.

I want her to know she's mine.

The difference is that for the first time in my life, my body isn't fully in my control. I'm not at full strength. There's a weakness I don't like and can't accept. Death met me on the doorstep and invited me in. It was only sheer luck and stubbornness that drug me away. I don't need to have sex with Lavinia to prove I can go to the Fury. I need to have sex with her to prove I'm still alive.

“You'll tell me if it's too much?”

I nod, and it's enough to get her to take the lead, placing a knee on each side of my thighs, straddling me. My hands move on instinct, pushing up her skirt, feeling the warmth of her flesh. Palming her ass, I groan.

“Fuck, babe, no panties?”

My cock thickens between us.

“Someone ruined them,” she tilts my head to where my brother had just been sitting, “because they were impatient.”

“Remind me to thank Sy later. Less work for me.” I massage her cheeks, fingers inching lower with every pass until they dip underneath. “You are still wet.”

There’s a warmth there that tells me it’s not all from the prior fucking. She keeps her eyes on me, like she’s searching for the slightest hint of pain, but right now I feel nothing but the urgent need to consume. I lean up, fighting against the pain, and slam my mouth into hers, tongue darting between her shocked lips. Her reaction is to grind down, and Jesus, I may blow my load in my shorts. Groaning. “You’re killing me, girl.”

Her mouth tastes so good. Her body feels amazing. She pulls away, kissing down my jaw, stopping to lick the tattoo of her lips. The feel of her hot mouth, her soft lips, makes my hips rock up. God, I need inside this woman.

There’s no rushed scramble to get our clothes off. I mean, I want her naked, but I don’t want to send a tremor down my arm and fuck this whole thing up. So I continue to rub her ass, fingers dragging over the crease between her plump cheeks. She reaches for my zipper, slowly dragging the tines down to reveal my chest and abdomen.

“I missed this,” she says, taking her time to kiss her way down my chest, exhaling a hot breath on my nipple. My fingers twitch, brushing against the rim of her asshole.

“Fuck,” she breathes, back arching, pushing those fantastic tits in my face.

“Feel good?”

“Mmhmm.” She refocuses, spreading the sides of my hoodie to expose my chest, but not taking it off. She’s aware of my limitations, and I get a tickle of fear that she’ll call this off, but to my relief, she runs her hands over my body and grinds against me with a heat so wet I can feel it through my shorts.

I push at the hem of her shirt. "Let me see your tits."

Lav lifts her shirt and before she even gets it over her head, my mouth is latched to her nipple. "Jesus," I mumble, mouth full, "I've missed these."

She tosses the shirt and reaches down, releasing my cock from the confines of my shorts. When fingers graze over the soft tip, spreading the drop of cum over the head, I fall back against the seat and groan.

"You gonna tease me all night?" I ask, my hand moving to fist the base. I'm about to blow.

"You don't like it?"

"I like it, LB, but I haven't been inside you in weeks, and unless you want me to shoot off in my hand, you better pick up the pace."

She rises to her knees, making room for me to slide my fingers over her clit to her pussy. I push one inside, then the other. "You ready for me?"

Her eyebrow cocks. "Are you ready?"

I was born for a lot of things, but fucking this girl has been the only one on my mind since the first day I saw her. I set my jaw, bracing for impact, then stroke my cock and slot it against her entrance. She's slick and wet. Her eyes are on mine as I push into her wet heat.

"I'm okay." Fuck, better than okay, although I do resist the urge to thrust into her. Pushing her hair back over her shoulder, I add, "All I've wanted is to feel your tight pussy around me, and it's goddamn spectacular."

She gives me what I want, lowering herself and taking me deep. Our eyes and bodies meet, and we both exhale, the ball of tension in my jaw loosening just a bit.

“All good?” She leans into me, tits pressed against my chest.

“The fucking best.” I lean back, hands moving to her hips and pulling her to me, ignoring the stab of pain in my neck. Worth it. “That’s it, Little Bird, ride me.”

Placing her hands on my chest, she rocks into me, slow at first, but with each stroke she picks up the pace. My eyes roam between her tits and face, the surge of want making it hard to focus. I swallow, thumb rolling over her nipple, making her legs clamp around me.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Let go,” I command, fingers dipping to rub the swollen nub between her thighs. “Let go, Little Bird—fly.”

Lavinia’s jaw slacks and that line of worry on her forehead eases away as the orgasm rushes through her. She falls apart, using my body as support and I hold her, ignoring the pain that happens when I wrap my arms around her. I just want to feel her—all of her—when I pump inside. Her pussy, still throbbing, milks me, clenching around my cock until we’re nothing but a sweaty mess.

Looking up at her, I can’t keep the grin from tugging at my mouth.

“You look awfully proud of yourself.”

“Maybe I am.” I brush back a strand of teal hair and cup her cheek.

I don’t say why. She can think what she wants, but I know the truth.

Nothing can stop Pretty Nick Bruin from getting what he wants.

Not even a bullet.

Lavinia

I’m pushing a stack of bracelets over my wrist when the loft elevator chimes. When the doors slide open, Kaz is standing in the entrance.

“Hey,” I give him an apologetic smile. “It’s taking a bit longer than planned but we

should be ready to go in about ten minutes. If you need to go without us—”

“Sorry Duch—” he frowns. “Shit. You’re not the Duchess anymore. Should I call you Queen? Or...”

“You can call me, Lavinia, Kaz. Stop being a weirdo.”

He nods, but still looks uncomfortable. “Okay, anyway, we’re under strict orders to escort everyone to the gym. Since it’s Nick’s first time at a public event since the shooting, we want to make sure he gets there safely.” I nod, appreciating the fact they’re taking the attempt on Nick’s life seriously. Oakfield may be gone, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t others out there looking to finish the job. “But that’s not why I’m here.” He holds up a black envelope. “You got mail.”

I frown, taking it from him. “The postman?”

“Nope. Courier.”

I stare down at the script on the front. It’s addressed to King Simon Perilini & Queen Lavinia Lucia, then on the line below, Mr. Remington Maddox, and Mr. Nicholas Bruin. Flipping it over to the back I swallow when I see the symbol of a pentagram.

“What the fuck is this?” I mutter, but a sinking feeling in my gut is an indicator that I already know.

“No clue, but you have fun with whatever cobwebs and voodoo is in there.” He takes a step back into the waiting elevator. “I’ll be downstairs with the car when you’re ready.”

The door closes and I carry the envelope back into the living room.

“Sy,” I call out. “I need you to come see something.”

He steps out of the bedroom and I suck in a breath. He’s in tight black jeans leaving little to the imagination about what he’s packing down there, a black, untucked button-down, and a loose black leather jacket. Well, fuck me. Sy isn’t one to dress up, but when he puts a little effort in, it hits me like Kryptonite.

“They should be out in a minute,” he says, running his fingers through his dark, curly hair. “Assuming they can stop arguing over who gets the mirror.”

“Are they fighting again?” I ask, holding back a laugh.

“Their combined vanity knows no bounds.” He walks over and pulls me to him, his wide hand sliding down my backside to cup my butt. “Fuck you look good.” He inhales deeply. “Smell good, too.”

“You look pretty handsome yourself.” I run my hands over the sleeves of his jacket. “I love this jacket.”

“Remy picked it out. He’s been making me spend some of the money Saul left to,” he makes finger quotes, “look the part of a King.’ Which apparently involves jeans so tight they’re at risk of crushing my balls and vegan leather.”

“Please don’t crush your balls in the name of fashion.”

He grimaces and adjusts himself. “I’ll do my best. Now, what did you want to show me? And please don’t tell me Archie puked up the plant he won’t stop eating again, because I’ve already cleaned it up three times this week.”

“I moved the plant downstairs.” I work the envelope between us so he can see it, “This came for you–us.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

He frowns and takes the envelope from me. “Kaz cleared it?”

“Yeah. Said it was delivered by a courier.” I watch as he examines the outside, a frown developing when he sees the pentagram. “Is that what I think it is?”

He sighs. “I hope the fuck not, but I guess it’s time to find out.”

Just as he tears open the envelope, Remy and Nick stroll out of the bedroom. As good as Remy looks in his designer jeans and custom boots, my eyes are drawn to Nick. Not with what he’s wearing, but the simple fact he’s dressed and ready to go. Alive.

“What’s that?” Remy asked, probably sensing a disturbance in the room.

“Something from your father,” Sy says holding it out between two fingers. “Want to open it?”

Remy stares at it for a moment, then takes the rectangle from him. We all watch as he studies the front, then pulls out the card lodged inside. I can’t see what’s written, but it does look like more of the same fancy script. Definitely an invitation. His eyes ping over the words, hand thrusting into his hair. “He’s lost his goddamn mind,” he mumbles, pushing the envelope back to Sy.

“What does it say?” Nick asks, leaning against the armchair.

