







# Godless Creatures : A Dark Romance

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**Category:** Dark Erotica

**Description:** PSYCHO

Convicted 25 years to life in an insane asylum, framed for a crime I didn't commit.

My silence paid with blood, compliance assured with blackmail.

Trust. A fickle, broken promise that shattered the foundations of my world.

Then a new psychiatrist entered my domain, searching for answers I refuse to give.

When she threatens to unveil everything I desperately want to hide, I try to push her away. But as secrets unravel, it's her soul I want to keep.

She's the one orchestrating my madness. Yet why do they continue to call me insane?

MICAH

Four years since I last stepped foot in Junction City.

My city.

All for one man.

He has the answers I seek and secrets I revere, all of which will pave the way to my stolen birthright.

But every time I take a look inside his fractured soul, all I see is him staring back and I find myself ready to enter hell at the devil's behest.

He kills for sport, destroying without provocation. But now he's met his match.

I'll willingly tear myself apart to fulfil the revenge owed to me and mine.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

For four years, we had trained for that moment. For four years, we had patiently waited.

A whispered rumour was all it took. Ludus Maximus began distributing drugs throughout the city—our city—encroaching on our destroyed domain and forgotten birthright.

One problem. We never forgot.

I'd do anything—we'd do anything—to gain the knowledge we desperately sought.

We would infiltrate each underground organisation, smoke out all the traitors who played a part in our family's demise. Then burn it all to the fucking ground until all that remained were our enemy's ashes, scattered amongst our lifeless friends.

Violence. Torment. Blood.

It was who we were, what we were born to be.

Our word was law. Our rule was paramount. Our name was King.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

The decayed iron gates welcomed me into hell, luring me forth to dine with the clinically insane. Wailing blasts of wind threatened to uproot me from the circular driveway, my black heels tracing scattered raindrops to the entrance of Oakview Asylum.

Oakview Asylum was an intimidating compound, a sprawling concrete prison in the centre of Junction City; originally a historical estate, donated and converted into a high-security forensic facility. It now housed the craziest, most disturbed and psychotic patients in the country. People who committed crimes so heinous and unbelievable that once they entered, they never came out.

A chuckle escaped my lips at the audacity of the situation.

The things I'd done. The things I was yet to do. Based on all manner of criteria, I too should be imprisoned within those cold castle walls.

As if the depressing state of the crumbling foundation isn't incentive enough to stay the fuck away.

An imposing tower stood guard on each corner, the bland, grey bricks leached of all colour and life. The fortifications twisted high in the sky, camouflaging amid the overcast clouds, a debilitating storm brewing within both.

I straightened my shoulders, smoothed a professional mask and stepped over the threshold of the entrance foyer. I was instantly assaulted by a threatening electrical current that zinged over my flesh in warning. The security suppressant barrier felt as if my soul was being torn from the very marrow of my bones.

It was inhumane, merciless, a physically painful experience. An aggressive failsafe to keep inmates confined and the city streets safe.

But who will keep them safe from me?

A bulky security guard with a buzz cut stood before the front desk, his uniform pressed and ironed into regimented alignment. Enormous arms crossed in front of his chest as lacklustre blue eyes roamed over my frame with disapproval.

“I’ve been waiting,” he said with an authoritative undertone.

I kept his gaze and refused to clock the time. I wasn’t late. I was five minutes early. “We’d better get started then, shouldn’t we?”

He can go fuck himself.

A tick flexed in the corner of his jaw before he offered me a staff identification card. “This doubles as a swipe card, which grants you access to all areas of the facility. Come, I’ll lead you to your office.” Turning for a side door, he didn’t wait to see if I followed. “The name’s Fern. I’m head of Oakview Security.”

As if I couldn’t tell by the blatant badge plastered over his chest in clear block letters.

I rolled my eyes behind his back as he led me through multiple checkpoints, the barren corridors already compressing on what little happiness was hidden within.

Fern came to a halt outside a thick timber door. “I only have one rule: follow my instructions, every instruction. I’m here for your protection. I can’t protect you if you don’t follow orders, Miss Olivia Chaser.”

“Doctor Chaser.” The alias rolled off my tongue, slick as honey.

I didn't need my ability to feel the direct potency of misogyny radiating from him. My insides preened with glee. Maybe I could have some fun after all.

My office was sobland and suffocatingly mundane, it was sure to suck the life out of you (if you still had any left). The colourless cell held a desk directly in the centre, bolted to the ground with two weighted metal chairs lined on either side. Rest assured, I wouldn't be assaulted by the damn furniture. Comfort seemed to be a non-existent concept.

A stack of patient files lay haphazardly on the desk. I sifted through the contents until I found the name that had held residence in my mind ever since I'd first heard it.

The reason I was here. The person I'd sought to find, hoping he'd be the gateway to our many unanswered questions. I opened the file.

Alias: Psycho

Legal Name: Unknown

Sex: Male

Age: 21

Variant Status: Unknown

Sentence: Homicide — 25 years to life

Diagnosis: Psychopath

Assessment:

-Anti-social behaviour

-Nil emotional response, lack of empathy and/or remorse

-High risk of violence and dangerous behaviour (multiple unprovoked assaults)

-Resistant to all treatment options. Refuses to engage

Findings: Minimal chance of rehabilitation

Treatment: If patient remains the same twelve months into sentence, advised lobotomy

I lifted a brow, perusing the assessment notes from the previous shrink. I didn't know the circumstances of their abrupt departure, although I could hazard a guess. Oakview had a high staff turnover rate, the previous two psychiatrists lasting six weeks altogether (not that I was supposed to be privy to that information).

Either way, I didn't care. The dangers and risks were nothing compared to what I'd experienced. I was here for one job only. More specifically, one person only.

I will not fail.

There was a quick rap at the door before a tall male swaggered through the archway. He assessed me with hunger, his porcelain veneers gleaming a winning grin.

"I'm Mr Burner, Manager of Oakview. We spoke on the phone."

We shook hands, his fingers lingering longer than necessary. I plastered on a fake smile while discreetly rubbing my palm clean over my thigh. "A pleasure to be a part of the team, Mr Burner."



We made small talk—the generic bullshit normal people pretended to care about—as he presented the grand tour.

Burner's pristine image was comical, in complete contrast to his surroundings: coiffed blonde hair, accompanied by an expensive suit two sizes too small.

"I must say, you look young for your age," he said. "Your resume was extraordinary. You shone above all other applicants." The compliment fell short, due to there being no other applicants.

I'd nearly killed Spencer when she'd submitted my fake credentials. She'd added an extra ten years to my twenty, alongside other ridiculous qualifications. Thankfully, no one had dug up an old trumpet...the mission would have been compromised immediately.

"Protection and safety are of the utmost importance," he rambled on. "There are cameras running 24/7 in all communal areas. Due to confidentiality, we can't place surveillance within individual rooms. If you feel unsafe at any time, please alert Fern."

I feigned interest, nodding at appropriate pauses, when a distinct bell rang through the speakers, announcing lunch.

"Let me take you to the cafeteria. You can get a glimpse of your patients. After that, we can get more acquainted in my office." He pressed a hand to my lower spine, directing me forward.

Bile rose in the back of my throat and I flexed my fingers to prevent them from dislocating his own. My family would be unhappy if I committed homicide on the first day. Containing my rage, I twisted out of reach, trailing after him into the bustling space.

I scanned the area, taking stock of my surroundings. Possible exits, potential threats. Always a necessity when entering a new environment—especially a room filled with crazy people.

My eyes seemed to gravitate to the farthest corner of the room, something lingering in the depths seeking me out. Then my gaze locked with two of the darkest orbs I'd ever seen, swallowing me whole in their bottomless depths. I was gripped by a predator hiding in the brush. The prime hunter of the facility, I had no doubt. I had found what I was looking for, but it was far more sinister than I'd ever imagined.

Psycho.

I was stunned, completely taken over by the irrational thought to move closer and seek comfort in the tattooed arms of my own destruction. As I was about to take a step towards him, Burner cut into my wayward thoughts.

“Shall I show you the dorms? They're off to the right here.” I clutched onto the distraction and broke away from the stranger's intoxicating hold.

I have to see him again.

That was my last thought before I could snap sanity into my brain once more.

I blindly tracked Burner's steps to escape, the vivid image of Psycho playing back in my mind, mocking me with intrigue.

Biting hard into my tongue, salty, metallic blood saturated my mouth, the pain and taste pulling me out of my hypnotic state.

I would not falter. Whatever that was, it had no place here.

## PSYCHO

Shrouded in shadow, I straddled the corner bench of the mess hall, one of my many haunts. Tipping my chin high, I pushed the unappetising meal to the side, instead lighting a cigarette for sustenance. Nicotine laced my veins as I perused the cafeteria with tedious boredom. My knee bounced, deciding whether to remain on this bench or—shocker—sit on the bench outside, torrential rain and all.

Inmates were whispering about the new psychiatrist. Crazy motherfuckers believed themselves to be clever, scaring them all away, not realising they'd never be redeemed with the constant revolving door of shrinks if they weren't cleared of their insanity.

Who am I kidding? Not one person in this asylum would ever be discharged, least of all me.

Unlike them, my incarceration was by choice...I couldn't decide if that was better or worse.

From my initial sentence ten months ago, everyone knew to stay the hell away from me. If they didn't, they learnt fast (if they managed to survive the aftermath, that is).

Tilting my head back to the dreary ceiling, I exhaled a thick stream of smoke, wishing for any reprieve to break the monotony of inmate life.

The main door buzzed from the far side of the room, the perfect time for Manager Burner to lead the new psychiatrist around for a tour. The atmosphere charged as inmates attempted to stay low-key (as if being a mentally unstable person locked up in a high-security prison could ever be considered low-key).

I huffed at the fresh excitement. Another wannabe do-gooder using the sinners of

society in an attempt to make themselves feel better. I yawned at the predictable mentality.

Burner swiped through the last remaining security door, leading the newcomer into the lion's den. Giving me my first unobstructed view of the goddess behind him.

I choked, inhaling sharply on my cigarette, the vapour catching in my throat. I swiped my eyes—suddenly lined with water—not wanting to lose sight of my marked target.

She was fucking gorgeous. Her bronzed skin shone against her professional, figure-hugging suit, the fabric stretching from her neck all the way down to her ankles. Black heels clicked in tune with the prominent pounding in my ears, her shining brown hair tied in a low ponytail trailing down her back, accompanied by glowing amber eyes that were now transfixed in my direction.

She couldn't possibly see me, my solitary corner so dark and shaded, no light could ever penetrate. But there she was, on the opposite side of the room, staring across the expanse directly into my fucking soul.

I leant forward ever so slowly, elbows resting on my knees. Instinctively preparing for the hunt, muscles clenched in anticipation to pursue this newfound prey.

I wanted to taste her skin. I wanted to drink her blood. I wanted to claim and simultaneously destroy this innocuous being.

Burner must have said something, as her captivated gaze shifted from mine, her attention now waning elsewhere as she was led through the next corridor to the dorms.

My body vibrated with unrelenting pressure, ready to strike, ready for action. I clenched my fists to prevent chasing after her.

Patience. The minimum requirement for the ultimate pursuit.

Oh, how the kill will be worth it.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Many were uncomfortable in the dark, even more so amongst the company of the dead. I never understood why. The dead could not speak, could not plot, manipulate or betray. Certainly more trustworthy than the living.

I wove my motorbike through towering tombstones and opulent mausoleums. Nightingale Cemetery was an entire mini metropolis, the most affluent and sought after location for the afterlife in Junction City. One would only find their end here if they had a family plot, which resulted from superior pedigree, significant wealth or notoriety of the highest order.

I screeched to a halt before the intimidating statue of Stern King, stabilising one foot over his sarcophagus at my feet.

Our forebear stood vigil at the entrance of our family crypt, the King Mausoleum looming high over his back, the streaks of approaching dawn reflecting brightly off the glowing white marble. Our sigil stabilised directly centre, the pure 24k gold crown symbolising our leadership of the longstanding crime organisation, the Sovereign.

A familiar ache tore at my conscience, an unrelenting grief ever-present and vicious in its undertaking. The reminder of our losses was acutely overpowering when confronted with our ancestors' eternal resting place—empty of two main occupants.

Our father, Oliver King, was a difficult death to process. He'd always seemed invincible, an untouchable entity that could never be caught off guard.

However, my three sisters and I were close, completely aligned. Breathing, moving

and existing together as one cohesive unit since our births. All four of us were sixteen when the eldest, Chase—our leader, our fucking guiding light—was taken from us. The remnants of her loss still reverberated through our bond, the cavern of despair magnified by the absence of her physical remains.

After her death, I naturally transitioned into the leadership role, being the second-born and next in line. A title I neither revered nor wanted, responsibility forcing me to take command to ensure my younger sisters' safety.

I shook my head, releasing the useless emotions and past regrets. Grabbing a thin knife from my boot, I nicked a tiny incision at the base of my wrist, red droplets staining the surface of Stern's engraved name.

The sarcophagus released an audible groan, descending into the labyrinth of the deceased. I hit the throttle, darkness swallowing the illumination of my headlights as I navigated sharp corners from protruding crypts.

There was a whole underground to Junction City, including numerous exits and entries, depending on which service you were searching for. The main bulk were owned by Ludus Maximus, their base directly below the city centre.

The catacombs were secluded within the surrounding mountain range, too far to be considered useful or of any relative importance. It inadvertently became the perfect escape, the ideal safe-house for our return.

I parked in our makeshift garage, hardly able to find a free spot amid the various motorbikes that Emerson had stolen. She'd kill me if I scratched another one of her babies.

Slipping through a dark archway, I ascended steep stairs to push through the cold, iron door, artificial light blinding my entrance into the Temple. Our temporary haven.

We were situated underneath the most influential house of worship in Junction City, Variant Sanctorum, accompanied by the allegiance and support from the Head Saint (not that he had much choice, unless he truly wanted to test his faith and the strength of his god's will).

Although we were surrounded by ruin and decaying flesh, our abode was refurbished. Basic, simple—much to Spencer's disgust—but liveable.

The Temple consisted of one large, open area. An exposed kitchen lined the entire left wing, a cheap couch dominated the right and rubber mats lined the floor in the centre: our training grounds. This was our own mausoleum for the living.

After we realised the difficulty of transporting anything into these depths, we quickly forfeited on frivolous pieces, surviving on the bare essentials. We didn't plan on staying long.

I rubbed a hand over my face as the dreaded church organs for morning worship vibrated through the stone walls, the dull tone ringing in my ears. As I entered, the smell of fresh caffeine aroused my exhausted senses.

"Where have you been all night?" Spencer asked. I was so far gone, I hadn't noticed she was already in the kitchen. She wore a thin nightgown like mine. Who was I kidding? The flimsy piece of silk was mine.

"Chasing new leads, sourcing informants," I said, words mumbled and hardly coherent.

"How was your first meeting with the psychopath?"

Straight to it then.



My eyes were slits as I poured a cup of coffee, blatantly ignoring her. She knew full well I was not equipped to dealing with her bright, sunrise enthusiasm.

“Is he as crazy as the rumours say? Or are they all exaggerated?”

I slumped onto a stool at the island bench, gulping down a generous mouthful to awaken me to the land of the living. “You bored? It’s too early for your shit, Spence.”

“What shit?” A soft, melodic voice interrupted from behind. Emerson occupied the stool next to me, swiping Spencer’s coffee and downing half the mug. She was in a rugged, frayed men’s tee that came down to her mid-thighs, her shining blonde lion’s mane sticking out in all directions.

As Spencer was clean cut and immaculate, Emerson was wild and rough around the edges. She was the baby of the family, easily deceiving with her petite stature and angelic face. Sure, she could play the demure innocent when needed—until you pushed through to her core and found a constant, raging fire ignited within, stoked and fed with endless passion.

We all had this, unsure whether it was forged through nature or nurture. Our previous traumas had ultimately altered the way we processed this innate passion.

Mine was skin deep, my ability never letting the blaze be buried further than that. Except I had to be cautious the flames didn’t rage out of control, as other’s emotions were constantly being added alongside my own.

Spencer, the third-born, displayed her fire in plain sight, her nature unpredictable, chaotic and extremely emotional.

Emerson’s, however, was suppressed under layers of organs, bones and sinew—plus anything else she could find to throw on top. Difficult to penetrate and raise to the

surface. But when it did, when that invisible barrier snapped, you'd better run for cover while you watched the beautiful catastrophe unfold.

Spencer leant over the island bench, giving us a clear view of her perfect breasts. A silver chain shimmered from her neck, lined with countless clear stones.

"Are those diamonds?" I asked.

She twirled the necklace using a delicate finger, her porcelain teeth shining into a feral smile. My sister was a bombshell, flawlessly proportioned, the epitome of female perfection with a particular predilection for all things expensive.

Emerson huffed into her mug. "Which poor sod did you steal that off?"

"Who said I had to steal it? He gave this to me."

Emerson and I chuckled as a mischievous gleam flickered in Spencer's green eyes.

"Don't change the subject. Micah, we missed you at dinner last night. Tanner isn't due back for a couple of days and Meek can only provide so much entertainment." Emerson raised her middle finger in reply. "What were your first impressions of the former undefeated gladiator of the Ludus Maximus?"

"There's nothing to report. I haven't met him yet," I said, keeping my voice levelled with uninterest while my pulse elevated at the mere mention of him.

Emerson gave me a suspicious side-eye. She could hear the blood racing in my veins.

Spencer whined. "What does he look like? Would I be able to take him?"

I spared half a shrug. "He's tall, muscular...and covered in tattoos."

Wrong answer.

By deciding to give as little as possible, I'd given Spencer the ammo that her hyperactive brain required.

"Why are you being so taciturn?"

Emerson smirked, her red 'M' tattoo winking at me from its high perch on the peak of her cheekbone. "Yeah, Micah, why so coy? Tell us more about the Psycho." The sound of his name triggered heat to rise on my cheeks.

Spencer's lips popped open before she jumped around the bench, half-landing in my lap. "You like him."

I pushed her off and she caught herself before hitting the ground. "Stop being ridiculous. I haven't even met him. Hardly had a conversation." In reality, we'd had no conversation at all.

"Prove it. Describe him to us?" Emerson asked.

Spencer practically bounced on the spot, like a puppy waiting for a treat. "Yeah, tell us about him. We need a debrief."

"It's hard to explain. He's...intriguing. I can't get a proper read on him. The suppressant barrier also has an effect."

Spencer cocked her head. "I've never seen you like this. So ruffled and unsure. Or remotely interested in anyone other than a good fuck."

"I'm not interested. It isn't like that."

Emerson bit her lip in concern, thankfully not adding to the commentary.

Spencer tucked a loose strand behind my ear. The gesture itself was innocent until my skin itched in warning. Then she opened her mouth. “Well then, you wouldn’t mind if we swap out and I take over this case for you, huh?”

My muscles reacted on instinct alone. Gripping onto her fingers, I bent them back to the point of snapping. “Try me, Spence. Don’t even think about stepping into that asylum, or I swear you won’t come back out.”

“Oh, you really, really like him,” she said, her aura lighting up with glee, the flare of excitement so bright, it was almost as blindingly brilliant as her red hair.

Emerson tsked in the background, displaying her disappointment at my lack of self-control.

I huffed, releasing Spencer from my grip. Emerson veered for the fridge, collecting various ingredients. “Tell us everything.”

Spencer poured herself another coffee, straddled Emerson’s empty stool and winked. I rolled my eyes at her toddler shenanigans and told my sisters about my first impression of the infamous Psycho.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

The days bled into one continuous reel, our wordless game of cat-and-mouse ticking over with intensity. I'd dodged him at every turn, his interest piqued, frustration rife in the lining of his features.

I stood on the outskirts of the bustling cafeteria as dinner was served, coercing my Variant to settle in my chest. Tanner and Emerson utilised their abilities to concoct some semblance of immunity to the suppressant barrier, my circulation adjusting to the elixir (it wasn't entirely foolproof).

Although severely diminished, my Variant remained intact. The sole reason I was best suited for this infiltration mission.

Psycho was on the verge of snapping, his rabid beast fighting to be released. Frankly, I was surprised he wasn't pacing the halls. Instead he remained still, preferring to brood and haunt me from afar.

No matter his position or location, I could always sense him.

Squaring my shoulders, my focus snapped to the predator in question leaning against the far wall. His black combat boots were crossed at the ankles, leather pants casually around his hips and a tight black tee stretched over his long torso. His dark clothes accentuated the tapestry of tattoos that climbed all the way up his jawline.

His head tilted with feline grace, animalistic in nature, and as I held his unwavering gaze, his lips lifted in a challenging smirk. Then the lights cut out. Little did he know, I was more than willing to carve up that pretty face until he was screaming the answers I came here to find.

He wanted to catch me, ensnare me in his trap.

Should I let him?

PSYCHO

There she stood, lab coat blindingly white, as pristine as her fake conscience. I watched her, fucking stalked her, as she stood on the opposite side of the mess hall.

Dr Chaser, the enigma that haunted my goddamned dreams. With one glance and barely a hair flick, she had me infatuated—a dangerous position to be in. I didn't need another liability, and I'd do anything to ensure she didn't become one.

Our new psychiatrist had the instincts of survival and the penchant for games, revealing her calculated mind as she escaped my sharpened claws for the millionth time this week. Forever scoping, forever taunting, baiting me like the juiciest, ripest fucking fruit I'd never be able to sink my teeth into.

Either I was losing my touch, or the good doctor wasn't the innocent doe she liked to portray. Heads up, she is no innocent.

She wanted something from me. They all did. No one dared enter my territory without a motive.

I was the perfect test subject. Some wanted to fix me. Others sourced me out to assuage their blatant curiosity, while a fair few laid down a bribe for intel on the underground. It never mattered. Whatever reason they came searching, they always left disappointed. Or not breathing at all.

The last departed with a coat hanger sticking out of his throat, body pale and pulseless, his entry sanctioned by the one and only Manager Burner, head of the

nefarious Terror Squad that ruled over Oakview Asylum like their own personal kingdom.

Burner's death was a recurrent fantasy that played in my mind, alongside the end of his corrupt minions that frothed for his tiny dick. I couldn't deny they had power over me, as their alliance with Maximus for my imprisonment remained intact. I awaited the day their association would crumble, and salivated at the thought of gutting them all like the animals they were.

Dr Mudlark had returned from his hiatus and planned to commence his grotesque experiments that night. I'd cracked the system, perused his schedule and found Cookie at the top of his list. A lanky teen whose only crime was hanging with the wrong crowd. Despite my refusal to connect with anyone in this godforsaken place, my sole enjoyment came from fucking up their plans.

With a metaphorical pat on the back, I clocked my prey as the seconds ticked down.

Three. Two. One.

Alarms split the air as Oakview Asylum had a widespread power outage. All doors unlocked, all light smothered in darkness. I inhaled deeply, lapping up the screams from all directions.

Chaos ensued.

Prisoners ran rampant and staff blindly searched for cover. I dodged the unruly crowd and zoned in on my target, who remained steadfast.

Anticipation bubbled in my veins. Her flight or fight response completely combusted, panic leaving her in the most perilous position.

Slipping up to her side, I whispered, “You’re supposed to run, otherwise it’s no fun.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t flinch in alarm. Instead, she leant closer, wisps of her fragrant hair skating over my face. “Maybe I wanted to be caught.”

Fuck. That voice alone ignited a live wire through my nervous system.

I circled her. “Why’d you come here, Doctor? Why’d you lower yourself into this cesspit filled with sinners and degenerates?”

“What if I said I came for you?” Her voice was calm, inviting.

“Of course you did. They always do,” I halted at her back. “What do you want from me?”

“Accept my request and you’ll find out.”

The air stirred and she was already gone, disappearing amongst the moving shadows that danced along the walls.

I didn’t have to wait long, her request for assessment arriving soon after, as if I were a dog waiting to be called by my master. She’ll soon learn who the fucking alpha is around here.

Fern and one of his faceless henchmen escorted me to her office. As I entered, Dr Chaser stood from her desk, raising a hand in silent command, eyes fixed firmly on the men behind me.

Fern paused mid-step, halting at the entrance. “Doctor, I implore that we attend this session. For your safety.”



She didn't even deem him with a reply, instead shutting the door directly in his face. I snickered. Fern was a brute who thrived on authority. He wouldn't let that go lightly.

Sweeping back to her desk with refined poise, her long hair fluttered behind as if she had her own damn breeze. Countless shades of natural browns reflected a glossy sheen with each angle that she bent her slender, breakable neck.

Dr Chaser was either a naïve bitch with no life preservation, or she was that fucking stupid to think there was no danger in entering the lair of a starved hunter.

I flipped the heavy chair to sit backwards, using the back as an armrest, lighting a cigarette.

Dr Chaser sat behind her desk, her stare slowly tracking over my form until her brass amber eyes locked on mine. Her mask was impassive, cold and infuriatingly unreadable.

Frustrated, I exhaled smoke straight into her face before rolling my mouth into a sneer. I swear her eyes flared with anticipation, lips twitching slightly at the corners.

Game on, bitch.

Dr Chaser removed her lab coat and jacket, remaining in a short-sleeved dress shirt. I greedily traced the multicoloured tattoos riddled up her exposed arms, some peeking out of her collar. The imagery was drawn with such meticulous precision. I was impressed.

Her actions and manner of dress were hardly wanton, however my brain and body didn't seem to care, reacting all the same. A fiery ache of hunger festered in my gut and when I thought how fucking ridiculous my reaction was, I caught a flash of passion hidden in the recesses of her reflective pools.

My mouth stretched into a wide, shark grin. “Is this your form of treatment, Doctor? To seduce me into submission? Well, how bout we both get some therapy and strip your panties off next?”

She ignored me completely, preferring to bait me instead.

“Everyone thinks you’ve lost the plot. That you’re dim-witted and have nothing of substance up here,” she said, tapping a finger on her temple. “But that’s not it, huh, Psycho? There’s more to you, much more.”

I arched a brow at her forward approach. She really did have a fucking death wish. I didn’t like the way she was examining me, as if she could dig past my bullshit, to burrow down into my very core.

I stubbed my cigarette in the ashtray aggressively.

Her head tilted, unperturbed. “You have quite the reputation. I believe in the last ten months, you’ve made no headway with your sentence. Are you fully aware that if you work with us and show signs of rehabilitation, you may be able to re-enter the world again?”

I focused on my fists that rested atop my thighs, if only to prevent them from pounding into her flesh until she was soft, malleable, complete mush.

Dr Chaser stood abruptly, shuffling the two papers that were on her desk (which were fucking blank, I might add). “I won’t waste my time on an unwilling participant.” My teeth ground together as she stared down at me like some almighty fucking saint. “If you do not comply, you will be locked in this shithole forever.”

Sauntering towards the door, her clicking heels mocked me with every step—until my unfiltered wrath spilled over my non-existent threshold.

I lunged, tugging on her loose strands, and slammed her face-first into the wall. Her body jarred from the impact, the vibration ricocheting back into me, her head turned and hair in disarray as she took large, gulping breaths.

Leaning down, I murmured against her ear. “Baby, let me make this loud and clear, ‘cause you obviously didn’t read enough in that file about me. You do not come into my domain and tell me what the fuck has to be done. This is my house, and I’m at the motherfucking top of the food chain. Now, you either tell me why you’re really here and what you want from me, or get the fuck out before you become my next meal.”

She gave a cocky smirk, as if the idea of being my prey wasn’t something she was averse to. I believed I’d misheard when a quiet groan escaped her lips, until her ass pushed back against my rock-hard dick.

I was more than willing to corrupt her flawless soul, blemish her perfect shining beacon of hope and smudge her innocence with my filth.

“Hmm. The Doctor likes the bad boys, huh? Well, if it’s a dirty fuck with a killer you’re looking for, babe, I’m more than happy to oblige.”

I loosened a long breath, my lips skimming across her jawline, ready to steal a taste, when a hard elbow pounded into my ribs, sending my lungs heaving.

Before I could react, her tiny form slipped out from beneath me. She twisted in some elaborate formation, toppled my bulk off-balance and slammed my back against the wall, a switchblade digging into my throat for good measure.

A slight bruise was forming on her cheekbone, her hair deranged as I’d ripped out a good chunk in the process. My eyes lasered in on her mouth as she licked a minor cut on her bottom lip.

I thirsted to sink my teeth into her wounded flesh. She was the sexiest being I'd ever encountered—I'd ever felt—with her rounded breasts pushed up against my chest.

Who the hell is she? Not some altruistic doctor, that's for sure. Not just anyone could take me off guard like that, let alone physically bend me to their will.

She was fast, talented and damn experienced. A great combination for someone that's dangerous. I could fight and disarm her in a second. Instead, my curiosity was sparked.

“Who are you?” I asked, dropping all pretence.