Sy clears his throat and starts reading, “You are cordially invited to bear witness to the eternal union of Baroness Arianette Gowen Hexley to The King of Barons on the evening of October thirty-first, at the House of Night.”

“Well, I guess it’s happening,” Remy says, shoving his hand into his pocket and pulling out his marker. “My father is actually going to marry the girl that was originally arranged for me.” He laughs darkly, “A girl, which I’ll remind everyone, is younger than all of us. If that doesn’t nail the dynamic between the Maddox men, I don’t know what does.”

“Does this mean she’ll be your stepmother?” Nick asks, snatching the invitation out of his brother’s hand, his blue eyes skimming over the words. “Wait, isn’t your dad still married to your mom? Is he a bigamist now?”

“The Baron’s covenants transcend legalities,” Remy says. “Marriages are... more like an oath than a piece of paper. An exchange. The Black Wedding is an event between two families. It’s about merging power. He stole that from my mother, locking her up where no one can get to her. I guess he found a new source now.”

“Then fuck him,” I say, hating the hurt I hear in his voice. “Let’s bail. We don’t have to go.”

“Oh, we’re going,” he declares, “not because I have to or to give my approval, but I’ll bear witness for my mom. I’ll make sure he sees my face while he’s walking down the aisle and betraying her.”

“Damn, Rem, that’s savage.” Nick says, scratching at the bandage on his neck. “Your father sucks. But we knew that.”

“Yeah,” Remy says, glancing over at me, “we did.”

I’m brought back to that night on the cliffs, when Maddox revealed himself as the Baron King to his son. When he told him how if he chose me over his father, everything would fall apart.

I guess this is what he was alluding to. Timothy Maddox has to take on the burden of this arrangement for his son.

“I’m okay with it,” I announce, walking over and wrapping my arms around his waist, “because it means you’re free. And it means your mine. And what goes on over in the crypt is none of our concern.”

And to be honest, I’m a little curious about the spectacle. Halloween night? And the dresses. Fuck, I think back to the equinox celebration last year. Regina was a badass, but no one knows anything about this girl Arianette, other than that she went missing and managed to escape.

My mind slips downstairs to the Morgue where I’ve been sorting Forsyth’s history. Maybe Arianette has the key to where girls like Laura and Stella are being kept.

And just maybe, our ties to the Baron King will allow us to get close to her.

I’m surprised I can feel the buzz of my phone over the roar of the crowd, but I pull it out of my pocket and read the message.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I say, easing out from under Remy’s arm.

“What’s up?” he asks.

“That was Maggie. Apparently there’s an emergency in the cutslut lounge.”

Sy frowns. “What kind of emergency?”

“The hair kind.” I roll my eyes. “It’ll just take a minute.”

I rise but as I pass Nick, his fingers curl in my belt loop and he drags me back.

“Wanna grab me a beer while you’re down there?”

I lift an eyebrow. “You’re not drinking. We all agreed.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“It’s the Fury! Everyone will think I’m a pussy if I don’t have at least one beer.”

There is not one person in the city limits of Forsyth that would ever call Nick Bruin a pussy. Especially now.

“There’s some homemade kombucha down in the kitchen,” Sy says. “If you want to grab him a bottle.”

“Kombucha?” Nick’s nose wrinkles. “That’s bullshit.”

“It’s one percent alcohol and good for your gut-biome,” his brother retorts.

Remy and Nick both glare at Sy. The former says, “What happened to you, man?” while shaking his head.

“I’ll peel off the wrapper so everyone will just think it’s a beer.” I lean down and press a kiss on his neck. “Behave.”

After helping Kathleen detangle her hair from the curling brush, and grabbing the kombucha from the refrigerator, I fight my way through the crowd and back upstairs. At the landing, I spot Story’s cute little butt sticking out as she leans over the guardrail and assesses the crowd below.

“Hey.” I move next to her and look down. “It seems more crowded than usual, doesn’t it?”

“They’re definitely fired up about the fight, but that’s not the only reason people

showed up,” she tells me. “They came to see him.”

She nods across the space to where Nick sits in the DKS King box, Remy and Sy at his side. The guys look casual. Pumped for the fight, but Story is right. Nick being here, walking in on his own, even with the bandage on his neck, is the real show. Being here tonight is about way more than curing some boredom. It’s proof of life. Of victory.

“How’s he doing?”

“It was touch and go for a minute, and he’s stubborn as fuck, but he’s going to be okay.” I look down at the bottle in my hand. Finally, I admit, “I’ve never been so fucking scared in my life.”

She looks over at me with those big eyes and says, “Oh, Lav,” before throwing her arms around my neck. She hugs me tight before releasing me. “I remember when Nick shot Killian–UglyNick,” she clarifies before glancing over to where her King sits across the balcony. His eyes have been on her the whole time we’ve been up here. “It changed everything for me. I realized I had to stop fighting so much and just accept who we were together.”

I laugh. “We’re DKS, I don’t know if any of us can ever stop fighting. It’s in our nature.”

“You don’t have to tell me, Duchess. I still have bruises from Screw Year’s Eve.”

I roll my eyes but we both laugh and it feels good—just letting go for a second. We split apart and I go back to my men, pressing the unwrapped brown bottle into my Duke’s hand.

“Thanks, Little Bird,” he says, pulling me into his lap. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I settle in against him, taking a quick moment to look over at Story, who is now sitting with her Lords, and I know one thing for certain. I’ll fight with, and for, Nick Bruin all the way to the end.

7

QUEENMAKER

“Not happening,” Sy says, passing me with another stack of steel pipes. It’s not just Sy’s answer, but more how he says it, throwing me this look that’s somehow both amused and annoyed. Like I’m Archie.

Like I’m his pet.

My jaw tightens. “Excuse me?”

Pausing in his struggle to lever the rusty valve from the wall, Remy glances at me. “Come on, Vinny. That rule is older than their parents. Hell, it’s older than their parents’ parents.”

I hold up the DKS pledge book, which—yes, okay, halfway falls to tatters because it’s ancient. I found it buried among a stack of administrative paperwork and crude doodles in the basement storeroom. It’s a few rubs from being hamster bedding.

But still, I point to the page. “It says here that for a true Queen of West End to earn her crown, she has to prove herself in public, physical combat against her King. To the victor go the spoils. It’s very clear.”

Perched on the old metal desk beside me, Nick grasps one of the pipes, testing it in

his grip like it's a weapon. "You and Sy in the ring together? I think it's a good idea."

Outside the doorway to the little office that's going to eventually become Remy's private inking room, the clatter of steel pipes hitting the floor rings out. Sy stomps back into the office with a glare. "That is fucking ridiculous," he says, yanking off his heavy gloves. It's mid-December, and given that Royal Ink's future new furnace install is on backorder, Sy's huff emerges in a vapor cloud. "No Duchess has ever bested her King in the ring. You do realize if that's ever actually happened, he just let her win."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“I know.” Beside me, Nick releases a slow, velvety chuckle. “You see, Little Bird? You’re asking my brother to throw a fight.” He points the pipe at Sy. “Or you’re asking him to beat his woman’s ass.” Pausing, he offers me a considering look. “Or you’re asking him to get his ass beat by his woman. Any way you slice it, there’s no win in this for him.” Tapping the pipe against his temple, he concludes, “Like I said. Great fucking idea.”

Reaching over, I snatch the cold pipe from his grip. “You all underestimate me.”

Pulling me into his side, Nick arches a brow at his brother. “Come on, Sy. Think of how many tickets we’d sell.” He gives my arm a brisk rub, sensing my shiver. “People would come from all four corners. We’d be fucking rolling in it.”

“We’re rolling in quite enough, Nick. And also,” Sy flips him off, “shut the fuck up.” Pinning me with his blue eyes, Sy adds, “I call you my Queen, Lavinia. Other people call you my Queen. Mama B defers to you, for fucks sake. Even Story sees you as her equal.”

I argue, “But...”

Only, I can’t quite place it. I just know something inside of me chafes at the thought of not being official. Getting the brass Bruin burnt into my flesh was awful, but beneath the agony, rage, and humiliation, at least there’d been the knowledge that I was a proper Duchess now.

Sensing my uncertainty, Sy steps between my legs, framing my face with his big, warm hands. “What’s this about?”

Surprisingly, it's Remy who answers. "It's the mauve she saw at the Palace the other day," he grunts, shoving down on the pipe wrench.

"Mauve." Sy frowns, and I know that, much like me, he's struggling to connect the color association. Remy's been adding them to his color wheel lately. Or, maybe more accurately, mixing them. The look Sy passes between me and Nick says, "What colors make up mauve?"

We both shrug.

"With Verity?" Remy clarifies, giving up on the wrench. Wiping his hands, he rolls his eyes. "At the coronation."

Sy's mouth tilts. "Mauve is... jealousy?" Eyeing me skeptically, he hedges, "Envy?"

Remy groans. "Respect, Sy."

Oh.

Oh.