She leant in slowly, her blade digging deeper into my skin, a trail of blood escaping the incision. “Let's just say, I can help you escape.”

“There is no escape.”

She pressed closer, her exhale teasing my neck. “We will see.” My heart skipped a beat when her wet tongue flicked out, stealing a taste of my blood. She abruptly pulled away, unlatched the door and made her escape without a backward glance.

I caressed the lingering spot where she'd licked, my fingertips coming away stained bright ruby red.

My cock was strained, my mouth agape, my mind a convoluted mess.

What the fuck just happened?

When I came back to my senses, something hard and small dug into my hip. A swipe card was wedged inside my waistband. Displayed on top was the clear professional picture of a smiling siren with her name printed directly below—Dr Olivia Chaser.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I entered the crypt surrounded by skeletons, entrenched within the tombs of the dead. They'll keep our secrets buried amongst their graves.

Our prisoner's naked body sagged from his elevated wrists, bare and blistered from the rusted chains. The Ludus Maximus tattoo proudly gleamed on his chest, mocking me with its reflection from the cheap lamps sporadically spaced on the cold stone floor.

Emerson stood in the centre, saturated in blood, a pair of pliers clutched in her delicate hand. She turned at my arrival, hawk eyes zeroing in on my injured face. "What the hell happened?"

I waved her off, not wanting to stain my suit. Blood was a bitch to wash out. "A slight hiccup."

"I hope he came away worse than you?"

A flash of reminiscence blinked before my eyes: the exact moment I was pinned against the wall. Everything careened downhill from there.

I initially removed my coat to gain a thorough reading of his aura (outside of my siblings, my ability made close proximity uncomfortable, and physical contact virtually abhorrent).

Frighteningly, Psycho's touch wreaked havoc on my Variant in ways I'd never experienced.

Seeing his vivid blood stain my blade, tracking down his tattooed, pulsing neck...the call was inevitable, the demand so primal I couldn't resist a taste—even if I was fully aware of the decision.

In spite of my foolishness, I didn't regret the act, his dumbfounded shock enough to override my reservations. Involuntarily, my mouth lifted into a smirk at the memory.

Emerson groaned. "Forget it. I don't want to know." Turning back to her test subject, she continued her questioning. "Titus, tell us everything you know about Amp and the Ludus' role in its distribution."

With a cocky reply, he spat at her feet. I snickered. Despite his mangled flesh and marred frame, Titus had some massive balls—literally and figuratively. Yuck.

Due to his insolence, Emerson's last remaining thread of restraint irrevocably snapped.

I shook my head at his idiocy as she rose to the challenge. He soon released a sharp grunt, before another tooth was wrenched from his witty mouth, the chains groaning from the added weight of his limp form. A thick layer of drying blood was all that remained from the gaping holes that were now his toothless gums.

Titus was no innocent, and certainly not someone that would be mourned. For all the people he had betrayed and hurt throughout his lifetime, this was a mere pittance.

There is no escape. Not for him. Nor for us.

I circled the room, cutting directly behind him, and spared Emerson a quick nod for the finale. A sly smirk pulled from her lips before she opened the iron door at her back. It jolted with an audible wheeze to display a weeping woman cowering on the floor, her high-pitched whine grating against my heightened senses.

Emerson latched her blood-stained fingers into the woman's brown hair, dragging and depositing her at the feet of her wretched lover.

"No, please," Titus said, words muffled, his false bravado crumbling. "She has nothing to do with the Ludus." My tattoos prickled from the fear permeating his voice, infused in his very breath. This was the first time he'd used the word 'please'. I quite liked the sound coming out of his mutilated mouth.

"If you don't provide any valuable information, she will be punished."

"Leave her be," Titus hung his head in defeat. "Maximus told no one about the drug trade."

"You are a high-ranking official in the Ludus Maximus, and one of his closest confidants."

"That means fucking nothing! I may have been a close friend in the past, but he's become senile in his old age."

Emerson strolled to the table of assorted torture weapons and scanned a loose hand over the display. "That isn't good enough." Her voice was so sweet, it was almost sickly.

"I swear. He doesn't trust me—or anyone—any more. Not after Psycho." Titus hesitated, his gaze resting on the blatant view of his woman gagged and chained. A stark reminder of his vulnerability if he didn't keep talking. "Psycho. The champion of the Caverns, and undefeated gladiator of the arena. Kid climbed the ranks fast and was the shining glory of the Ludus. Maximus treated him like a long-lost son. Until ten months ago, when he was sentenced to life at Oakview Asylum."

"Why?" I whispered onto the nape of his neck, sending tremors over his scarred skin.

“No one knows. One day he was an integral part of the Ludus, the next he was locked up in high-security. Maximus has been paranoid ever since.” His gaze bounced between my sister and I, awaiting judgement. “That’s all I have. There is no one besides Maximus himself who can give you what you want.” He knew full well we couldn’t reach him ourselves.

Emerson narrowed her eyes in concentration, monitoring his pulse for any falsehood. Her features cleared, resolute and hard, before giving the iron door a sharp rap with her fist.

Titus tracked the opening and Emerson leant against the torture table.

A broad shadow fell over the room when Tanner shouldered through the archway, his smoky brown eyes quickly assessing the scenario before him. He was tall, Emerson reaching his mid-chest, dark skin and brown wavy hair distinguished against her pale complexion and blonde locks.

Tanner’s usually-casual persona was nowhere to be seen, instead leaving a haunting presence in his wake, poetically accompanied by the blank void where our Variants went to wallow and disappear.

Titus could sense it too. He didn’t quite understand, though his face paled and panic lit the depths of his orbs as he tracked Tanner, who stalked closer.

“I cooperated! You said you’d let her go.”

Tanner stood behind the woman’s kneeled form and wrenched her head back with a rough hand. Her blue eyes bled into her lover’s face with desperation, silently begging for his protection.

Too late.



Titus fell speechless as her mask transitioned before us. Mousy brown locks converted into copper red strands, and blue irises sharpened into vibrant, forest green. A serpentine smile slid over her lips as she slapped Tanner's hand loose and stood upright, rolling her shoulders back in a stretch.

"Bastard," she whined. "You didn't have to pull my hair so hard."

As she massaged her scalp, Tanner winked in return. "I only wanted to play my part. You were playing yours so well."

"Beth?" Titus asked Spencer, in a last-ditch effort to appeal to his transitioned lover-turned-stranger.

Spencer returned his call with a wide, malevolent grin, her white canines shining like she was ready to feast on his flesh (which, in all honesty, wouldn't be far from the truth).

Titus paled further, realising his protection was unwarranted and entirely unnecessary. "I can help! I can help!"

Spencer tilted her head as a flash of silver glimmered between her fingers. "We don't need your help." Her hand darted forward, the knife sinking into his flesh, firm steady and sure as she flayed the prized Ludus tattoo from his skin.

The last remaining dregs of Titus' screams echoed through the endless catacombs. His dying lament welcomed our return, initiating the beginning of our long-awaited revenge.

Spencer cleaned her knife with a spare rag. "What a waste of time."

I sighed, eyeing the stray red droplet that landed on my expensive jacket. "I wouldn't

say that. I took your advice and planted my staff card on Psycho. So if he wants to leave, now is the opportunity.”

“You think he’ll take the bait?” Tanner asked.

“If he does, then he will lead us straight to Maximus. If he remains, then they have leverage on him. Why else would he stay in a place like that?”

We all sat around the kitchen island, a full roast and condiments dominating the bench. We’d cleaned and cooked, now ready to eat together as a family.

Tanner honed into his food, Emerson sipped on a glass of whiskey and Spencer balanced back on two legs of her stool, blowing a bubble of her favourite pink gum, the casual action in disparity with her extravagant black gown.

Spencer’s gaze roamed over my healed injuries. “Ah, that’s better. I wouldn’t have been able to stomach my meal if I had to stare at your battered face the whole time.”

I rolled my eyes and tipped my chin at her getup. “Where are you off to tonight?”

“Do you like it? Looks much better on me than the mannequin in the window. These are real gems stitched into the fabric.”

Emerson chuckled. “Did you take it straight off the dummy, or pay this time?”

“The mannequin looked about my size. Plus, the shop assistant was rude. Serves her right.” Spencer poked out her tongue. “I wouldn’t worry, she’ll be searching for a long-haired blonde with striking blue eyes, wearing an oversized leather jacket riding a motorbike.”

Emerson’s chuckle cut short, those same blue eyes now narrowed on the redhead.

“You better be joking, Spence. I’m at Hangman’s Clinic tomorrow. I don’t want to worry about cops breathing down my ass.”

“Oh, hush Meek. Believe it or not, I don’t actually want to look like you.” Spencer’s gaze then flicked to me. “You either.”

My head fell back and a laugh escaped my throat. Emerson smiled into her glass.

Tanner ignored our bickering, continuing with his meal. We were grateful to have him back after the long week, his guidance and support a significant part of our family dynamic.

“How’s your father?” I asked.

He finished his mouthful and chased the food down with Emerson’s whiskey. “He’s having difficulties with the new recruits. They’re not as resilient as they used to be.” His smoky brown eyes lit with amusement as they bounced between us.

Emerson refilled his glass. “To compare is unfair. We had prior training...and we were more than motivated after Chase.”

Spencer sniggered. “Speak for yourself. I was the best, and Uncle is just now realising.”

“Best at what?” I baited. “Meek beat you for the assessment in combat, and I beat you in weapons.”

Spencer’s cheeks blazed red, her fingers twitching around her knife. “No one can school me on infiltration and undercover jobs.”

“It’s kind of forfeit when your Variant lets you change appearance, Spence. Of course

you're not going to get caught," Emerson droned sarcastically.

And that's all she needed.

Spencer bolted from her chair straight over the cluttered bench, dishes and food flying in all directions.

Tanner wrapped a muscular arm around her waist as his other hand continued to shovel food into his mouth. I shook my head and continued my meal.

"It doesn't matter. I beat you in everything," he said, wrestling Spencer back into her seat. "All of you rely too heavily on your Variants. Apparently, I need to humble the three of you."

I groaned in unison with my sisters at his usual speech. Spencer finally gave up the struggle, not a hair out of place, her make up as immaculate as when I first walked in. If I hadn't seen her turn savage right in front of me, I never would have believed she was capable of it.

"Try to heal without your Variant now, Miss Righteous," Spencer said, grinning at the small scratch under Emerson's chin, who didn't escape completely unscathed.

Emerson double-checked the time. "I have to go, or I'll be late for the race. Update me tomorrow?" she asked Tanner. He spared a nod and she pressed a quick kiss to his hair. "Happy to have you back, bro. Someone has to control this demon."

We all chuckled except the demon herself, who narrowed her penetrating green eyes.

Emerson shrugged an oversized leather jacket over her biker gear, flipped her golden hair into a high ponytail and evaded Spencer's swipe as she danced around the scattered mess over the floor.

Spencer pushed back. “I better get going as well.”

“Uh-uh, demon lady,” I said. “Get your ass back here and clean this shit up.”

“And ruin my dress?” she asked, pinching at her gemmed gown.

Emerson giggled from the door. “Should have thought about that before you went all savage. I cooked the damn thing, the least you could do is eat properly.”

Spencer pinned a loose potato at her head, Emerson conveniently slipping through the exit at the last second.

We all watched the buttered potato slide down the wall in slow motion as a blonde head popped back through the door. “Yeah, clean that shit up.”

“Meeeeek!” Spencer shrieked.

Warmth radiated through my chest and a genuine smile curved my face. My gaze caught on Tanner’s, his signature side smile plastering firm, a dimple impressed into his stubbled cheek.

“Welcome home, Tan.”

“Good to be home, M.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Inmates packed into the games room, falling into cheap plastic chairs set in loose rows, all facing the ancient TV that stuttered to life up front. Averse to company, I deliberately chose an isolated seat in the back row to avoid contact with anyone.

The hour was late and the weather hadn't improved, the storm clouds casting an extra layer of despondency on my mood.

Burner insisted I stay, and I relented. Common everyday people were supposed to be intimidated by their boss, especially one as arrogant as him. He was a man used to being obeyed. Oakview Asylum his sanctum, where he enforced all manner of control.

However, he wasn't the only source of my ire. Psycho had reverted back to silence, refusing to engage or fulfil my requests for another session.

His reluctance was frustrating. His effect on me, infuriating.

The lights dimmed and the crowd hushed to hear the static volume, when the man in question entered and occupied the seat directly in front of me. It was embarrassing how hyperaware I was of his presence, the observation involuntary and entirely unwanted.

Psycho moved with a fluid grace that any dancer would envy, each motion purposeful and effortless. He swiped a hand through his midnight blue hair, the dark strands messily slicked back and so close I could easily reach out and rip them from his scalp.

That fucker sat there on purpose. His lingering scent mocked my unwarranted fascination, the brazen show of his exposed back displaying exactly what he thought of me. Fucking nothing.

Not a threat. Not a danger. Not even a blip on his risk radar.

Well, that shit was fucking broken.

Psycho wanted to ignore my existence. He was going to find out why that was never a possibility.

With the crowd distracted, I leant forward with undetectable movement, my lips lined directly up to his nape. “Still here, Psycho?”

A tremor raced down his spine and when he went to turn, a figure paced down the aisle towards me. I settled back in the uncomfortable chair and smoothed my expression.

Nurse Katsy—an attractive blonde with a large bust pushed up to her collarbones—slipped between us to drop into the seat beside me. I almost didn’t catch it, nearly missed the inconspicuous brush of contact as she passed. Her fingers deftly stroked the cut below Psycho’s jaw.

The cut. I. Fucking. Put. There.

Psycho stiffened under her flippant touch, and my lip curled as I tightly crossed my arms to prevent them from choking her out.

Who are they to one another? Is she the reason he hasn’t left, why he chose to remain here at Oakview?

Nurse Katsy released a dramatic huff, demanding my attention. “I can’t stand to watch this crap, to think it’s acceptable to have one of them on TV.”

My vision cleared on the program currently on-screen. A famous TV personality was in the middle of an interview, absentmindedly hovering a pen mid-air with his telekinesis. He made this action appear as a parlour trick, when he was most likely utilising the full extent of his power.

It was a common misconception to think Variants were threatening. In reality, most possessed minor abilities (usually not enough for personal gain, let alone being a threat to others).

We were a significant minority in the general population, but the unknown made people scared, and fear easily bred vicious, cruel people. I’d seen it, experienced the same: a never-ending cycle of hate reared from foolishness and ignorance.