That's it, I realize. It wasn't just watching her get on that throne with her son, either. It wasn't even the way the Princes—the whole frat—treated her; like she was someone they knew they could count on to fix the rot in their territory.

It was how Verity used that power to change East End for the better.

It's the same thing Sy did when he became King. Maybe even Killian, too. But watching everyone look at her the same way they look at Kings made me wonder, why not?

Why shouldn't a Queen be just as important to her territory?

Sy frowns, nudging my chin up. "The frat respects you. You know that. How many times have we had to keep Nicky from burying a bullet into whatever new pledge tries to worship the ground you walk on?" Smiling softly, he bends down to brush a kiss against my lips. "If anyone ever showed you disrespect, you know what we'd do to them. So do they." The kiss isn't as sweet as he means it to be because there's a truth in it that bristles.

That's not respect for me.

It's respect for my men.

"So you won't do it." Pulling back, I search his eyes. "You won't get into the ring with me."

He thumbs my bottom lip, his eyes heavy in that special, lusty way. "Not for a match."

I duck out of his grip—and Nick's—whirling to fix him with a steely look. "Then you don't respect me."

"What?" Sy blinks, and I'm not sure if the stunned confusion in his eyes is meant for the accusation or the smooth maneuver I just pulled. "Of course I respect you. I love you."

"You love me, but you don't respect me. I know you." Still wielding the pipe, I grip it hard, my knuckles going white. "You'd never respect someone who couldn't beat you. Not really."

"That's not even remotely true," he insists, but it takes a moment of aborted breaths

for him to offer up, “I respect Mama B.”

Remy snorts, sharing a look with Nick. “Bro, Mama B would noose you with your own dick.”

Unable to argue with this, he grimaces. “Well, I respect my mom, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Nick gives him an unimpressed look. “I’ve seen mom beat you over her knee.”

“When I was nine,” Sy snaps.

Nick shrugs. “Point stands.”

“Okay, this is stupid.” Reaching for me, Sy says, “Lavinia, you’ve beaten me in a hundred different ways since the first night I met you. Why can’t that be enough?”

I use the pipe to nudge him back before he can distract me with his scent and rippling muscles. “Because only one way matters to West End.”

He blinks down at the pipe, jaw tightening. “You can’t actually be serious about this.” He meets my gaze, and for a flash of a moment, he looks absolutely miserable. “Baby, I’d fucking demolish you.”

My jaw drops. “Big words coming from the guy who’s backing down from a challenge.”

Nick and Remy suck in a unison, sharp inhale, and I don’t need to ask why. Sy’s eyes go all flinty and hard, because he can be accused of a lot of things, but backing down from a challenge? Not one of them.

Until now.

He raises his chin, gazing down at me. “What challenge would that be? The challenge of pummeling a girl?”

Looking into his eyes, I realize the whole idea was genius. Whoever made these rules, however long ago it may have been, knew exactly what the King of West End should be. A rock-hard protector, obstinate and unyielding, who'd fight for every win as if his life depended on it. But they also knew who its Queen should be.

His fury.

"Not the challenge of beating a girl, Big Bear," I say, gentle as I reach up to cup his cheek. "The challenge of losing to one."

An hour later, I can tell it's still getting to him.

Every now and then, his back will... flex beneath his jacket. Almost like he's angering himself over it internally, in dribs and drabs.

Remy's too distracted to notice. "We can put a door here to the boutique," he says, inspecting the hole in the plaster he'd just jubilantly created. The chill of the room doesn't seem to bother him. He's in a tight tee, dirty gray jeans, and heavy black boots, and damn. The whole manly laborer vibe looks surprisingly good on him, his tattoos shifting with every tug of his muscles.

The idea of turning this place into his own studio has him completely obsessed. We'd spent some time renovating the loft upstairs before we moved in. Even before Verity came to stay here every month, seeking a little West End refuge from the East End coldness. But we've spent far longer on the downstairs, knocking out walls and refinishing everything from the bones up. Each day, Remy's feet hit the ground running, the intense focus turning him into this whirling dervish of spirit that's almost too fast to catch.

Nick isn't dressed to work, though.

He's in a leather jacket, the collar pulled up to hide the scar on his neck beneath. He's also painfully restless. "Should be out there," he mutters, squinting as he peeks out the frosty window. This will be our third holiday spent together, and it's difficult not to let my memories wander back to our first, all locked up in the Crane Motor Inn.

He scratches at the puckered scar on his neck almost absentmindedly. I wonder if he even realizes he fidgets with it every time he feels cooped up. "I heard Ashby—I mean, Sinclair—is going to see Ballsy today."

None of us need to ask which newly annointed Sinclair he's referring to. Ballsack and Pace have formed an odd friendship. Him and Sy are the only visitors Ballsy will see these days. His trial is looming on the horizon, and although Sy and the Princes combined could probably make his bail, he keeps refusing to take it. Verity and I have no idea why.

He won't call us, either.

"Hey, Vinny," Remy grunts, his arm buried in the plaster of the office's wall. "Go grab me that mallet from the toolbox, would ya? This stud needs some serious percussive maintenance."

Resigned to another night of us all washing plaster off each other in the shower, I get up and walk out to the front lobby, crouching to root around in the large toolbox. I'm not sure when it happens. I don't hear anything. Not the door. Not footsteps. Not even a breath.

But when I stand up and turn, a loud gasp escapes me.

A man is leaning against the column right in fucking front of me.

At first, all I see is the dark shape of him, but then I register his finely tailored

ensemble. He's wearing an overcoat—long, black, double-breasted—that offers only a peek at the waistcoat beneath. The slender curve of his posture is casual yet intentional. Pale skin, stormy eyes, and his styled, inky hair should be enough to clue me in, but there's also the gleam of silver in his lip and nose, and the sharp, spiky script tattooed above his eyebrow.

Mori.

Baron.

Flinching back, my foot knocks the toolbox into the wall. Loudly. But I still have the mallet in my hand, so I grip it tight, raising it.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

But I'm only met with the unimpressed curl of a perfect, dark eyebrow. "As if you could," he sighs, glancing around the dusty space with the air of someone who's horrifically bored. "I know corpses with better situational awareness. You've gotten far too comfortable in this district for a viper. Back in my cub days, we would have razed this whole block looking for a poor, defenseless Lucia." Rolling his eyes, his head tips back and I gasp again.

His throat has a thick, gnarled scar. It's nothing like Nick's, which is puckered and rough, but even though the sight of it always makes my gut twist with the phantom memory of him almost dying, it's downright tiny in comparison to this.

This Baron's scar, thick and stark, stretches from ear to ear.

"What are you doing here?" I snap, keeping a stance that makes it clear I'm anything but defenseless.

Fortunately, Nick takes that moment to march into the lobby.

Or maybe unfortunately.

He has his gun drawn instantly, the barrel pointed toward the Baron's head, and even stalking closer from yards away, I know he'd make his mark. "DK. You're gonna want to take two-hundred and thirty-seven steps away from my woman."

Beneath his gray eyes and aloof expression, the man—DK—looks vaguely amused. "Mayhem? Seems a bit overboard considering I just walked right into your new bear den. Feels like anyone's welcome."

“I always knew Barons had a death wish, but you coming through my doors is next level suicidal.” This voice belongs to Sy, low and full of such threat that even I shiver as he approaches me from behind, his breath like dragon fire against the crown of my head. “You lost the privilege of being on my streets the second you pledged to the wicked path, so what,” he snarls, “do you want?”

I lean into my King’s body, giving DK a dubious once-over. He has strangely hollow cheeks, which throw his sharp features into full relief. His cheekbones could cut glass—and not just because of the silver stud adorning each of his cheeks.

I didn’t even know you could pierce a cheek.

“I want what’s owed to me,” DK says, jaw tight as he straightens. Perhaps the biggest offense of his entire visit is what he does next.

Twisting, he turns his back to them as if he doesn’t have a care in the world for the gun Nick’s got trained on him. And maybe he doesn’t.

Nick and Sy both tense, but just as Remy waltzes into the lobby, DK reveals something that makes all of us pause in shared bafflement.

A pet carrier.

“Remington,” DK begins, setting the carrier between us, “I think you know that I’ve been feeding the feral colony next door since freshman year.”

I glance at Remy, confused. “Freshman year?”

Remy frowns at the carrier, offhandedly explaining, “We roomed together for a bit back when Damon was a pledge.”

My eyes bug out, glancing from my Dukes to him. “You used to be DKS?”

“Pledge,” DK corrects, shrugging. “Never got my paw.”

Sy answers with a growl, “Now he’s just DK.”

DK releases a low, lazy chuckle. “You blood West Enders take shit so personally, don’t you? Saul wasn’t a King I wanted to follow. Evidently, neither did you.”

Sy raises his chin, blue eyes scolding. “But only one of us turned our back on the mission.”