Katsy tilted her chin to an awkward-looking teenager sitting in the front row who was one of my patients. After a couple of sessions, I quickly deduced he wasn’t a bad kid, but more a victim of circumstance and environment. At his time of conviction, he’d turned sixteen and was condemned as harsh and severe as any adult.

“Ace Cooks. He’s one of them. You should have seen the first time he stepped through the suppressant barrier. He cried like a baby,” Katsy said, not registering my distaste or silence. She never did.

Katsy was a self-absorbed gossip who got her kicks by manipulating her mediocre power over others. Her compliance was too easy; a few well-placed compliments and flattering remarks, and she was lapping that shit up like it wasn’t laced with poison.

Fern’s intimidating bulk shadowed the doorway, searching the crowd, zeroing in on Ace. “Cooks, Dr Mudlark has requested your presence in the basement.”



Terror electrified the air, sending uncontrollable shockwaves coursing through my veins. My senses lay hostage to the eruption of thoughts and emotions I absorbed from others around me; some relieved, others concerned, most filled with pity and fear.

Ace remained cowering in his seat, ignoring the request.

Fern sneered and launched his way, ready to physically drag him out by his hair. Distantly, I processed my body moving, my mind reeling to tackle my Variant into submission.

As Fern reached out to grab Ace, I was there, my fingers tightening on his outstretched wrist before he could make contact.

“Leave him.” My command was irrefutable.

I couldn’t stand touching him, and he couldn’t stand being challenged in front of a room full of his victims. I didn’t care, my eyes boring into his with that exact message. I refused to let go until he took the initiative to retreat a few steps, finding his composure.

A wordless battle, witnessed by the frozen crowd at my back.

“Dr Mudlark has prepared his treatment in the basement. He’s expected.”

I heard a whimper, which made me stand taller. “Ace Cooks is my patient, and I’ve not been informed of any plan or intervention. He will not be receiving treatment today, or any other day, until I myself provide approval.”

Fern clenched his jaw. “If you can inform Dr Mudlark tha—”

“No. You can inform him. If he has any issues, he can come to me directly.”

Fern hardly composed his spiralling rage. Turning on his heel, he stormed out the door. I was yet to meet the head psychiatrist, Dr Mudlark. For an enclosed facility, he was a hard man to find, appointments booked back to back. I questioned if he existed at all.

Background noise filtered back into awareness as I ignored the stares, veering for the exit myself.

Katsy awaited me there, her stupid, smiling face chipper as ever. “Don’t fret, Olivia. These men can’t help but be brutish, can they? There are much better ways—easier ways—to manage the inmates.” I lifted a brow at the audacity. She really had no insight whatsoever. She lowered her voice in a conspiratorial whisper. “Let me give you some advice. I’ve found the best way to make them behave is a reward system.”

“Like they’re toddlers?”

“Exactly. Take something away until they behave, then you can reward them by giving something in return. They’ll do whatever you ask.”

“And what do you ask for, Katsy?” My tone was lined with malevolence.

Katsy blushed, biting the inside of her cheek. With her aura emanating straight carnal lust, she practically screamed her indecent proclivities.

I made my escape, fed up with this farce. I had to get out before she was the subject of my own proclivity—to fucking murder.

I climbed high. Searching for a place of solitude, away from every single soul, where my faculties weren’t ambushed by toxic energy. Unintentionally, I found myself

outside on the main parapets of the castle, the rain subsiding for a short while. Leaning back against one of the circular towers, I closed my eyes.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I didn't know how long I remained in that position when the sharp hint of nicotine coated my nostrils. My eyes fluttered open to Psycho casually leaning against the battlements, perusing the courtyard below, ignoring my presence entirely.

I utilised the opportunity to study him, since that's all I was good for these days.

Psycho held a cold exterior, a firm expression settled in place, the perfect picture of mindless detachment.

In my dash for escape I had buried my Variant low, so fucking deep to escape the overwhelming rush of being drowned in corrupt filth.

Up there, amongst the clouds, I was content, able to breathe air back into my laboured lungs and filter out the poison from my overdosed system.

PSYCHO

I found her on the castle parapets. Eyes closed, face peaceful, demeanour calm.

I'd noticed immediately that her injuries had disappeared, as if our previous encounter never happened, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

The cut on my throat was still healing. It seemed unfair for her to leave her mark without mine to reciprocate.

Oh, how I desperately want to mark her golden skin.

They were all hidden now, but I'd never forget how every inch of her was covered in self-inflicted art. I was more than happy to explore her body for a space where I could stamp my own.

I kept on replaying her outburst in the games room. Was the homicidal intent that flashed in her eyes a figment of my imagination that I'd conjured on my own? I desperately hoped it was true. The fumes from her murderous glance towards Fern and Katsy made me fucking lightheaded and giddy.

I couldn't figure her out. Her defence of Cookie, intervening on his behalf, made me question everything.

Her nostrils twitched, alerting me out of my stupor. I shifted my gaze before she caught me staring. We were in stasis, neither one acknowledging the other. After a time, my resolve withered.

Just one look. Surely I can withstand a single glance.

My eyes involuntarily flicked in her direction to find her heading towards the open door to descend back into hell. I couldn't let her walk away without some form of recognition.

"Don't let them catch you slipping," I called, providing a word of caution, a vital piece of advice. If given a chance, any person in this joint would use that vulnerability to crush her into the ground. For some unknown reason, I couldn't stand the thought of that happening.

Her step paused, the only acknowledgement she'd heard the words as they drifted on the wind.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Ace joined me in my office, his lanky form dragging his feet along the floor. He had dark shadows beneath his teal eyes and his dirty blonde hair was spiked in disarray.

Externally, he portrayed a dishevelled teenager, which meant he was regularly underestimated. Ace was clever, his sharp mind constantly ticking over, hidden by his unimposing facade. He was quiet, however, extremely observant—seeing and hearing more than most.

His one tell was a worn silver lighter he was never seen without (empty of gas and virtually useless), which he compulsively flicked open and closed.

Ace slumped in the chair opposite, a constant rhythmic beat ticking between his fingers.

Click. Click.

He sat in a strange position, guarding his side from pain. Shuffling to get comfortable, his shirt sleeve lifted, flashing a series of bruises over his upper arm.

My brows rose. “Can you tell me where you got those?” His eyes leapt around the room, avoiding my gaze at all costs. “Shall I be more specific? Did you get those from Fern?”

Ace tensed at the guard’s name, not that I was surprised. Fern was a heavy-handed brute who found enjoyment beating on others. I gestured to the wound once again. “Was this because of what happened in the games room? Because I challenged him?”

Ace squared his shoulders. “Not a bother, Miss.”

Click. Click.

“I told you to call me Olivia,” I said. “Would you be more comfortable just referring to me as Doctor?”

He nodded. “You can call me Cooks, or Cookie, Mis—eh, Doc. Everyone else does.”

“Do you like that name? Cookie?”

“Not a bother.”

Click. Click.

“You say that a lot, ‘Not a bother.’ Is there anything that does bother you?” He didn’t answer, still choosing to avoid my questions. “What if you were released from Oakview? How would that make you feel?”

“Even if that was a possibility, there’s no point. No one out there is waiting for me. No family, no friends. All of them are dead,” he said with clinical accuracy, his voice void of emotion.

“Your file says you have a grandfather still living.”

His ritualistic movement paused. Teal orbs met mine and what I saw reflected back wasn’t a young seventeen-year-old, but more a hardened, matured man who had experienced a lifetime of despair.

“No one’s ever asked me about him before.” His head tilted. “When I said dead, I didn’t mean unalive in the ground ‘dead’. Technically, I have one living relative.

Figuratively, they may as well not be.”

Ace hesitated, pondering his next statement. “I know I’ll never get out of here...I’ve come to terms with that. But in case I don’t remember in the future, I wanted to say thanks. For saving me from the basement. For a little bit longer, at least.” He was despondent, accepting his fate.

“What’s in the basement, exactly? Dr Mudlark’s treatment area, right? The one place I haven’t been yet.”

Ace shuddered. “No need to go down there, Doc. You’re not missing out on anything.”

I relented and referred to the clock, which completed our session. With my hand on the exit, Ace clasped my shoulder. “Promise you won’t go down there. That you won’t go searching.” Amid his touch came the overwhelming impression of obligation. He believed he owed me, and in doing so, gave me his version of a warning.

His concern was unwarranted. I didn’t give a fuck about Oakview. Or the mysterious Dr Mudlark, for that matter. As long as it didn’t affect my mission or myself, I had no interest in exploring more than necessary.

“Not a bother, Ace,” I reassured him.

He flashed a crooked smile, squeezed my shoulder and departed.

I’d surprisingly taken a liking to the kid. Surprising in the sense that I never liked anyone aside from my family. I never had the patience or desire to pursue a connection outside of them. Every other person was considered cannon fodder, my Variant an additional barrier that prevented others from venturing near.

Bewildered, I remained stunned. His physical touch hadn't caused the world to upend into ruin. Instead, his presence was...tolerable.

What the fuck? This place is turning me soft.

The faster I left Oakview, the better.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Ishovelled food into my mouth, not even registering what I was eating.

My next appointment with Dr Chaser was the next day. I was conflicted in my decision whether to accept her invitation or not. I hadn't seen her since I'd caved earlier, my raspy voice breaking the strained silence between us.

Walter and his pack of mutts strode past my table, approaching the lunch line. They're what gave Oakview its haunting reputation: pack hunters that thrived on the pain and suffering of innocents, claiming insanity to escape a real prison. Now their group ruled the majority of Oakview, kissing Burner's ass to escape the mad scientist. Keeping order through violence and coercion.

Weak and pathetic. I loathe them.

Due to their cowardly approach, they never bothered with me. I was the apex predator, and they fucking knew it. They'd forgotten I was there (granted, most did). Regardless of my notoriety and past infamy, I kept to myself.

Technically, I wasn't a psychopath (in the literal sense of the word, anyway). Psycho was the name given to me in the Caverns, the title born from the fighting pits and renowned from my gladiator death matches in the arena. For anyone that had seen me publicly fight or kill, they'd whisper my name equally in awe and fear.

I felt nothing about my soulless deeds. No remorse, no regret.

To them all, I was a psycho. As for me? I didn't care how they saw me, as long as they left me the fuck alone.

Then Walter's sidekick, Zack, made a damning statement, cutting me out of my reverie. "I bet she has a sweet, tight cunt. I have my first session with her this afternoon. I'll find out for you all," he finished, licking his lips.

Walter cracked a laugh, his minions following suit. "No chance will you get with her. She's a fucking doctor. There is no way she will say yes."

"Who said she has to say yes?"

"You're fucking deluded. You wouldn't even get within an inch of her before Fern takes your ass out."

"Haven't you heard? Lil' Cookie said she takes her patient sessions alone. There's no cameras, and she refuses to have security inside her office. She likes her sessions to be private. Some new shrink thing."

Walter was livid, his ears reddening from the news. "When were you going to inform me of this?"

"I'm telling you now." Zack shrugged. "And I'll tell you how it feels when I rip her open once I'm done with her tonight."

Adrenaline rushed through my bloodstream and my brain split open from the inner beast carving at my insides, raging to get out. I didn't have to read him to know what he was thinking, because the same singular thought flooded my mind.

Destroy.

My body was taken over by instinct alone. Jolting to my feet, I launched towards him. No one noticed, the warning too late. With lunch tray in hand, I whipped it across his face, shattering his nose.

I didn't stop, couldn't stop.

I continued to pound the platter into his skull, over and over again. With a heaving chest and strained fingers, my grip faltered, the hunk of bent metal falling to the ground.

His mushed face was unrecognisable, his fractured form deathly still, crimson blood free-flowing to mix through my spilled noodles, strewn across the floor.

Ah, that's what I was eating for lunch. It was hardly appetising anyway.

I retrieved my smokes from the table, ignited one and veered for the exit. Everyone was frozen in place, security barring the walls and doorways. No one stepped up to try and stop me. Instead, they parted so I could walk through, unencumbered.

My beast was preening and I shut that shit down fast, not wanting to add to the growing internal conflict. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so unhinged. And it all came down to her. The bane of my existence.

I couldn't afford to act this way, and refused to dissect the reasons why I did what I did. It wouldn't happen again.

He'd find out, and I didn't want to contemplate the concept of him exploiting another weakness. So I wouldn't create one. I refused to acknowledge that it was even a possibility.

Resolution hardened my chaotic mind.

She was nothing. She was no one.

I couldn't afford for her to be anything else.

My memory hadn't given her beauty justice, even at night when I dreamed about her with my palm wrapped around my throbbing cock.

Which is why I'd given in.

We were back in her office, our gazes clashed as I removed the swipe card from my boot and slipped it over the desk between us. Lightning-fast, Dr Chaser reached out, fingers brushing over the back of my hand. Raw electric energy erupted from the light pressure, my skin tingling from the gentle caress. I suppressed a growl ripping from my throat as a thick wave of possession sparked in the depths of my mind, demanding I grab and plaster her body to mine.

My Variant danced along the edges of my consciousness, alert and thriving from my frantic call. However, the barrier's perusal was thorough, sucking away any semblance of power. It soon snubbed out the slight flicker of my ability.

Regret settled in my bones when Dr Chaser deposited the swipe in her pocket, out of sight.

Escape, freedom, revenge. So close, yet impossible to acquire.

I can easily take the swipe back and get the fuck out of here?

The idea left, wanting and half-hearted, no conviction behind the notion whatsoever. Despite my desperation to flee and hunt down the fucker that sent me here, there remained one obstacle that was entirely impenetrable.

I'd never risk Ava. Not ever.

Dr Chaser didn't say anything, or address the fact that I'd returned one of the most valuable gifts I'd ever been offered. And in doing so, I'd unwillingly revealed my one

weakness.

I never intended to escape. I turned my ire on her, switching my self-loathing on an easier target. One more accessible—and in the vicinity.

MICAH

Psycho was back to his silent, brooding self, as if our last encounter never happened, as if he didn't just give up his one chance of escape.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose to attention as his gaze drilled into mine with scepticism. My motives, my intentions, my very presence. All questions he sought to dissect the answers to.

I removed my lab coat and his black, greedy eyes sank into my tattoos. The further his stare lingered, his emotions intensified into pure, undeniable lust. Warmth shot over my bare skin straight down to my centre, my body humming in expectation.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I snapped. My physical response was always in conflict when we were together.

Psycho gave a smug smile. “You’re stripping off the wrong garment, Doctor.”

“It serves a purpose.”

“What purpose? To distract me with your feminine charm?”

“For some reason, I don’t think that would work.”

Psycho wanted me. I had no doubt. However, I could also feel his rigid will and ironclad resolve. Psycho did not trust me, and would never let his idled desire

overshadow the potential threat I posed. He wouldn't budge. Not without incentive or compromise.

I tilted my head in contemplation, assessing my next move. How was I supposed to gain information from a man that would never trust me?

"Why did you attack Zack yesterday? His face was unrecognisable. Did he take the last sandwich?"

"I don't like people touching what's mine," Psycho said.

Although we'd had minimal contact or conversation, Psycho was shockingly honest. Every word that he said in my presence rang with truth.

I leant forward, crossing my arms over the desk surface. "You have a reputation, Psycho. Not just in Oakview, but in Junction City. Did you have the same reputation in the Ludus Maximus, I wonder?"

Psycho mirrored my actions, leaning in to meet me halfway. I ignored the innate warning and continued with my outspoken inquisition.

I lifted a hand to trace the air above his arm, not quite making contact. "Rumours say that you have an alter ego buried within you. That you only let him out when you want to destroy or inflict pain." Psycho's eyes narrowed on my fingers, his muscles tensed to the brink of snapping. "That isn't true though. I understand now. There's more underneath it all, isn't there? You're not quite whole," I whispered the statement with hardly enough breath to formulate actual words.

He'd heard. Psycho slammed his fists against the surface, the table vibrating from the resounding echo.

My brow lifted at his outburst. “It isn’t a threat.”

I needed more insight into his core. I was desperate for a glimpse into his inner sanctum, and for that, I required physical touch.

When I reached for his wrist, his hand whipped out to tighten around my throat. “Don’t fucking touch me,” he seethed through his teeth.

Psycho’s entire entity shoved forth with aggressive assault, my Variant flaring to life. When I identified his ardent need, Psycho shoved me back, my neck tender from his grasp.

Without contemplating the consequences, I pulled a vial from my pocket, the stark red of blood shining brightly in the grey room.

I twisted the thin glass between us. “This contains an elixir that can counteract the suppressant barrier surrounding this asylum.”

“This gives you access to your Variant?” Psycho asked, his attention never deviating from my hand.

“Not its full effect, but yes. You will gain access to your Variant for a short period of—”

Psycho pulled on my wrists, hard and fast. My top half crushed to the desk, arms extended, my wrists held firmly together with one of his large, unrelenting hands. With the other, he leisurely brought a cigarette to his mouth and lit the tip.

“Stop playing with me, Golden Girl, or you’re going to get hurt. I’m not your whore that you can bend over and fuck whenever you please.”

“I can feel the battle within you, Psycho. This will help.”

“Why should I not shove this vial down your fucking throat?” He snatched the ampule from my limp fingers and examined the contents. “For all I know, this shit is laced with Devil’s Flower, and my days have come to an end. Why should I trust you?”

“You shouldn’t. You’d be a fool if you did.”

“Who are you? What do you want?” His interest was genuine. He was legitimately asking, searching for an honest answer. Any reservation I held dwindled before his sincere intentions.

I tugged on his hold, using his tight grip as leverage. Twisting my body upward, I lurched over the desk to crash into his lap, my legs straddling his hips.

Psycho hid his surprise well, exhaling smoke directly into my face. He released his hold to band his arms tightly around my waist, nil room for escape.

For this mission to be accomplished, his trust was a requirement. What I hadn’t anticipated was me wanting that trust. I desperately wanted him to believe in me—for me—and to gain that I had no choice but to make my own sacrifice.

I slowly raised my hands and placed them on either side of his face, restraining my fingers to tangle in his midnight blue hair. My Variant soaked my skin in blissful warmth, as if I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Gazing directly into his boundless eyes, I gave him a glimpse of myself in return.

“My name...my true name is Micah King. And what I want is what this world revolves around. Revenge.”



I reluctantly extricated myself from his lap and turned for the door, away from his grasp, vacant of his touch. He didn't stop me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Micah King. Ever since she had uttered those two words, I couldn't stop pondering her existence. The admittance was undeniable; the significance of giving me her name, trusting me with her identity. I couldn't fathom why she would give up such valuable information.

King...it rang a distant bell in my memory. The name once belonged to one of the four main powerhouses of Junction City's underworld. The brutal sacking of the Sovereign was legendary, and to this day it was only whispered in warning.

Besides old rumours, my knowledge was limited. As the Sovereign was wiped off the map, I was a minor fledgling fighter in the Caverns, not yet inducted into the Ludus Maximus.

If Micah was a part of this family, the revenge she spoke of would be long overdue.

Which left me wondering...what did her revenge have to do with me?

It was the dead of night, the four walls of my padded cell compressing on what little oxygen was available. The tiny cot creaked as I slumped down on the edge, the vial of red blood dancing in the reflection of my purple UV lamp in the corner.

Let's see what her words are worth.

I swallowed any lingering reservations and downed the contents. Coughing violently, I thumped my chest in an attempt to clear my airway, the metallic tang congealing to the lining of my throat.

I deserved to die choking on some random's blood, purely for being blindingly stupid. I used my last remaining seconds to curse out that wench, with the perfect body and alluring face.

Then the elixir spiked my bloodstream like a tidal wave, pumping the concoction through my system at high speed. I breathed a contented sigh, the power of my Variant coming to life like a long-lost soul, saturating every fibre of my existence, finally making me whole.

The relief and elation of being reunited with my Variant was purely euphoric...until the high wore off. The comedown definitely hit hard, my mind foggy with the gradual removal of my sixth sense.

Everyone was forced outside to enjoy the sun for lunch, laughter and smiles dominating the courtyard.

Per usual, I sat at a lonesome picnic table in the corner of the square. After five long weeks, I'd finally received a well-hidden note disguised inside the layers of my uneaten sandwich. And with this message, I had well and truly lost my appetite:

Haven't found her.

Won't stop 'till I do.

G

My heart sank. G was my last hope, and the one person left to rely on. Many months of correspondence had now all led to dead ends. If we were caught, we were all damned. A dreaded outcome I was unwilling to accept.

With his sacrifice for me and mine, the added loss of my Variant and the price I'd

have to pay for the delivery of this message, I was now wading in an endless pool of anguish.

I shoved the note into my mouth, chewed the paper to mush and swallowed those useless words down my throat. I couldn't take the merriment that accompanied the sunshine. I had to escape, or someone was going to die today.

Stomping across the courtyard, inmates and staff provided a wide girth, their attention directed elsewhere in case my ire found them. Except for one.

An inmate I'd never seen before stepped in my way, flowers woven through his long, matted copper hair that kept flicking me in the face. He tried to drag me into a circled waltz, laying a casual arm over my shoulder.

"Now let's turn that frown upside down, friend," he sang. "Our gracious sun has made an appearance and honoured us with her light."

The atmosphere charged with static, everyone on high alert. I attempted to detangle myself and escape before I ripped his arm clean out of its socket, but the hippy fucker couldn't read a room to save himself.

He was a slippery fiend, and when he pushed my shoulder to bow before the everlasting star, my patience evaporated. I backhanded him so hard he went sprawling across the grass, flowers flying all over. No one came to his aid, waiting in anticipation to see if I would kill him or not. They didn't realise I gained no satisfaction taking from the weak. This fool was legitimately crazy. He belonged here. I'd get no joy out of spilling his blood.

Trudging for the doors of the asylum, I heard inmates shuffling in the distance, coming to his rescue while my back was turned. Cowards. I halted in the corridor, glimpsing Micah and Burner in the empty mess hall. I couldn't hear them, although

judging from their mannerisms, they looked comfortable, awfully fucking chummy.

Burner leant in close, his wide smile on full display, no doubt retelling one of his winning jokes. What I wasn't prepared for was Micah's interest, her head tilted back and jaw slackened as she released a hearty laugh. Burner was clearly impressed by her enthusiasm, his hand landing on her lower back.

My teeth ground at the display. Luckily for them both, Micah stepped out of reach and walked away. Unluckily for me, she was coming in my direction.

I entered the first unlocked door I found, landing in a maintenance closet and waiting for the coast to clear. Her silhouette crossed my path, her glossy brown tresses mocking me as she swept by.

All my previous frustration, anger and sense of injustice came crashing in on me. I couldn't control myself when my hand whipped through the crack and snatched her.

In one fluid motion, Micah was slammed against the closed door. I wedged myself in front of her, crushing her into the hard surface with the whole pressure of me.

My fingers raised, tangled and fisted into Micah's hair, while hers surprisingly gripped onto the back of my shirt, squeezing me closer. I needed answers, and she was going to provide...or else.

"I tire of this game, babe," I said, voice strained and deadly. The same voice I used for all my victims. "Why did you give me that elixir? Are you fucking playing with me?"

"I told you. Revenge. That's what I want," she said, her sweet, toxic breath floating over my face.

I pulled her hair tighter and she shuddered. “How does that involve me? Fucking tell me.”

“Information,” she sighed. Her eyes roamed over my features, the space between us practically non-existent. I could feel every single inch of her. “I want you to tell me why you got sent here? What did you see? What did you hear? What happened for Maximus to turn his back on his most prized gladiator? What did you do, Psycho?”

I shook my head for clarity, my mind muddled and filled with smoke, completely consumed in her presence. Then her words filtered into my brain.

Micah wanted the one thing I’d never be able to provide, never be willing to sacrifice.

With her uttered demand, she had carried forth the fundamental end to our brief connection.

I’d never be able to see her again.

I pressed her even harder into the door, near the point of us both suffocating.

I will take this. One last time to feel her body against mine. One last time to drown in her scent. One last time to breathe in her air.

I grazed my nose up her exposed neck, to halt at the beauty spot perfectly located beneath her jawline. My tongue flicked out to lick my lips, inadvertently skimming across the mark.

Goosebumps chased my movements as they raised on her skin and I willingly soaked in each tremble, each shiver, each hitched sigh she so freely gave.

Tipping my head back, our lips barely scraped together when I whispered my verdict.

“Micah, baby, seems our liaison has come to an end.” It was the first time I’d said her name out loud, the syllables rolling off my tongue in perfect clarity, as if they always belonged there.

“You won’t even consider my request?”

“The risk is too high.”

“Ahh, so there is a reason why you voluntarily stay here. What have they got on you? I can help. You can trust me, Psycho.”

Trust?

A word I wish was never fucking invented. It had only caused turmoil and pain in my life. “Huh,” I scoffed. Her mask shone with sincerity. That’s when I realised she actually believed the shit she was spouting. “I think you truly believe that, don’t you? That you’re someone dependable, someone I could put my trust in? Well, it will remain an untested theory. With this, I trust no one.” I pushed off her, detangling my hold from her soft strands, and with a harsh sneer I ended our acquaintance. “Farewell, Golden Girl. Do not request to see me, do not approach me, do not talk to me. Leave quietly and never come back. This, right here,” I flicked my fingers between us. “Never existed.”

“If only it didn’t.”

Then her hands lifted to brace my jawline and before I could utter another word, she closed the distance to press her lips to mine.

I wasn’t a kisser. I didn’t kiss anyone, the caress too intimate and comfortable for my liking.

With Micah, the feeling was different. I inhaled sharply at the charged contact from the tender touch of her skin. Then my body took over without a coherent thought to lead it.

The predator was released, and she had no one to blame but herself.

I shoved her back and assaulted her in return. Biting her full lips, tasting her tongue, devouring her wet fucking mouth. My hands gripped onto her like a vice, skimming down her curved body to land beneath her thighs, lifting her legs off the floor. She automatically wound them tightly around my waist.

My girl wasn't a bystander, she was more than a willing participant. Micah's panting breaths mixed with mine, creating a symphony of lust and need. Her fingers ripped at my clothing, as if she wanted to tear me in half. I groaned down her throat as her nails dug into the back of my neck, my skin now a souvenir beneath her fingernails.

I was on the verge of losing my mind when she took command and rolled her centre over me, sliding against my obvious arousal. Her actions were desperate, she couldn't get enough. Hell, I couldn't get enough, both of us chasing the ultimate euphoria that only the other could provide.

A bell rang and rocked us back into reality. Lunch was over.

We froze, both opening our eyes at the same time. Micah's were lit with an undeniable fire, the inflamed amber sparking as bright as the sun—except this was one I would willingly bow down for.

Then all my previous reasoning came crashing back down on me. We had come to a stalemate, and there was no moving forward.

In rushed timing, we separated and corrected our clothes. I waited for her to leave so I



didn't have to touch her again, the enduring memory of her beneath my fingertips a warning call to my own dwindling restraint.

I flinched when she lifted my hand to place a glass vial into my palm, shutting my fingers over it for safekeeping. I didn't respond. I couldn't. She threw me, her actions gentle and soothing, the complete opposite from a moment ago.

Before I could register her movements, she lowered her head, lips skimming the back of my fist. "Good luck, Psycho."

Micah released me from her siren call, slipped through the door, and was gone.

I'd assumed I would be relieved. One less person to worry about, one less person to take something from me.

Instead, I was locked in this rundown shithole, gagged and bound without clemency in sight. My mind raced with the never-ending list of reasons why I could not trust her. It didn't help the ache in my chest that pulsed with the lingering thrums of regret.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

The air was crisp with unobstructed views of Junction City, a sprawling canvas of twinkling lights below.

I wrapped my arms around my bent knees and leant back against the gigantic dome of Variant Sanctorum.

Throughout history, Variants were revered to the point of being worshiped as godly beings, resulting in a full-blown religious following. Temples were commonplace and erected as sacred sites to allow believers to practice their beliefs.

Over the generations, technology naturally evolved, knowledge developed and the people's faith faltered in light of scientific questioning. Trepidation grew from what couldn't be explained and which once was considered prime divinity, now made us the enemy, condemned as godless creatures.

When I'd returned to the Temple, I bypassed dinner and escaped into the secret entrance, up through the altar, willingly getting lost in the endless recesses and winding staircases. One step led to another and I found myself at the highest vantage point in the city. A lone soul sitting on top of the largest towering dome standing directly centre of the opulent structure.

I was a coward. I couldn't bring myself to face my siblings. How could I tell them I failed? The first obstacle in gaining redemption for my lost family, and I had chosen the sacrifice of a stranger too much to bear.

Psycho's touch was imprinted into my flesh, severe as any brand; a stark awareness of my unquenchable need, and also an acute reminder of my weaknesses.

The iron platform vibrated beneath me as incoming steps ventured closer. My Variant flared with a familiar farewell, sinking into my pores. A necessary sacrifice I would always welcome with the comfort of having Tanner near.