All the mirth floods from DK’s expression, leaving hardened, dark eyes. “I never turned my back on the mission. I’m just fighting for it on a different front.” The crackle of resentful tension is shattered by the long, mournful cry of the creature in the cage. DK’s eyes drop to the carrier and he straightens his lapels. “No use in dwelling on mixed loyalties. Like I said, I’m here to get what’s owed to me.”

Nick’s lips curl in disgust. “Some mangy black cat? Go ahead and take him.”

“She’s a ‘her.’” DK’s correction is laced with impatience. “And I don’t need your permission to take her, Bruin. In fact, I’ve been feeding and trapping them for years now. Getting them fixed and then releasing them. Nine, so far.”

Taken aback, a single question escapes me. “Why?” Barons don’t care about cats. As far as I’ve always been able to tell, Barons don’t care about anything. They aren’t made to care. They’re made to follow. To worship. To fix.

To clean up Forsyth’s ugliest messes.

DK’s unsettling eyes land on mine, and for a second, something electric and

unhinged flows through them. “It took me a long time to trap this one,” he says, smoothly turning to Remy. “She’s suspicious. Feral. Barely a year old.”

It takes me a long moment to realize he’s just ignoring me.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Nowthat is a Baron trait I'm used to.

Remy scoffs, glancing at the cage. "Much like my new step-mother, she looks pretty trapped to me."

DK smirks, and a chill runs down my spine at the way his face transforms. He's got dimples. They might look sweet and disarming on anyone else. On him, they just look like a mockery of the feature, twisted and malicious. "Yeah, I got her. Took her in for a spay and treatment too, which inconveniently makes her my legal responsibility. Just one problem." His eyes flick to Sy. "She's already stuffed full of your little Archduke spawnlings."

"Yeah, right," Sy scoffs, eying the cage with disdain. "Any tomcat could have nailed her."

"But only one tomcat is out there every Friday night, like..." DK releases a raspy chuckle, "Well, like clockwork."

I step in, ignoring the way Nick inches in front of me. "Okay, sometimes Sy lets him out when we're doing Friday Night Fury, but him knocking up another cat? That's not possible." I gesture to Sy. "Archie was neutered over the spring."

DK doesn't even blink as he nods to the carrier. "Didn't look too neutered when I found him banging this one."

The anger rises, my tone growing clipped. "Maybe you don't know what 'banging' looks like, because—" But when I glance at my men, none of them are meeting my

gaze. There's a shiftiness about them that makes me pause, comprehension dawning like a brick to the head. "No fucking way," I growl, jabbing my finger into Sy's chest. "I told you to take him in! I made the appointment. I saw you leave the clock tower with him. So what the fuck?—"

"It's not his fault," Nick cuts in, tucking his gun away. "We put it to a vote. The whole thing was perfectly democratic."

I gawp at the three of them, my head swimming. "Putwhatto a vote? Him being neutered?!"

Remy clucks his tongue. "He's the Archduke, Lavinia. He's royalty."

Nick agrees, "You can't cut a Royal's balls off."

"His swimmers are, like," Remy scratches his temple, "sacred or whatever."

I can't even believe what I'm hearing. "So the three of you just decided to?—"

Sy stands to his full-height, cutting me off. "Forty-three, technically."

My eyes bug out, the scale of the betrayalgalling. "Are you seriously telling me that the whole fucking frat voted on whether or notmycat gets neutered?!"

"Yeah," Nick says in a slow tone, as if it's the most natural thing to do. "We used our DKS pins."

"Wait a fucking minute here." Sy balks, uncrossing his arms. "Since when is heyourcat?"

My jaw cannot possibly drop any wider. "Since I'm the one who rescued him from

Nick's murder scene!"

"Not only am I the one who scoops his boxes and plans his diet, but you named him the Archduke," Sy snaps back. "Faceit, he's the DKS mascot now. And that kind of title comes with responsibilities."

The whole thing is so absurd that it possibly breaks my brain because all I can think to respond with is one simple truth: "You lied to me."

Some of that fiery outrage in Sy's gaze melts away, but it's not shame that replaces it. It's a plea. "A man needs his balls, Lavinia."

"And come on, you've seen them. You've had to." Nick gives me a wry look. "Archie has some real fucking gonads on him."

I gape at him, completely lost. "What?"

Remy nods. "He swings those beans around like kettlebells. You'd have to be blind. We all pretty much figured you knew but were letting it slide."

The truth is, that's a part of Archie I don't pay much mind to. Sure, I pet him and brush him, but I've never thought to raise his tail and check the state of his testicles. Why would I? Suddenly I feel foolish, like I've been far too easily duped.

Mycat?

Atomcat?

With a steeling breath, I turn to DK, who looks almost as put-out as I do. "Since abortion isn't an option," I say, teeth gritted, "what exactly are you here for?"

“Call it child support.” DK pushes his foot into the carrier, sliding it gently closer to me. “According to the vet, she’s bound to pop by next week. Since the crypt isn’t exactly a place for a litter of kittens, I’ll come back to claim her in ten weeks. When she’s done,” his face pinches into pure, dripping disdain, “creating.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

He turns to leave her there, but Remy's voice rings out, "Hey, Kemp." When DK spins, his eerie eyes void of emotion, Remy plants his feet, pinning him with a long look. "No matter what you call him, he'll never be your father."

DK doesn't even flinch. "I know exactly what my King is, Remy."

Sy's mouth forms an unhappy line. "A psychopath?"

"Oh," DK gives a slow, creeping smirk, "he's something much worse than that."

When DK fails to elaborate—to no one's surprise—Remy nods. "You could have a place here, though."

This, at least, seems to spur some emotion on DK's face. Consternation. "Come again?"

Remy jerks his chin toward the back. "I'm building a tattoo studio. We could use a piercer." His green eyes gleam malevolently in the low light. "No one in Forsyth is as skilled as you are at stabbing things with needles."

Nick and Sy are both staring at Remy like he's gone absolutely mental.

DK presses a palm to his chest, offering a fake grin. "As touching as that compliment is, I've already been told I'm unwelcome. Good luck with this shitpile, though."

And then he's gone, sweeping through the doors just as quietly as he'd entered them.

“I bet she’s gonna have like eight of them,” Verity says, grinning. “Your cat’s got some real spunk, Lav. Look at this girl—she’s huge!”

I shoot a glare toward Archie, who’s perched on the back of the sofa and currently throwing his own glares to the mother of his children.

“You fucking dick,” I growl, not for the first time. “Don’t you dare be mean to her! This is all your fault!”

The black cat—nameless, so far—is just as DK described her. Suspicious and feral. But she’s also clearly terrified, refusing to come out of the cage.

I still leave the door to the carrier open. “I’m not sure we can handle eight kittens,” I whine.

But Verity climbs to her feet, insisting, “Sure you can! You just need to find her a good nesting spot.” Humming, she wanders around the loft apartment like it’s familiar territory—which it is. When she was staying here, it was a lot more sparsely furnished, but she navigates the living area like it’s a second home. She was the first person I called regarding the pregnant cat situation—for obvious reasons. She’s never been a cat, but she has been pregnant.

The four men sitting around the dining room table with varying levels of grumpy eyebrows certainly won’t be any help.

“Are you stupid?” Wicker says, face twisting. “Why the hell would you invite a Baron to be a business partner?” The only downside to having Verity over is that one of her Princes always escorts her. Lex isn’t so bad, and Pace mostly keeps to himself, but Wicker is a brat.

“Excellent question,” Nick replies, turning a slow, threatening look Remy’s way.

“I’m all ears.”

Remy rolls his eyes, undeterred as he tips his chair back. “You guys don’t get it. Timothy Maddox has never been your father.”

Sy scoffs. “So it’s some sort of solidarity thing? Because news flash: Timothy Maddox has never been DK’s father.”

To my surprise, it’s Wicker who jumps in, squirming uncomfortably. “It’s a Baron thing. Leadership in Beta Rho isn’t about having a commander. It’s all... paternal and shit.”

“It’s devotion,” Remy corrects, tipping his head back to look at Sy. “You’re a King, but you’re still one of us. To BRN, my father—his position as King—it’s like being the Pope. They don’t just follow him. They worship him.”

Nick scoffs. “I’m not seeing how having a Maddox worshipper downstairs is working to anyone’s benefit. Your father will just use him to keep tabs on—” Abruptly, he goes silent, and I glance over to find him eyeing Remy thoughtfully. “Huh.”

Wicker and Sy both look confused. “What?”

Remy laces his fingers behind his head, lounging back in his seat. “Forcing his shadows to work in the light. An enemy is always better when you can see them.”

A low hum escapes Nick’s lips. “When you can schedule them.”

Remy’s white hair sways with a nod. “Plus, I wasn’t lying before. We could use someone skilled in body mod, and Kemp and I go back far enough that I think he might actually give it a second thought if my father ordered him to dick me over.” He gives Wicker a long, significant look. “And that’s more than we can say about anyone

else on the wicked path.”