Tanner settled down next to me, stance casual, expression bored, his wavy brown hair curling at the ends. In public, Tanner came across impassive and indifferent, like nothing mattered. Like the world didn't matter. If only that were true. Tanner hid his straight masculinity and unpredictable malevolence beneath an air of aloofness, easily deceiving others that weren't intuitive enough to separate the two. He was the most dangerous of us all. And still, he remained—and always will be—our brother.

“Spencer's gone postal. You missed dinner,” he said, his breath wafting vapour into the frigid atmosphere.

“I turned off my phone.”

“Should we be concerned?”

“I just needed a minute...to think.” A single raindrop fell from the sky, hitting my arm. I lifted a finger to trace it. “How'd you find me?”

Tanner rubbed at his stubbled jaw. “When you were younger and your Variant became overwhelming, you'd always climb to the highest possible location, seeking solitude away from others. Why do you think Spencer isn't here right now?”

I snorted. He wasn't wrong, naming one of the advantages of venturing high. Otherwise Spencer would have dragged me to the dinner table herself.

Despite the increase of intermittent raindrops that filtered from the rumbling clouds, Tanner remained steadfast at my side. He never pried or pushed for information. He'd stay here all night and not say a word, if that's what I wished.

With a hesitant inhale, I expressed my conflicted point of view. “I can’t get the information from Psycho. He refuses to give me anything.”

“There are other ways to persuade someone to talk, as you well know.”

“I can’t use those methods on him. I...I don’t know if I can.”

“Your feelings are that serious?”

My feelings were serious enough that they were already compromising the mission. I didn’t want to admit the ridiculous failure, so I asked a question instead.

“How’d you know Chase was the one?”

Tanner had not recovered from her loss. I wasn’t sure he ever would. Their love was genuine and all-consuming, and despite their young age the bond was real. I saw their connection with my own eyes, sensed the intensity through my Variant.

It was almost comical how such blissful happiness could be shattered in a single moment in time. After bearing witness to the painful aftermath, I couldn’t help but wonder, ‘who’d ever wish for that?’

“Is that what this is with him? He’s your person?”

“I don’t know. My Variant has always led me true and never faltered. Should I follow the path that I’m being led towards?”

“Is it your Variant? Or is it you, Micah? You’ve never known anything other than feeling what others feel, knowing someone’s heart before they even know themselves. What’s in yours?” He pointed to the middle of my chest.

I hung my head, meandering his words. I honestly didn't know. My Variant was an innate part of my psyche. I'd never had to compartmentalise my ability before, the thought alone disconcerting.

I huffed, no closer to the answer. "I wish she was here. She could have told me what made her leave Reeds for you."

"Pfft. As if he could ever compare," he said, his gaze clashing with mine.

I laughed at the blatant truth. As soon as Chase and Tanner met, there was no other for her—her boyfriend at the time included.

Will I regret breaking Psycho to gain the information that I covet? Will what I receive in return be worth the price?

Tanner's gaze didn't falter from my own, his suddenly clouded over with memory as he unintentionally got lost in my amber eyes—eyes that were exactly the same as my older sister's, Chase.

A sharp spike of desperate longing escaped his form, quickly to be shut down again. His emotions must be severe if they managed to escape his Variant and ricochet into mine.

That happened occasionally. Usually when he was staring at me. This wasn't lust or want, more the yearning for his previous lover. Out of all four sisters, Chase and I took after our father and looked the most alike.

Tanner blinked and visibly shuddered, attempting to shake off the fragments of past tragedy. We never spoke of those moments, our mixed pain potent enough without voicing them into reality.

“What will you do?” he asked.

I heaved in a long, steady breath, succumbing to my wrought emotions, submitting to my shame. “I have no choice but to leave. He’s unable to give me what I need, and I’m unwilling to use the methods to force the answers from him. I wouldn’t forgive myself.”

Tanner nodded. “If that’s what you wish.”

“Are you disappointed?”

“Each one of us has sacrificed so much to get here. I don’t expect for you to give even more, Micah. Neither would our sisters. I don’t want that for you, Chase wouldn’t want that for you. Don’t sacrifice what you find sacred, otherwise what you become by the end will be unrecognisable.”

“I’ll remain at Oakview until the Fundraiser Ball. Then I’ll leave.” It was an upcoming event attended by the social elite of Junction City. It would be remiss to forfeit the opportunity.

We remained in companionable silence, the city sounds drifting up to keep us company.

I eventually tipped to the side, my head resting against his shoulder. “I miss her. I’m sorry you lost her so young.”

“I am too.” He leant his cheek against the crown of my head. “But with her loss, I also gained all of you. I wish I was a part of your family with Chase by my side, however that doesn’t make me any less grateful.” Tanner drew an elongated breath. “There is nothing I hold higher than being your brother. It’s an honour that I dreamed and came into fruition through the worst of circumstances, and yet I wouldn’t change

this for the world. We are the last remaining heirs of the King bloodline, and we will live up to our name.”

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

As predicted, Nurse Katsy didn't wait long to claim her payment.

Self-loathing peppered my insides as her signature one-two knock sounded at my door; a vibrant beat that infected each and every cell in my body with disgust. In grumbling protest, I hauled the door open to a simpering, pathetic sight.

Nurse Katsy attacked me with lustful fervour, tearing at my clothes, sharp claws snatching at my flesh. Each time she came to visit, she was like a bitch in heat, frothing for my cock, begging for a taste.

I couldn't stand the fucking sight of her...and I also couldn't risk her opening her big mouth and telling the rest of the Terror Squad about my correspondence with G. So, if I had to fill that gaping jaw to stop the words spilling from her lips, then that's what I'd do.

She attempted to kiss me.

Strike fucking one.

I roughly shoved her to the ground and slammed the door shut. "What the fuck are you doing? Anyone could have seen you! There are cameras in the corridor."

Unperturbed, she rose to her knees and tore at my waistband. "I'll delete the footage, as I always do," she said, slanting her lips into what she imagined was a seductive pose. "There are no cameras in here, though. We can do what we want."

In record time, she had unzipped my pants and pulled my trunks out of the way.



Before she could grab my soft cock, I broke her advance, using a firm hand. “No further without a condom. You know the deal.” My tone was unrelenting. As if I wanted more of her touch than necessary. I’d take any barrier that I could get between us.

Katsy pouted, and I wanted to slap the expression off her face. “You aren’t even hard yet.”

I snatched the wrapper from her eager fingers and palmed myself, yielding with hard, punishing strokes. Closing my eyes, thoughts scattered through my skull, all of Micah.

I replayed the kiss we shared, the feel of her honeyed skin under my rough touch. A groan escaped my closing throat, my dick throbbing from the desperate need to have her as I slipped the condom on.

“Look at you, so hard for me. You missed me, didn’t you?” A female voice cut through my mind with the effect of a cold shower, my cock shrinking from the unwanted intrusion. I looked down at the woman kneeling at my feet and when she opened her mouth to provide more commentary, I shoved forward, filling her throat.

Strike fucking two.

Re-closing my eyes, I retreated back to the promised land. Blonde tresses transformed into glossy brunette strands and brown, dead orbs converted into blazing amber irises.

My eyes peeled open at a quiet click of the door. Katsy remained on her knees, eating my dick in long, uncoordinated strokes, consumed in her ministrations. That wasn’t even the most disturbing sight.

My favoured hallucination appeared in the flesh. Micah popped her head through the

crack of the door, her eyes roaming over the scene laid out before her. I watched a flash of hurt flicker over her face before a blank mask came slamming down in its place. Without a word of farewell, she silently shut the door, as if she was never there to begin with.

My chest and dick completely deflated. I shoved Katsy away and launched for the exit, readjusting my pants at speed.

Strike fucking three.

I found Micah in the maintenance closet, the very same one where we shared our first kiss.

How fucking ironic.

Micah leant against the far wall, hands flat beside her, chest heaving, eyes closed. I'd never seen her that unbalanced.

I blindly flicked the lock and approached her with caution. "What's the matter, babe? Jealous?" I tried to come off light-hearted, but instead the words grated like daggers.

She shoved me back, my step faltering. Her strength was surprising. Micah attempted to push past without coming into direct contact. She failed only because I blocked her exit with my broad frame.

"Why'd you come to my room?"

Her perfectly plump lips lifted into a sneer. "Fern told me to check on you. Said you requested to see me."

That prick. He'd definitely caught Katsy sneaking around on surveillance. I shoved a

hand through my hair. “He’s watching the cameras. Probably knows we’re in here right now. Fuck!”

“Then let me leave.” Micah tried to push past me again, but there was no way that shit was going to happen unless she wanted to throw down right then and there. From the look on her face, the last thing she wanted to do was touch me (or be anywhere near me, for that matter). Bitterness crept up from my gut at the revulsion in her eyes.

“I told you to leave. To go and never come back. Forget about me.” Those last words tore my throat apart from their reluctance of being released.

“Don’t worry. After the fundraiser ball, I’m gone.” Her statement fractured something inside me. I raised my hand—to do what? I don’t even know. She flicked my fingers away with a sharp snap of her wrist, the motion bruising. “Don’t fucking touch me,” she said, blasting me with my own words.

Why the fuck did I come after her? What fucking right does she have getting angry at this situation, anyway? No one should be angrier than me.

“You think I want to touch that fucking woman? Think I want to give up my dick for that desperate bitch?! I was providing payment. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Micah scoffed. “What, you’re her whore?”

I pressed into her, my hand snaking upward to twine in her hair, wrenching her head backward.

“That’s exactly what I am.” My teeth ground together, the enamel cracking under the pressure. “And when I’m done with all of this, done with this fucking place, she will regret the day she ever degraded me into a fucking prosthetic sex toy she could command.”

A flash in my periphery was my single warning before Micah's fist made contact with my face, simultaneously pulling herself free from my hold, her features clear with betrayal.

"That's it, though. You'll never be done with this place. You will never escape, never leave. You're a willing prisoner in a jail of your own making." Her words cut into my chest as swift and sharp as any knife. "I offered you help. You denied me. Now live with the consequences."

Micah fully bodychecked me and charged out the door. I didn't even have the strength to stop her, feeling as little and insignificant as my actions deemed me to be. I wouldn't follow, wouldn't justify my reasons. I was someone that was worthy of this fate, and she was right. I had to deal with the consequences.

You let her leave...again.

The declaration pushed me over the edge. What little resolve I had completely shattered as I proceeded to destroy the room around me, attempting to smash the walls down to accompany the remnants of my lost dignity.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I was in a foul mood as the disturbing sight played in my mind on repeat. Katsy on her knees, Psycho thrusting into her panting mouth. I wanted to destroy him, repeatedly shattering that stupid face.

Even worse, I still couldn't bring myself to torture him for the answers I required. I wasn't lying to Tanner. Even with Psycho's latest escapade, I didn't know if I was capable.

I cringed internally at my own uselessness, now my constant companion.

Maybe I should kill him and remove this unfounded weakness. It was a weakness I had never experienced before. I wasn't a runner, but I knew when to cut my losses. I had to leave before my identity was jeopardised.

I burst into Burner's office without knocking, and came up short to find him in deep conversation with Katsy. Their speech hushed as they turned to me in unison, both sporting fake, welcoming grins.

"I'm glad you're here, Olivia," Burner said. "You've heard the news then?"

"News?"

"Some idiot has threatened chemical warfare on the city."

My brows lifted. What the fuck did he just say? Surely I misheard.

Katsy giggled at my expression. "The government has released a city-wide alert.

Everyone is to stay indoors until the threat has been neutralised.”

I ignored them, grabbing my phone and scrolling through numerous unread messages.

Spencer: Let’s go shopping. I need a few more dresses.

Tanner: No.

Emerson: You’ll get poisoned and die.

Spencer: The government’s a conspiracy.

Tanner: True. Still, the answer is no.

Spencer: Micah? What do you think?

I rolled my eyes before typing out a reply.

Micah: Veto the shopping, Spence. Save it for another day.

Spencer: Too late.

Image Received

Attached was a selfie of Spencer wearing a gas mask. Where she got that, I had no idea. Another image followed straight after: Emerson pulling hard on Spencer’s hair, the shot blurry with movement.

I ran a loose hand down my face and sighed.

Katsy aimed for the exit, her arm skimming mine as she passed. “Looks like we’re

stuck here all night. Let's have some fun together."

Red filtered into my vision and my fingers strained tight, digging into my phone. My expression remained clear as I counted my respirations, re-establishing equilibrium.

When I was stabilised, Katsy was gone and Burner remained at his desk, perusing the official warning directive from the government.

He flicked a reassuring gaze my way. "I know this isn't ideal, but a chemical weapon is a serious matter, and you'll be safer indoors. We will ensure your comfort as best we can."

I nodded, sparing another glance at my phone.

Tanner: Greattttt. Now you're contaminated.

Spencer: OMG! I swear I can't breathe.

Emerson: And yet, she has enough breath to keep on whinging. Stay where you are, Micah. The threat is around the corner from Oakview.

I swear, I couldn't make this shit up if I tried. If Emerson was concerned, the threat must be legitimate.

Since I was trapped and opposed to the idea of gassing myself alive, I had to remain in character until I could officially leave for good.

Burner offered Katsy's empty seat. "While I've got you, I wanted to say how impressed I am with your work. No psychiatrist has lasted more than one session with Psycho."

No shit. Psycho wasn't here to be rehabilitated, he was here to be punished.

Besides the Caverns and famed fighting pits, Ludus Maximus was an influential crime organisation that provided security and soldiers to the world's elite. Maximus had enough jurisdiction and power to influence if someone was to remain locked up or not.

Burner continued with his worthless drivel. "Except you. I'd be lying if I didn't wonder what you talked about in your sessions. No security, no protection, no witnesses. He must trust you."

My ears pricked at the underlined insinuation. I'd underestimated Burner's observation skills.

I leant forward and softened my features. "I'll tell you," I said, lowering my voice in conspiring camaraderie. "If you win."

His eyes sparked with interest. "Win what?"

"Whatever game you choose."

Burner was a gambler, his personal traits synonymous with his addiction; irregularities with his work performance, mood, personality and appearance. The fact that I'd sifted his bank account also helped. Despite the money he'd embezzled from Oakview Asylum, Burner remained in debt beyond repair.

He scuffed his chair closer, eyes gleaming. "Alright, Doctor. We have the Fundraiser coming up, and I want to make an impact on Mayor Arthur Oakview. More importantly, I want to use you to make that impact. If the Mayor hears of the progress you've made with Psycho, he may be inclined to donate more money."



“Stakes?”

Burner steepled his fingers. “If you don’t gain his favour, you tell me what’s discussed in your sessions.”

“Okay.” His aura flared at my simple agreement.

“What about you, Olivia? What do you want if you win?”

I stood, pivoting for the door. Adopting a flirtatious tone, I said, “The satisfaction of beating you is reward enough.”

Burner started, a grimace splitting his eager expression. “Call Fern to me. He’s in the treatment baths assisting with hydrotherapy.”

A shiver ghosted my skin at his statement, my steps growing heavier the closer I climbed to my intended destination.

The tiled room was clinically white, a glossy sheen mirroring grotesque reflections.

A handful of inmates were stripped to their briefs as Fern sprayed them with a high-powered hose (which was predominantly aimed in Psycho’s direction).

Psycho had braced himself against the wall at a strange angle, bearing the brunt of the pressure, protecting Ace, who was huddled behind him.

Nurse Katsy stood aside, a clipboard clasped to her chest, chewing on the end of her pen, her gaze tracking over Psycho’s naked flesh.

I stilled. If I ventured any closer, my Variant would engulf all rational thought and only instinct would remain. For the survival of all others, I couldn’t let that happen.

“What is the meaning of this?” I asked through clenched teeth.

Katsy flinched. “Dr Chaser. I told them to tell you—”

I raised a hand, her words halting from her venomous mouth.

Fern paused his assault and raised a smug brow. “Dr Mudlark ordered hydrotherapy for these patients. We are completing his treatment authority.”

Whimpers echoed from the far wall, frail bodies dripping with ice-cold water.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Calm yourself.

“Dr Mudlark has no jurisdiction over my patients. Maybe I should pay him a visit, if only to remind him of the conditions required to practice as a doctor in Junction City?”

Fern scowled and Katsy averted my piercing observation.

“Ace Cooks, come with me,” I said.

The remaining patients cowered, however they remained in their positions. They weren’t assigned under my care, so I didn’t have the power to remove them from this heinous treatment.

Turning for the exit, Ace stumbled behind, teeth chattering loudly.

I swallowed the traces of lingering guilt deep down in my gut. It was an emotion I wasn’t attuned to, nor one I wanted to cultivate. I couldn’t save them all.

Before I could pass the threshold, Fern called for my attention. “What about Psycho?”

He's yours."

I glanced over my shoulder. Although he was quivering, Psycho remained resolute and magnificent.

Staring straight into his black holes, I replied, "Is he?" Fern chuckled.

Psycho's eyes bore into me, their weight heavy. You're actually going to leave me here?

I huffed. "Fern. Burner wants you in his office."

"I'll be there soon," he replied, before turning the hose back on full blast.

I spared Psycho half a shrug in farewell.

Deal with the consequences.

Ace sank into the chair opposite, his eyes bouncing off my office walls. Tonight he seemed off-kilter, more anxious than usual, his lighter clicking at an alarming rate.

The hydrotherapy incident was hours ago. Dinner had passed and pre-bed rituals had commenced.

I continued on with my sessions booked for tomorrow, hoping distraction would help with my twisted emotions and the suffocating feeling of being trapped.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Can we...can we turn off the lights?"

“Why?”

“I’d feel more comfortable. Please, Doc, I promise I’m not up to no good.” He was genuine, the request hard for him to admit.

I nodded reassuringly and extinguished the lights, his agitation easing away as darkness took hold and his breathing steadied into a mellow, soothing stream.

Blindly recollecting my seat, I spoke into the blackened space. “Is that better?”

“Yes, Doc. I prefer the dark.”

“Some would say it’s safer. Easier to hide or disappear.”

Ace flinched at my observation. “You’re right. Most don’t like losing their vision. It makes them scared, uncomfortable, not realising that demons come searching no matter the time of day. The dark has only ever been my friend.”

“You’re a Variant, aren’t you?” He retreated into himself, scared to admit what was biologically passed down from birth, what he was most likely targeted for. “There’s no need to fear. So am I.”

Ace laxed from the knowledge, sinking further into his chair. I was glad to be able to give him some semblance of comfort.

What the fuck is happening to me? Comfort? I really have lost the plot.

He couldn’t help but ramble, glad to talk to someone about something so ingrained. “I have night vision. Well, outside of here, anyway. When I was younger, I’d have to say ‘lay low’ for my Variant to be triggered. As I aged, my ability became automatic. I come alive in the dark, like I can breathe easier here.”

His speech naturally tapered off, his fond description catching me in the vestiges of a past life. Memories where my sisters and I discovered our own abilities, learning and teaching through each other. I didn't realise how long I'd gone without speaking, reliving those formative years.

Clearing my throat, I crashed back to the present as Ace contemplated his next words, hesitating before following through with whatever was on his mind.

"Doctor, you seem...sad."

"Hmm. I'll be leaving Oakview soon. So I guess I do have a certain melancholy air about me."

"You're right to leave, Doc. You're not like the rest of them. You do right by Psycho, leaving before the evil of this place consumes you."

Observant, indeed. "What evil, Ace?"

"Your colleagues, Doc. They ain't good people." I couldn't blame him. They were vile humans, but the poor boy had us confused. Little did he realise that I was capable of far more evil than they ever possessed.

"I must say, tonight does feel particularly ominous," I said, referring to the city-wide lockdown.

"Well, today's Wednesday, ain't it?" I could hear him shuffle into a more comfortable position. "When the Terror Squad of Oakview comes out to play. Security Fern the brute, Nurse Katsy the sexual deviant, Manager Burner the thief. And everyone's least favourite, Dr Mudlark, the mad scientist." I froze, soaking in his descriptive narrative as he released a soft chuckle. "I actually thought you called for me so you could send me down for experimentation, Doc. I was shitting my fucking

pants. I should have trusted you...although I never would have guessed that you would leave Psycho to the mercy of them,” he hummed. “Or maybe that’s a good thing, so he can’t remember you. Come tomorrow, there won’t be much left of him, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” My tone was low and airily menacing.

Ace choked in disbelief. “You didn’t know?”

I shoved upright. “Where is Psycho?”

“They took him down to the basement, Doc.” His voice cracked with each word.

“They took him to the mad scientist.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

“It’s your one-year anniversary. Did you know that, inmate?” Fern taunted. Apparently I had an annual appointment to attend, a debrief of sorts, to discuss my progress as a patient.

I hadn’t seen Micah since she’d left me at the mercy of the Terror Squad, and I couldn’t help feeling I had lost.

Fern led me further into the castle, down passageways I’d never ventured to before.

My hackles raised at the change of location. The corridor looked exactly the same as every other: clean, grey, bland. But it felt different, more clinical—plus a hint of misery, coating the walls. My jaw set as my eyes scanned the surroundings, instincts enhanced, searching for any threats.

Turn back.

Fern opened a random iron door that looked 100 years old and stepped aside for me to enter. I arched a brow and turned 180 degrees, intending to backtrack.

My ego got the better of me. I believed my reputation and status alone would be enough to protect me from future conquest, from letting idiots attempt to touch, or even be in the same vicinity as me.

So far, I’d been accurate. My stay here was fucking depressing, but during this year of incarceration no one had ever dared to challenge me, preferring to leave me to my self-inflicted wallowing and self-pity.

Until now.

I was jerked backwards by my jacket, and without hesitation I twisted, using the momentum to forcibly ram my fist into Fern's nose.

A resounding crack and painful cry rang in my ears, causing a manic grin to spread across my lips. It didn't falter when four guards swarmed into the corridor, rushing to aid their boss.

Even without my suppressed Variant, I was more than equipped to deal with these low-grade security guards.

Ludus Maximus was the criminal syndicate renowned for producing elite fighters and indestructible soldiers. Specialising in MMA, weapons and all aspects of mortal combat. And me? I was the best of them all.

They will kneel and beg for mercy before Psycho, the undefeated champion of the motherfucking Caverns.

My shoulders rolled back, severing the last vestiges of restraint holding my festering rage. "Let's play."

Fern backed away, cradling his nose, blood seeping through his fingers as he cowered in shock. His minions didn't waste time invading my space.

The first crouched low, launching to tackle me to the ground. I used his neck as an anchor, tipping him off-balance, the force pushing him headfirst into the hard stone wall. He toppled to the ground, gravity doing the rest.

The remaining three shuffled closer, warier in their approach. At least they were smarter.



Fern remained an overzealous bystander.

“Pussy,” I mouthed.

His impressive scowl carved deeper into his ugly face, but it still wasn’t enough to lure him into the fold.

I had to control my position. If they closed the circle at my exposed back, that would be the end for me and my reputation.

Reluctantly, I side-stepped into the padded cell, backing into the furthest corner. A full-length mirror dominated an entire wall, reflecting the scene from all angles.

I’ll enjoy this.

I tracked their advance with a predator’s precision.

They all followed except for Fern, who locked the iron door behind them, enclosing a supposed clinically insane psycho in a room amid three victims.

The first came tunnelling forward, her motions amateur at best. She was the only female in the group. I panicked. I’d never hit a girl before.

Reacting on instinct alone, I blocked her assault, and when my punch was about to make contact, my fist unfurled. Instead she copped an open-handed palm straight across the face, the slap hard enough to snap her neck to the side. She was dazed, her footwork shotty when she tipped to her knees.

“Sorry,” I said, in a tone that wasn’t sorry at all. “Gender equality and all that.”

Crouching low, I had little time to prepare for the next. His face was red, eyes

bulging from their sockets, veins popping from his flesh.

“You have to lay off the steroids, man. They won’t help you in this fight.”

His reply was a chesty snarl, more animal than human. I was impressed. If it was anyone else, they’d probably be intimidated.

We parried a few shots, his technique better than the last one. In the end, his anger overshadowed his defensive skills.

When he charged forward for an offensive strike, I dodged. Rotating back to build momentum, I launched a kick forward. He raised his arms to defend his head, realising too late that wasn’t my aim. My boot ricocheted into his solar plexus, his chest concaving at the sudden impact. He immediately keeled over, gasping for oxygen to fill his deprived lungs.

I cracked my neck from side to side, ready to disable the third and final, when a distinct click and sharp hissing sounded from above. Gusts of white vapour filtered through the vents in each corner of the ceiling, the space filling with thick smoke at an alarming rate. The two guards closest to the oncoming gas began to cough and clutch at their chests.

Fuck this for a joke.

I ripped my jacket off and knotted the sleeves tightly around the lower half of my face as a makeshift filter. Using my last remaining strength, I proceeded to slam against the mirrored wall, hoping it led to an adjoining room, knowing I’d never get through the iron door.

Get the fuck out! Get the fuck out!

My steps staggered, my feet heavy.

It was harder and harder to lift my limbs. My brain was foggy, thoughts delayed and disjointed. All my focus was consumed by the one and only need for escape.

My throat contracted and my legs buckled beneath me as I faltered down to one knee.

The mirrored wall in front abruptly cleared into a window, blue eyes staring back at my crumpled form, filled with sheer hatred.

Fern held his crooked nose as blood continued to pour down his body. He pushed a button on a side panel and spoke into a microphone, his voice rebounding through the room.

“You really are a fucking psycho, aren’t you? That’s why you’re here, so we can cure you.”

“YOU’RE A FUCKING PUSSY ASS BITCH!” I screamed, my throat strained from the poison. Raising a finger, I pointed straight at the vile fucker through the display window. “I’m going to fucking kill you,” I promised.

He laughed. The idiot actually laughed at me.

My body shook from murderous intent. Or was it from the medication racing through my bloodstream? Either way, I was lost to it.

“You, kill me? After what they have planned, I find that hard to believe.” He laid a red-stained hand against the glass, smearing the surface with his decrepit life force. “You think you’re special? You think you’re important? They’re going to drill a hole in the middle of your fucking skull and turn your brain into goo. When we see each other again, I’m going to have to talk to you in single syllables. I will remind you of

this little conversation, but I doubt you will even remember,” he finished with a triumphant grin.

In one last-ditch effort, I roared with all the energy I had left, my fist launching forward, using his head as the target. My bones screamed at the force—which was entirely worth it when the window splintered on impact. Absolute satisfaction buzzed through my system as the last image I processed was Fern’s face, draining of all colour. The protective glass between us shattered to the ground, and I along with it.

Shadows danced at the edge of my vision, light intermittently filtering through before evading me once again. Distant voices resonated through my hazy mind, trying to differentiate each person and what they were saying.

Scuffed footsteps approached my limp body (that would not respond to any of my demands). “Look at this damage. I told you I wanted this to be clean. There are four unconscious staff members here, Fern. Why was the gas released while they were still in the room?”

“I apologise, sir.” I know that voice, that surly bastard’s voice (which was thankfully still laced in pain). “It required a lot for us to detain him. We could only subdue him through the gas, which wouldn’t have been effective if the rest of my team weren’t able to keep him here.”

A dramatic huff immediately followed, which could only belong to Manager Burner. “It’s too late now. Take him into theatre. Dr Mudlark has everything prepared. We are going ahead as planned.”

“Yes, sir.” The gutless pussy.

Distantly, I could feel my body being dragged and lifted (not fucking gently, either). Up and down stairwells, pushed and pulled through doorways, the turbulent motion

making me dizzy.

One image recurrently dominated my mind: the mysterious siren who charged into my life. During my whole stay in Oakview, she was my one single regret, the aftershocks of her loss cutting deeper than the knife she'd previously held against my throat, more directly stabbing into my chest.

They strapped my limbs and head to a wheeled stretcher in the centre of a clinical operating room, surrounded by hospital trolleys of medications and equipment. A high-pitched sound pierced my ears, the distinct hum of a power drill rotating at speed. Fern's words played on repeat.

They're going to give you a fucking lobotomy. Get up. GET UP!

I thrashed against the restraints, releasing a desperate, almighty roar.

"Calm yourself, child. Stop moving. I don't want to make a mess." Dr Mudlark's words spurred me on, slurred profanities and growls spilling from my mouth as the buzzing grew louder. I could have sworn the fucking drill was right next to my ear, when a door slammed open with a resounding boom.

"DROP YOUR FUCKING HANDS RIGHT THIS SECOND, BEFORE I PULL THIS TRIGGER AND IT'S YOUR brAINS THAT SPLATTER THESE FUCKING WALLS!" A familiar voice thundered through the space, the constant hum subsiding as the machine paused.

"Doctor Chaser? Where'd you get a gu—"

"I said. Drop. Your. Fucking. Hands." Her voice flipped from outward screaming to barely audible, which was even more terrifying. No one could deny she was not playing around. She had come for me.