It’s still strange to think of them as brothers. Remy on one side of the table, all tattooed and wily, while Wicker sits before him, pressed, groomed, and gleaming. But sometimes, if I squint really hard, I can almost see it.

They both share that same glint of wild, cutting sharpness in their gemstone eyes.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Just then, Verity walks back into the room, gathering her hair up into a ponytail. “Alright,” she announces, looking all business. “I’ve got three premium nesting places for her, all picked out. We just have to see which one she chooses.”

Sy pushes off the wall with a glower. “Take her to the gym. We’re not letting that mangy cat give birth in our home.”

Climbing to my feet, I square my shoulders. “Yes, we are.”

His eyes tighten. “No, we’re not.”

“Yes,” I grind out, “we are.”

He steps closer, planting his feet. “No.”

I cross my arms. “Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Wicker groans. “This is exactly how you sound when you’re fucking, isn’t it?” But then me and Sy both turn our fiery glares toward him, and Wicker raises both hands, palms-out. “Hey, I’ve got no cat in this fight.”

“Ignore them,” Nick says, voice exasperated. “Fighting is their foreplay. They’ll be fucking like jackrabbits in five hours.”

Not fucking likely.

Wicker goes on, “I don’t see what the big deal is. So your boy got himself a little rough trade. To createisto reign.” He raises his beer toward where Archie is still crouched on the sofa. “Welcome to fatherhood, you handsome slut.”

Everyone else in the room makes a unison disgusted sound.

“Don’tthrow your house motto around here,” I warn. When Sy fights with me, it’s sexy, but when he fights with other guys...

Ugh.

It’s still sexy.

“That cat,” Sy says, voice low and full of threat as he descends on me, “is not giving birth in this building. End of story.” He comes to a stop a hair’s breadth away from me, the vein in his temple popping. “Period.”

The next morning,I find her in our bathroom cabinet, all tucked out on the pile of towels I’d laid down for her.

A squirming pile of freshly newborn kittens is nestled into her belly.

I crouch down to look in on her, still groggy and pussy-sore from Sy’s cock, and can’t help my smirk. “We sure showed him, didn’t we?”

But a voice makes me jump. “Eight.”

When I spin, Remy’s got both arms raised, hands gripping the door jamb. His long, lithe body is on full display, tattoos flexing with his lazy movements. Unable to help

myself, I touch his abdomen—that warm patch of skin right above his low-slung boxers. “Eight? Head check?”

He gives me a soft little grin. “Nah, eight kittens. I counted them earlier.”

“Wow. Verity was spot-on.” A startled laugh escapes me, and he grins at the sound.

It kills me how good he looks these days. When his whirling dervish of focus narrows down to me, I’m always amazed at how clear his eyes are. How sweet his touches can be. How the heat of his touch can burn, but not singe. I strain up for his slow, searing kiss, indulging in his little sigh when he presses his forehead to mine. “A couple are white like Archie, and a couple are black like her, but the other four are all patchy and spotted. Eight tiny, bright souls.” As he says this, his finger is drawing an unhurried loop on my stomach, swooping around in a big circle.

My breath catches in my throat. “Are you trying to tell me you want something?” The amusement mingles with a bone-deep fear. I’ll never forget the look on his face when he held Verity’s baby for the first time. The way he seemed to shine with excitement and emotion, cradling his new nephew. But although the thought of seeing him holding our own child gives me an undeniable frisson of want, I can’t pretend I’m ready for that.

But Remy just chuckles. “As much as I’d love to put a baby into you, Vinny, I think we both know I’d make a terrible father.”

Frowning, I pull back to search his eyes. “Hey,” I say, unreasonably angry as I cup his cheek, “that’s not true.”

His eyes soften. “Right now, it is. But that’s okay. I’d rather do it right than do it quick. I just meant...” His eyes zero in on my mouth, teeth raking against my lower lip. “Sy might be.”

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

Without even thinking about it, my face spreads into a smile. “God, could you imagine that? He’d join all the mommy groups.”

Remy adds, “Bully all the baby’s doctors.”

“Teach it how to hit people.”

Remy laughs with me, all quiet and secret, but that softness never leaves his eyes. “I can imagine it, Vinny. That’s what I’m saying. All that bullshit with Archie and wanting to keep his balls...” He brushes my hair away from my cheek. “I know it pisses you off, but it’s not really about Archie.”

Blinking, I try to follow his meaning. “Oh.” Now that I think about it, spring was around the time Verity began coming to stay here, her belly growing with the baby.

“He’s a King.” This gravelly voice belongs to Nick, who suddenly fills the doorway beside Remy. He’s not like either of his brothers, who both wake up sleepy-soft and pliant. Nick always wakes up with a plan and his finger on a trigger. “And being a King means needing an heir. Because as much as the East End motto grosses out our poor West End sensibilities, they kind of have a point.”

Grimacing, Remy agrees, “That last little soul makes his rein complete.”

My stomach swoops dangerously. “Did he say something to you two?”

Remy shakes his head. “I just wanted to make sure you got it. That you weren’t blindsided when hedoes say something.”

“Because someday he will.” Nick reaches up to scratch his jaw, his bitten-off fingernails rasping against stubble. “Not now, but maybe in the next couple years.”

“You and me,” Remy pins me with a stony stare, “we aren’t like Nicky and Sy. We don’t know what good parents look like, and we need... more.”

“More time,” I agree, biting on my lip, “to figure out what we want.”

“Yeah.”

Giving Nick a dubious look, I wonder, “Have you figured out whatyouwant?” I ask this because I can’t imagine Nick being okay with another man’s baby inside me.

But to my shock, Nick just smirks, tugging me into the warm breadth of his chest. “Half my genetic material, Little Bird.” His words are delivered in a husky breath, right into the patch of skin below my ear. “I’ll give you the other half later.”

I shiver violently, turning to brush my lips against the scar on his throat. It wasn’t too long ago that the four of us were faced with the possibility of losing a soul. The memory of Nick’s limp, bleeding body on that table has sunk into my bones like an agonized etch. Some nights, when he and I are laying in bed—when I can hold him down and make him be still—I stare at him like a woman obsessed, wanting to take every part of him into me. To hold it. Keep it safe and whole.

Maybe that’s just a glimpse of how he feels about me.

Who would want to bring a child into that storm?

The whole discussion is ridiculous. I still have two more years of college, and then I have to decide if this pre-med thing is going to grow into something more. Sy needs to secure his place with the Forsyth elite. Nick needs to find out where he can fit in

that, professionally. Remy needs to finish Royal Ink, grow it like a seed.

But on this long path to us becoming a family—giving Sy an heir—there's one very crucial first step.

“Excuse me,” I say, raising my chin in defiance. “I have a point to make.”

Nick and Remy share a look. “That can't be good.”

But I'm already marching to our bed, big and wide and mussed from a long night of taking first Nick, and then Remy, and then Sy, who'd laid me flat on my stomach to fuck me from behind. The memory of his large body pinning me down as he surged into me, spreading me wide, stretching and filling, still sends a quiver to my thighs.

And when I jump on him, straddling his warm, naked hips, I'm rewarded with his sleepy ‘oof!’. “We're going to have a bout,” I announce.

His blue eyes flutter open and immediately lock with mine, a divot forming between his brows. “Yeah?” he hums, a large, warm palm coming to rest on my outer thigh. Eyes darkening, he bucks into me, the hardness beneath the sheets obscenely obvious. “Yeah. Just give me a second to?—”

“I'm not talking about sex.” Well, I sort of am. But mostly not. “I'm talking about you and me on Screw Years Eve. A fury and her fist. To the victor go the spoils.” Sy's mouth parts, the argument gathering on an inhale, but I press my palm over it. “You're not going to throw the fight because that'd be insulting to me. And yes, you're going to have to hit me, but you know I can take it.” Bending down, I slide my palm away to brush a kiss against the tense seam of his mouth. “When you lose—and you will—you won't take it personally or sulk around about it. You'll be happy, because I'll be your Queen in more than just name.”

When I pull back, he's watching me, searching my eyes. "Why is this so important to you?"

"Because it's important to you," I answer, delighting in the slow, warm circuit his hand is making on my thigh. "You were never expecting to be voted King, but you love it. I see how seriously you take the responsibility. I watch you out there every day, determined to build this town into something worth calling yours." I push his hair back, willing him to see the truth in my eyes. "I want to do that—and not just behind you, or beside you. I want to do it with you."

My fingers card through his hair, and he exhales, eyes softening. "Baby, I don't want to hurt you."

I snort. "Yes, you do."

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

His expression grows stern. “Not like that.”

Nestling down against his chest, I assure, “It’s just first blood, Big Bear.”

There’s a pause, and then, “Is that in the book?”

“No, but...” Shrugging, I make a confession. “I talked to Mrs. Crane last night. She’s the only person who’s ever seen a Queenmaker match. One,” I stress, holding up a finger, “back in the forties or something. Anyway, she said it was first blood. Easy peasy.”

His hand wanders higher, grazing the outside of my ass cheek. “You think that’s easy?”

“I’ve decided,” I begin, pushing up to meet his gaze, “that we’re going to use the event to adopt out all of Archie’s little love children to good, safe Forsyth homes.” I drag my finger down the center of his chest, fixing him with a firm look. “They’ll only be three weeks old then, so you and the frat get to come up with a grueling application process, after which, you’ll personally hand-select the eight approved adoptees.”

Sy always looks great when he first wakes up—warm and rumped, miles of bare skin and a softness around his eyes. Right now, however, he mostly looks bemused. “And I’d be doing thiswhy?”

I shrug. “Because it’ll be one of my spoils of victory.”

“One of them?” With an incredulous laugh, he tucks an arm behind his head, nestling down into the blankets. He’s still rock-hard beneath me, and when his blue eyes dip down to drink in the scooping neckline of my tight tank top, I can feel it twitch against my panties. “You’re acting awfully cocky for a girl I can lift with one arm.”

Unbidden, the memory of last night comes to me. The way he’d lifted me over his shoulder and marched me to bed. Swallowing, it’s a physical battle not to grind down into his hardness. “My second spoils of victory,” I go on, ignoring the cocky look on his face, “is that you’re going to take the Archduke to get neutered. All forty-three of you, in fact.” Rocking back, I flatten my hands over each of his tight pecs, enjoying his gaping expression. “Once I’ve won, you and the frat can consider it a lesson on disobeying your Queen.”

He snorts, but I can already see it happening. That spark of challenge in his eyes. The way his jaw firms. The flex of his abdomen as he situates himself against the headboard, like he’s wanting me to size him up.

Sy can’t resist the allure of a win. “And what do I get if I win?”

“You can fuck me,” I say, having already thought this out.

The tilt of his mouth is unimpressed. “Look at you,” he says, grabbing my hips. He doesn’t even drag me against his cock. Just the way he grips me, so strong and assured, sends a shiver right down to my thighs. “You’re all flushed down your neck. Your eyes are dilated. You’ve been staring at my chest for most of this conversation, Lavinia. I bet your panties are already soaked because I made you horny without moving a muscle. I can fuck you, win or lose.”

Guiltily, my eyes jerk up from his chest, only to find him staring back at me with a wry grin. It disappears the minute I add, “You can fuck me in the ass.”

Beneath me, his cock gives a series of strong twitches. “Bullshit.”

“No bullshit,” I promise.

Almost as if he can’t help it, the hands on my hips glide around me, each gripping a writhing handful of my ass. “I’d tear you open like a pinata,” he says, eyes glazing over as he gropes me.

He was right before.

My panties are drenched. “I’d request one week for Nick and Remy to train me—get me ready for you.”

He pivots up to me like a marionette on a string, his eyes glued to my mouth. I don’t protest when his fingers dip beneath the elastic of my panties. I just match his breaths, shuddering as his fingers follow the crevice of my ass down.

The moment the tip of his forefinger finds my puckered hole, we both suck in a tight inhale. We’ve never even tried that. The thought of inviting that monster in his pants through my backdoor is vaguely terrifying. It’s taken us over a year to work up to the kind of sex we have now. He’s never once complained to me about it, but watching Nick and Remy take me that way has been a point of frustration for him. I know it has.

Sy is a conqueror.

“How are they gonna do that?” he asks, tipping his mouth to brush our lips together.

I wind my arms around his neck, finally allowing my hips to give a dragging shimmy against his cock. “Use your imagination.”

He's panting now, his fingertip toying with the idea, prodding the muscle like he's imagining how tight and delicious it'd be. "Deal." The word is gruff and hungry, and just as his finger breaches my hole, I slip away, enjoying the dazed confusion in his eyes. "Where are you going?"

"Well, I have to train, don't I?"

Blinking, the divot returns to his brow. "That Queenmaker match Mrs. Crane saw, back in the day..." His question is delivered with an edge of apprehension. "Did the Queen... win?" When all I do is grab my robe from the chair across the room, he pushes to his feet, eyes urgent. "Lavinia, did she win?!"

"See you in the ring, Big Bear."

The holidays are always busy in Forsyth.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

First, there's an enormous Family Dinner known for Thanksgiving. It's not just about inviting everyone to our table, but also about driving three vans full of food to the elderly alumni, the homeless shelters, and a new addition for this year, Remy's addict support group.

Then, there's Christmas with the Lords. Their parties are always so big that they span entire city blocks. There's the charity event at the hospital, which Sy attended with Lex and Tristian again this year, and then a whole night of festivities with Nick and Sy's parents.

But the final holiday event—and by far the most exciting—is Screw Year's Eve. Traditionally, it's a comical, Jell-O-slipperied match between house girls, but since Verity is still recovering from giving birth, and there is no Countess anymore, that leaves only our new Duchess, South Side's new Lady, and the Baroness. A bit of a thin ticket.

My match with Sy is perfect timing.

As I sit contemplating whether or not Kathleen needs tips on the finer points of tit smacking, Nick wraps my knuckles. The locker room is quiet and much too still—the calm before the storm. Sy and Remy are in the other locker room, getting ready. I've been their ring girl more times than I can count, sitting right where Nick is, holding my Dukes' hands in mine as I wound the tape over their knuckles.

Now, I'm the one fighting a shiver from his gentle touch.

“We're on opposite sides of the bench,” I note, matching his grin when he glances up

at me through his lashes.

“I did this for you once—kind of.” Nick must be talking about my match with Haley. “Tit slaps won’t help you much this time, but you can scratch him like it’s a chick fight. He’ll love it.”

I arch an eyebrow. “That’s one way of drawing blood.” But I’d never do it. As much as him throwing the fight would be an affront to me, bringing out girl-fight tactics to bleed him with as little effort as possible would be an affront to him.

Nick hums, winding the tape around my thumb. “‘First blood’ can be a tricky match against the wrong person. Sy won’t want to get too close. Grappling is automatically out, which is a shame. The way he’s been salivating over your ass lately would be the perfect tactical distraction.”

“Or I could hide a knife in my sock,” I say, giving him a knowing look.

Nick rolls his eyes. “It was one time, and I was making a point. Play dirty against dirty play.”

But that’s the thing about Sy. He’s not a dirty kind of player. Being in the ring... it means something to him. It’s hallowed ground. He respects it. Worships it. It’s not enough to draw blood. He needs to know he’s earned his spoils. Because Simon Perilini understands something no one else in this whole city does.

The difference between a win and a victory.

Slowly, my smile falls. “Hey, Nick?”

He flicks his eyes up. “Yeah, Little Bird?”

“If I lose, it’d be worse than if I never did this at all, wouldn’t it?” The words are spoken in a whisper, a secret worry passed over the distance. Even though this is something I want to do, the risk is only now sinking in. I can beat Sy. I know I can. But can I be the victor tonight? “If I lose, they’re never going to respect me.”

He could say something about the fighters of West End respecting anyone who chooses to get into the ring with Simon Perilini, who’s undefeated. He could say that’s what this is—my choice, which I fought tooth and nail for. He could tease me for having cold feet, or say I have nothing to worry about, or tell me I’m free to call it off, take him home, and ride his cock into the sunset.

Instead, he tears off the strip of tape, meets my gaze, and plainly replies, “Then don’t lose.”

And somehow it’s exactly what I need to hear.

Nick had been right before about the ticket sales.

Of course, it’s probably more about the upcoming Jell-O and tit-slapping angle than anything, but when I climb into the ring, I look out over the crowd of people from all corners of Forsyth and see far more women here than I ever have before.

There are so many of them. The crowd of cut sluts isn’t a surprise, but I can also spot the South Side women by the betting table, dressed to the nines. Verity’s East End court is grouped together along an aisle, glittering and buoyant. And if I look hard enough, I’m pretty sure I can see some of the Barons’ female shadows.

Most shockingly are the North Side women I recognize from my old life—a couple of Leticia’s old friends—all lingering in the back.

Glancing up toward the box, I see Story, her King, and his seconds-in-command.

Verity is here too, although she's only attending with two of her Princes, so I guess Wicker got stuck with babysitting duty. I'm far more surprised to catch sight of Remy's father in his horned bronze mask. Instead of training in the back for her upcoming match, the Baroness is sitting primly between her King and her Barons, and when my eyes pass over them, I'm startled to find her staring back, her dark gaze fixed unsettlingly on me.

She doesn't know it yet—no one does, except Story and Verity—but she's a big part of why I'm doing this.

I only hold her stare for a moment, shifting to the men beside her. It doesn't matter that her Barons are wearing masks, too. One of them I recognize just by the long, lazy curve of his posture. DK is leaning in toward the other Baron and pointing to a banner across the gym. We'd put it up yesterday, a vinyl monstrosity with a photo of the eight kittens. They're at an awkward age where their ears are strictly horizontal. It makes them all look sad and suspicious.

Over the loudspeaker, Remy is listing off their finer qualities.

"Kitten number five," he's saying, and my eyes are drawn to him. He's sitting at the announcer table next to Mama B, leaning back in the chair. His feet are propped up on the table and he's holding the microphone in loose fingers, looking as though he doesn't have a care in the world. "This one's a doozy. Don't let those sad blue eyes fool you. This kitten is a fighter." The DKS members in the room respond with a deafening cheer, and Remy smirks, soaking up their rabid energy like a battery. "Kitten number six is her latest victim, so if there are any bleeding hearts out there, take mercy on this poor, bullied soul. Don't we all know the anguish of being denied a tit?"

Glancing above him, I catch Story's eye, dipping my chin in a nod.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

She gives me a sunny smile and two thumbs-up, screaming, “Kick his ass!” Beside her, Tristian Mercer’s eyes narrow suspiciously. I worry for a moment that he might understand—mightsee.

Because even though the fear I voiced to Nick earlier was real—I genuinely do want the respect of the frat—there’s something else on the line tonight.

And I don’t just mean my ass.

I enter my corner of the ring just as Sy enters his, and I’m both delighted and tormented by the sight of his bare, flexing chest. He’s dressed to fight in his loose, red and gold shorts. His hands are wound with red wraps, and I have to admit that it’s oddly pleasing to see the same stony set of his brow I’d find at the beginning of any of his other matches.

Over the distance, he meets my gaze, lifting his chin in greeting, anddamn.

Win or lose—ass or pussy—I’m getting some ofthattonight.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Remy’s silky voice slithers through the speakers, only to be met with various cries of, “And Duchesses! And Baronesses! Princesses!” Remy gives the crowd of women an appreciative brow-raise. “Whoever you all are, you better stand the fuck up.” To punctuate this, he does just that, climbing onto the table to address the crowd. Mama B rolls her eyes at his antics, but he continues, “You’re about to witness history in the making. This is the first Queenmaker match since 1942, and never has there been a match more important to the people of West End. The battle of our beauty and her beast. War of the sexes. A fuschia fury. A fight so

important that—” His energetic green eyes meet mine. He pauses, seeing the scowl on my face. “I mean,” he adds, “hey, no pressure, beautiful. Anyway,” he goes on, nonplussed, “In the blue corner, we have Lavinia Lucia, the heiress to North Side, our former Duchess, the one we call Queen!”

Around the ring, the cutsluts whistle and cheer.

“But in the red corner,” he gestures expansively toward Sy, “we have the undefeated Perilini, our former Duke, West End’s reigning King!”

Now, the DKS members whistle and cheer. The new generation of Dukes are tending to Sy’s corner, Porterfield handing his King a water bottle and a towel while Kaz checks his knuckle wraps.

Feeling a phantom electric charge behind me, I glance back to realize Nick’s climbed up to be in my corner. Him and Sy are both staring at Remy much like I am, exasperation warring with fondness.

“I think he likes this better than being in the ring himself,” Nick says, giving one of my French braids a gentle tug. “Look alive, Little Bird. Whatever you do, don’t let him sweep your feet. It’s his signature move.”

“I know.” Leaning on the rope, I give Nick a sparkling, vicious smile. “I trained with him long enough to know his moves.”

Nick turns his narrowed blue eyes on me. “Should I be worried that I’ve been training with you for the past three weeks? You planning to use this against me?”

I shrug. “Only if I need to.”

I see his throaty chuckle more than I hear it, the crowd swelling with another cheer.

“Remember that night we first met,” he reaches up to touch my chin, nudging it upward, “when you kicked me in the face?”

I stare into his blue eyes, surprised to call up the memory with more of a smile than a grimace. “You made the cutest little squawking sound.”

His brows slam low. “I’ve never made a cute squawking sound in my life.”

“It was the cutest,” I argue. “Like a wounded baby owl.”

Rolling his eyes, he spins me toward the center of the ring. Warm lips find my neck and I tilt my head, eyes fluttering as Nick bestows his good luck kiss on me.

Of course, it ends up being more of a good luck hickey.

After admiring his handwork, he brings a palm down on my ass. “We’ll get some cute squawking sounds out of you tonight. To the victor, Little Bird.”

Sy and I approach the center, touching our fists together a mere blink before the bell rings out.

The crowd erupts in a swell of electricity.

“Nervous?” he wonders, circling me.

Yes.

I circle him back. “Nope.”

The spotlight above carves dark hollows in his cheeks, turning his eyes into blots of shadow, but I know he’s tracking my hands and feet. He’s stalking me. Measuring me

up.

“You’re going to have to strike first,” Nick told me during training.

So that’s what I do.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

It's not my best punch. My arm isn't straight, my center of gravity is all off, and when my knuckles slam into Sy's jaw, he looks deeply disappointed.

"What the fuck?" He drops his stance, deflating. "Lavinia, that punch was embarrassing. Your posture's all wrong, you're dropping your shoulder, and your elbow is a fifth-grader's geometry drawing of an obtuse angle."

I scowl, dropping my own stance. "Don't train me while I'm fighting you!"

He leans to look over my shoulder, sniping at his brother, "What did you even train her to do, Nick?! Because I taught her to throw a punch forever ago. It's like you untrained her to?—"

His words clip off when my second punch—a flawless uppercut—slams into his chin, snapping his head back. The satisfaction I feel when he staggers a step back swells proudly in my chest.

Just like Nick and I planned.

Behind me, Nick applauds, whistling. "Atta girl, LB! Fucking perfect!"

Sy blinks, eying me with a glint of disbelief. "He taught you to trick me into thinking you were bad?" He seems to compose himself, gathering that stoniness back into his eyes as he regains his stance, shaking off the punch. "Fine. You wanna play dirty? Let's go."

But despite the words—the way he's watching me suspiciously as we circle one

another—I still see the flash of pride on his face.

Nick and I decided long ago that I'd only get one chance for that play, and we were right. Sy is on high alert now, dodging my third punch, and then swooping away from my kick. I know the crowd is there, cheering and shouting, but I block it out. The whole world is narrowed down to the three-hundred square feet of the ring and the man within it.

The first punch he throws is easily dodged, and I send him a glare. "You're holding back." His eyes drop to my body, and I square my shoulders. "Yeah, you're at least three times my size. But I've been around the gym and DKS for a long time now, so there's something I know."

Nick was wrong about one thing.

First blood or not, Sy's not afraid to let me get close. "What's that?"

I push my whisper, feather-light and moist, into the shell of his ear. "Size isn't what matters, baby."

I feel his shudder more than I see it. Against my chest. Across my skin with his sharp inhale. And mostly on the tip of my forefinger, which I use to aim a hard flick right into his balls.

Immediately, Sy reaches down to protect his groin, bending over.

"It's instinct, Little Bird. A man's whole body reacts to a threat against his assets, whether he wants to or not. Use it."

As Sy doubles over, I take that flash of moment to bring my knee upward, slamming it into his chest. Behind me, the crowd pulls in a collective gasp, but to my

annoyance, Sy hardly seems fazed, bouncing back to arch an eyebrow at me.

“The balls? Really?”

“There were no rules against going below the belt,” I reply, regaining my footing.

“I know.” Sy swipes another punch, but I duck around it easily. “I just didn’t figure you to be so cliché.”

Behind me, I hear Nick’s sharp, swooping whistle.

A signal that it’s time for phase three.

The fury.

I lunge forward, striking out and landing a hit to his cheek. It’s not a hard hit because that’s not the point of ‘the fury’. The point is the relentlessness of spirit, feinting backward only to strike out again. And again. And again.

Sy dodges most of these, his blue eyes tracking my every movement, but I meant what I said before. Size isn’t everything. He’s big, but that makes him slow. I’m small, but that makes me fast.

I dodge out of an attempted hold just to lay a barrage of hits into his stomach.

Naturally, it barely fazes him.

But he’s on alert now. Tracking. Calculating. Every time I swoop in for another swipe, I can see the wheels turning in his head, wondering if he should dodge it or take it. They’re not hard enough to draw blood, but they also don’t stop. He has to take a hit to draw back his fist for his own move.

I begin to sense when he decides to take one rather than evade it.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

And that's when I put all my weight behind it.

The punch slams into his jaw, but just as quickly as he'd calculated to take it, I can sense his brain deciding it's had enough. Because that hit actually hurt.

And he hits me.

Like, really hits me.

His knuckles slam into my cheekbone like a sledgehammer, and it rocks me harder than I'm expecting. The pain explodes, radiating through my skull like a seismic wave.

Fuck.

I've been hit plenty of times, but never like that.

My vision goes spotty—black with confused sparkles—and I land on the mat so hard that it rattles my teeth. I think at first I lose my hearing, but my heartbeat still throbs in my ears.

The crowd has just gone silent.

Instantly, I try to push up onto my palms, struggling to shake the dazed feeling, but it's no use. I double over, clutching my head, and even though I'm going to hate myself for it...

I whimper.

“Vinny?” Remy’s startled voice is garbled in my ears—or maybe it’s just the sound system he’s speaking over. Lower, more staticy, I hear him add, “Someone fucking get Pauly.”

I don’t see Sy approach me, but I feel him. It’s a heaviness in the air. There’s also the sound of the slow drag of his feet against the mat, and then his halted breath as he leans down, whispering, “Lav? Hey, you okay?”

I open my mouth, but only a hitched breath emerges.

“Fuck,” he says, all low and full of dread. “Fuck, baby, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. It was like instinct took over and I couldn’t pull my punch. Are you?—”

The second his palm rests comfortably on my back, I spring up, grabbing his wrist and twisting. It happens so quickly that his expression is still a comical freeze-frame of panicked guilt when I slam my elbow into his nose, sending him tumbling gracelessly onto the mat, ass-first.

It takes everyone a frankly insulting beat to realize my whole ‘poor injured bird’ routine was a ruse. It isn’t until Sy pushes up onto his elbows, a stream of blood trickling from his nostril, that I’m met with a wave of shocked gasps, a roaring cheer directly on its heels.

“We have a victor!” Remy cries, and in my corner of the ring, Nick is laughing, bringing his hands together in a clap. He offers me an appreciative tip of his chin. “Good sell!” he yells.

Sy still looks stunned, even when I reach down to offer him a hand up. He eyes it dolefully, wiping a smear of blood across his upper lip. “Guess I should have factored

in Nick teaching you to play dirty.” Still, he takes my hand, climbing to his feet.

Wincing, I inspect his nose, an inkling of guilt settling in my gut. “That wasn’t Nick’s training, actually,” I tell him, holding his irked gaze. “It was yours.”

It was over a year ago that we stood in this same ring, Sy teaching me to defend myself against the men of Forsyth.

At his confused expression, I remind him, “Go for the jugular? Be a viper?”

I can see the wheels turning in his head, calling up the memory of the words he’d said.

“Use the weapons you’ve honed, Lavinia. Just because you don’t like where they’ve come from doesn’t mean they aren’t useful.”

I spent a lot of years as a defenseless captive of horrible men, and he’s right. I don’t like where that came from.

But Sy taught me it could be useful.

“If I’m a Queen....” I say, bringing his knuckles to my lips. “If I’m obstinate and cocky and ruthless...” I brush a kiss to his knuckles—the same ones that I still feel throbbing in my cheek.

“It’s only because you taught me how to be.”

His face hardens, jaw tight as he regards me. “You just broke my undefeated streak, my trust, and my nose. You made me look like an idiot in front of my family, the frat, my enemies—the whole goddamn city.” His eyes dip down when I swallow, because an apology is swelling in my chest.

The enjoyment of my win fades rapidly at the anger I see in his features.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

But then there's a twitch.

Just one.

And then his lips spread into a slow, vicious smirk. "That's my girl."

The emotion explodes on my face as he thrusts my fist into the air between us, turning me toward the DKS section of the crowd. "The victor!" he shouts. "Your Queen!"

"To the victor!" they cheer.

In the box, Story and Verity are standing together now, both on their feet, a jubilant smile on their faces as they roar in delight. This wasn't their fight, but they were both behind me every step of the way.

If we're going to continue our mission to change what a woman's place in Forsyth is, then the Monarchs need to show Arianette that it's more than a daydream. That she can bring Maddox down. That a Queen can be more than a pet. That she can be an equal.

She can keep what's hers.

She can reign.

And she can be a victor.

“She really is a bully,” Sy mutters, crouched down beside me in the bathroom.

I adjust the ice pack on my cheek, grinning at the squirming pile of kittens under the sink. “She’s definitely one of Archie’s.” The black mother cat is taking a much-needed break somewhere—probably in the kitchen cabinets, where she’s grown fond of sleeping. “Mean little Archie Junior.”

“No,” he snaps, adjusting his own ice pack, pressed to the bridge of his nose. “We’re not naming them. You name them, you get attached.”

Rolling my eyes, I stand, pulling him up with me. “Speaking of which, did we get a lot of quality potential adoptees?”

He follows me back into the bedroom, nodding. “A couple alumni—the non-shitty ones. Tristan wants two for his sisters.”

“Oh!” I spin, bring my hands together. “Yes, approve that.”

He lowers his ice pack, tossing it on the nightstand. “I’m hand-selecting them. Myself. Remember?”

I pout dramatically. “Then consider this a good reference. Izzy and Lizzy would take very good care of a mean little Archie Junior.”

Thrusting a finger at me, he says, “Your pouts don’t work on me anymore, deceiver. You sit on a throne of lies. Let me see.”

That last part is delivered with a touch to my chin. He directs my face to the side, blue eyes assessing my cheek. Frowning, he says, “That’s going to be a whopper of a shiner tomorrow. You sure Lex cleared you? No concussion?”

I delicately prod the swollen bridge of his nose. “He said just what you said. I’m gonna have a black eye. You, too.” As he’s inspecting me, I gather the courage to ask, “You’re really not mad? About... me beating you?” I’m careful to avoid the ‘L’ word.

Sighing, he grazes a fingertip against my sore cheek. “I thought I would be. But actually...” His gaze wanders down, a hand dropping to my hip as his eyes darken. “It’s just super fucking hot.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

He grabs the ice pack from my hand, tossing it aside. “Really.” He drags his lip through his teeth, a thoughtful frown on his face. “If you think about it, you winning just means I’ve chosen the perfect Queen for me. For West End.” Dipping down, he whispers in my ear, “So it’s kind of my win.”

Winding my arms around his neck, I laugh. “Oh my god, you’ll find any way to be the winner.”

He laughs with me, quiet in a way that makes my chest burst with warmth. Pulling back, his smile settles into something soft but serious. “It’s true, though.” He searches my eyes, and when his hands come up to frame my face, I get the sense that he’s documenting something. Something heavy and important.

Somethingmauve.

“Having you at my side is what’s made me King, Lavinia. If I taught you how to be obstinate and cocky and ruthless, then you have to know...” His eyes dip down, tracing his thumb’s path across my lower lip. “You’ve taught me how to be all of that while still loving someone. So, yeah,” he adds, finally clearing the distance to push his words into my parted mouth, “I’m far from being a loser.”

The kiss is slow and searing, deep and hot. He doesn't taste like a loss. He tastes like heat and whiskey and an undertone of blood.

He tastes like my King.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 2:56 am

“Sy?” I say, breathing heavily when I tear myself away. Remy and Nick are still at the gym closing up from Screw Year’s Eve, but I don’t need them here to remember the discussion we had weeks ago. “Have you ever thought about... wanting kids?” As soon as the question leaves my lips, a rush of heat rises to my cheeks.

Sy’s answer is quick. “No.” Too quick. Offering me a guilty smile, he confesses, “I do have a name picked out though.”

I freeze, eyes popping wide. “You do?”

Nodding, he says, “Victor.” And before that can fully sink in, he adds, “Or Victoria. Between you and me, I’d prefer a Victoria. I think we have enough testosterone around here, don’t you?”

“Victoria.” I say the word like it’s some alien tongue I’ve never heard before.

Pausing, Sy tilts his head. “You hate it,” he guesses, eyebrows lowering into a scowl. “I guess it’s pretty cliché.”

“No, I—” Pushing two fingers against his lips, I try to speak past the tightness in my throat. “Sy, it’s perfect.”

You name them, you get attached.

The hard line of his jaw softens. “Maybe some day, huh?”

“Yeah, Big Bear.” Wrapping my arms around him, I rest my cheek on his chest,

indulging in the thud-thump of his heartbeat. “Some day.” The moment stretches on. I feel his chin on the top of my head. The warmth of his breath in my hair. The swell of his chest against my aching cheek.

To the victor, indeed.

“In the meantime...” I say, drawing away to reach for the bottle on the nightstand.

His eyes narrow. “Is that supposed to mean something?”

I bounce the bottle of lube casually in my palm, giving him a wink. “I figure you and I can do a little training on our own. Work up to it? Just like old times.”

It’s strange to think I’d want much of the old times back, but I have to admit to missing the raw charm of our past fumbling. Everything was more complicated then, but our bodies always knew what they wanted.

He takes the lube, mouth pursed skeptically as he reads the label, putting the pieces together.

My ass was always his.

He just has to conquer it.

“I’m not the one who should get spoils.” Glancing up at me, he raises an eyebrow.

“Then don’t consider it a spoil,” I say, pulling off my tank top. “Consider it a lesson on obeying your Queen.”

A slow, devious smile springs to his lips. “Baby, I live to serve.”