My golden girl.

Impressively, Dr Mudlark didn't back down, and actually tried to one-up the woman. "I am following the treatment plan, as per his initial evaluation twelve months ago."

"I am his doctor now. How dare you commence an operation of this magnitude without my input or consent? Leave, before I report you to the authorities for your inhumane practices."

"Women," he scoffed under his breath.

"What did you say?" her voice dipped lower in menace.

"Nothing, nothing."

"You will no longer have any contact with my patient. If I hear that you have so much as looked through his file? You. Will. Regret. It. Do you hear me? That means all of you."

They all agreed with under-toned grunts. Three sets of hesitant footsteps shuffled out the door, which was slammed shut and locked behind them.

My chest glowed and if I wasn't physically inept, I'd readily drop to my knees and worship at her altar. I felt the exact moment the tight restraints were pulled and loosened from my body. A gentle hand tracked down the side of my face, the impression delayed but so welcome. Then a sharp sting lanced in its place.

My eyes flickered open and my vision cleared on the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

Micah King.

I almost laughed at the fucking absurdity of it all.

“Did you just giggle?” she gasped in disbelief.

“Did you just slap me?” was my slurred reply.

“Sorry?” she asked with nil remorse written into her features whatsoever.

Oblivion was fast approaching. I could feel the drug sedating my system, distorting my senses, when all I wanted was to stay right there—in that moment with her.

“You stopped them from cleaving into my brain. Maybe you should have let them. I am insane, you know.”

“If being a Variant makes you insane, then I’m just as insane as you are. No one deserves this type of barbaric treatment, Psycho.”

“August,” I muttered.

“August?”

I groggily lifted my hand, a stray finger outlining her plump lips.

“Don’t call me Psycho. Call me August.”

A trace of a smile lifted beneath my fingertip. “Sleep, August. I’ll look over you.”

And fuck me, did I believe her.

As blackness invaded my awareness once more, I welcomed the onslaught without any regret or anger.

I had given her my name—and with it, so much more.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Iroused with a groggy start, a pleasant weight pressing against my side, the even inhale and exhale of her breath fluttering against my neck.

Micah was caught in a deep sleep, draped half on top of me, sharing the stiff stretcher. I turned on my side, careful not to rustle her awake. Her cheek was using my upper arm as a pillow, which was dead beneath her head. I'd never been more comfortable.

With both of us laying on our sides, my face was an inch away from hers. I couldn't resist when my fingers began to roam over her form. She was so close, so available, so breathtakingly near. I had to feel that she was real; a living, breathing entity, and not a phantom plucked from my wildest imagination.

Maybe I did get that lobotomy, after all. Maybe I'm stuck in the fondest delusion. If this is the result, I'll consider the treatment a success.

My hands rhythmically stroked her back and arms as a hearty sigh parted from her lips, her body undulating, pushing closer. I withheld the growl that wanted to rip from my throat and confined a tight leash on my composure.

Micah's thick eyelashes opened in slow motion, recognition lighting her gaze.

She attempted to pull away, the supposed retraction unacceptable. My arms locked her in closer on instinct alone.

"Stay." A simple request.

Her omniscient irises tracked over my features. I could still detect a trace of hurt hidden behind their pools, and my heart cracked when she whispered a name.

“Katsy?”

“Don’t say it. Don’t contaminate this moment with her. I’m sorry you had to see that.” I pressed closer, as if to rid myself of the unwanted image. “Just know that I will never touch her again...unless I’m crushing her throat with my bare hands.”

I knew what I was promising: sacrificing my correspondence with G, and risking Katsy snitching on my dealings—which she would. Still, I promised, and I fucking meant it. For this moment, this one snapshot of time with Micah.

I shook the concept from my head, not wanting to dwell on my depressing future, but instead bathing in the present.

My reassurance was enough. Micah relaxed in my hold and wiggled her position, trying to get comfortable in the limited space. She hitched a leg over my waist, the slit of her pencil skirt baring open to flash the lacy top of her thigh-high stocking.

My hand dug into the flesh of her upper leg to stop further ascent, her centre so close to scraping against my expanding arousal.

With all my concentration slamming down on my wayward hormones, I didn’t recognise Micah’s advance until she pressed a kiss to my lips.

I kissed her back.

Her hand roamed to the back of my neck as her addictive mouth fed me my soul. My grip involuntarily tightened, stamping my fingerprints into her skin as she released a contented sigh.

If this was all illusion, I never wanted to return to reality.

MICAH

We kissed for what seemed both like a second and an eternity. Time wasn't a structure when I was wrapped in his arms. My body thrummed in satisfied content, and when his lips wrapped around my tongue, my nerve endings short-circuited, distributing an all-over shudder.

"So sensitive," he said, voice husky.

"It's my Variant."

"Then pray tell. What is it, so I can help it along?" Using an elbow, he shifted upward, licking up the length of my neck in one fluid motion. "You have a tiny beauty spot right here." His head bowed to suck below my jawline, the spot extremely sensitive, sending shockwaves straight to my centre.

"I can sense the way people feel."

"You're an empath? As in, you sense people's emotions?" He never stopped his ministrations, speaking in between his well-attended task.

"Not exactly. It's more complicated than that, more...encompassing and integral than sensing one's emotions." Lifting a hand, I lightly trailed my fingers up his arm, goosebumps raised over his tattooed skin, chasing the movement. "When I'm in close proximity to someone, I get a flash of insight from their core within."

August paused, his face hovering above. His swollen lips tilted upward when my hand came to rest on the centre of his steady, thumping chest. "My body receives a physical response to the way someone is feeling at that given time, but more

importantly, I sense their deep-seated intentions.”

Warm fingers circled patterns up and down the exposed flesh between my panties and stocking, my eyes closing at the overwhelming heat gathering in the wake of his touch.

My teeth sunk into my bottom lip in order to regain some semblance of stability. Hopeless need was only growing, and with him this close, I was rapidly losing complete command of any conviction.

“Can you sense my intentions right now?” August whispered, his breath brushing over my lips in the softest caress, wandering fingertips lifting higher and higher.

“My ability is most responsive when I’m in direct contact,” I managed to breathe, my voice hitching when his knuckles slid over my delicate inner thigh.

“Then tell me, Micah. Tell me what it is you feel,” August said, reaching the edge of my soaked panties.

My eyes flew open to find his gaze locked on mine with laser focus, the shocking black so depthless, so infinite—and frankly disturbing. Yet I found myself more than willing to submerge and subsequently drown in the devastating abyss.

“You,” I replied. “All I feel is you.”

All manner of thought evaporated when his fingers skimmed beneath the fabric and swiped through my sensitive core.

August tortured me, savouring my submission with his compelling touch, his strokes gentle, efforts unhurried. He drank down my moans and ravished my body, never succumbing to my commands for more.

He removed my clothes with firm precision, laying me naked and exposed before his fevered gaze. He relinquished his shirt in return, remaining in his jeans, his eyes scoring burning flames over my skin and causing smoke and ash to barrage my mind.

Climbing above me, his forehead bowed, resting against the tattoo between my breasts. “Fuck,” he uttered. “You’re gonna be the death of me, I fucking swear it.”

“Do you want to stop?”

August’s canines sharply nipped my skin. “That’s the problem. I won’t ever want to stop.” He shifted his head and aggressively sucked my nipple into his mouth. And when his teeth sunk into the delicate peak, my ribcage nearly fractured from my erratically pounding heart.

His hands and mouth never left my body, endlessly caressing, kneading, licking and sucking. He was attentive and particular, never intruding on the place I wanted him most—needed him most.

“August,” I pleaded, pushing my pelvis upward, searching for friction.

August heard my call and settled on my side. He kissed me on the mouth and his hand finally lowered between my legs, circling my throbbing, slick entrance.

He shuddered, a distinct growl escaping his clenched teeth. “Perfect tits, perfect fucking pussy. You were made for me, Micah.” I gyrated into his hand, demanding more contact. “Hush, baby, I’ve got you. Couldn’t think of a better way to thank you.”

“Thank me? For what?”

“For saving me...in more ways than one.” Before I could question his statement, he

pushed two fingers into my weeping pussy, both of us relinquishing a groan.

His pumps increased in tempo and rhythm, sending quakes of pleasure reverberating through my bones. His thumb soon raised to my clit to join in the assault, the motion of his hand in perfect synchronisation.

The chase for the high peaked to superior heights, and when his fingers curved inward at the perfect angle, my psyche tipped over into euphoric bliss. My walls clenched onto his fingers, demanding they stay there, deep inside me. In the end, all I could process was Psycho swallowing my screams by swiping his tongue into my mouth.

## PSYCHO

“August.” A name I hadn’t heard spoken for years. My insides lit up with the sound pressing from her lips. She was the first person I had ever freely surrendered it to, and I couldn’t bring myself to regret it.

Micah was a living, breathing goddess, her orgasm only classified as divine intervention for the effect her release had on my soul. I didn’t know how I’d let her go, watch her leave.

With her pliant body beneath my hands, I’d stolen ownership of her very being. She just didn’t know it yet. But when I was done with her, she would.

Micah’s hand reached for my waistband. I shook my head and jolted off the stretcher. With all contact lost, her lips raised in a disappointed pout. I chuckled. “This isn’t about me, this is about you. Only you.”

I raised my hand to lick my soaked fingers clean, eyes rolling when the sweet flavour hit my tastebuds, instantly regretting my words.

The sensation was surreal. Her tightening walls, the taste of her lust, the impression of her soft, unblemished skin—all of it concocted and prepared perfectly for me.

There was nothing I wanted more than to connect with her in every physical way. But tonight was about worshiping her. Keeping my pants on was the best decision I'd ever made. I had to create distance, 'cause if she kept on touching me and tracking my body with desire in her eyes, I'd definitely fold. And if she called my name again, I was undeniably a fucking goner.

I lifted the arm restraints dangling loose from the stretcher and held them open in invitation. Recognition flashed over her face as she placed her wrists in the leather straps, allowing me to lock her arms down by her sides.

My possessive animal roared with approval at the act of trust.

I rummaged through the operation room and my gaze caught on the Electroconvulsive Therapy Machine (ECT). I planted it next to the stretcher and opened a new set of sterile electrode pads.

She was a banquet of sin, my restrained golden girl. I approached her like the starved beast I was, my eyes never wavering from her alluring form.

She tracked me with pinpointed focus. "What about yours? What's your Variant?"

My mouth curved into a hungry smirk. "Mine's more primal. Like an alter ego, perhaps. When there isn't a suppressant in place and my Variant is triggered, my physical senses heighten, and I turn into a predator."

I crawled atop the stretcher, her knees parting to accommodate my bulk. She was confident, not shy to show off her body, and receptive to my observation. It was beyond fucking sexy.

“Touch becomes sensitive.”

Kneeling between her open thighs, I raised one of her legs and massaged her calf in aching suspense. My tongue flicked out to saturate my lips at the unobstructed, appetising view, her centre bare and dripping from her previous orgasm.

“Vision sharpens.”

Yielding to her undulating call, I proceeded to suck and lick up her toned leg. When I bit the inside of her knee, Micah’s pelvis buckled upward amid a sharp, unbelieving gasp.

“Sound amplifies.”

Folding forward onto my stomach, my face hovered directly in front of her shining centre. Pressing closer, my nose scraped between her inviting lips, dousing my nose in her desire.

“And my sense of smell and taste increase beyond comprehension,” I finished, my voice gruff.

My tongue dipped out for another desperate taste, a thunderous snarl vibrating through my chest as her essence saturated the lining of my mouth.

Micah wasn’t faring any better, her muscles practically quivering from my minute measures. I pulled back slightly and attached the electrode pads to her inner thighs.

I never did anything lightly, and I wasn’t about to start. The first time I tasted Micah had already become a core memory. We had an electrifying connection from the moment we met, and it was time to make that a physical reality.



Raising on my elbows, I caught her attention. “Safe word?”

Her lustful gaze faltered. “Safe word?”

My fingers curled forward, scarcely skimming her hypersensitive clit. “I’m here to give you pleasure, baby, and a little pain. So I need a safe word.”

She gyrated her hips forward, searching for more of my touch. “Don’t stop.”

I withdrew and tsked. “That’s a bit confusing.”

“For fuck’s sake, August. You’ll know when to stop when I’ve broken these chains and choked you out with them.”

“Hmm, kinky.”

Micah legitimately growled, and I couldn’t help chuckling. Before she could cuss me out again, I switched the ECT machine onto the lowest setting.

Gentle pulses of electricity stimulated her nerve endings, causing her thigh muscles to pulsate and tense.

“More,” she said.

Who was I to refuse? I upped the electricity, her legs spasming from the contracted waves.

“More,” she repeated, her tone practically begging, body fucking trembling. I followed her command, the setting high and surely on the verge of pain, not even the pads of the ECT machine silencing her plea. Further proof she was fucking made for me.

“Still with me, baby?”

She bit into her lip. “Mmm, it hurts so good.”

I was going to come in my pants just from watching her.

My lips swooped forward to catch a stray drop of her cum that escaped down her ass cheek. Upon contact came a pulsing current that left a sentient tingling across my mouth.

A dangerous concoction of depravity thickened in my veins. From Micah’s hoarse cries to the satisfying afterburn on my lips, pleasure pulsated directly to my strained cock.

Fuck. That was it for me. I sent a long, pressured lick between her swollen lips, the impact causing her to come with fervour, her fingers latched tightly in my hair.

I had no idea how she’d escaped her restraints, and I couldn’t bring myself to give a single fuck.

My sole focus was on something entirely more important. I was fucking famished, and this was only the entrée. “Hmm, I didn’t get my fill yet. I need more.”

Her head thrashed from side to side, glossy hair flying in all directions. “I can’t, August. I can’t.” Her shaking hand still pulled at my roots, contradicting her words by directing my face back to her responsive core.

“You can. I’m the apex predator, baby. Equipped to hunt and pursue prey as easily as any wolf. Now, let me feast.”

“Oh, god.”

I held no reservations and checked out, my mouth latching on to her quivering centre, increasing pressure in rapid release. I flicked my tongue out in quick succession and suckled on her swollen clit. A sharp electric current continuously ran over my lips, the pulsing frequency intensifying my hard-on to extreme measures.

Micah rode my face with wild abandon, rubbing her juices all over me, driving me savage.

I ventured lower and speared my tongue inside her, searching for more, mining for her cum.

“Fuck, Augus—”

I blindly increased the voltage from the ECT machine once more, her thighs violently vibrating as I impaled her over and over again.

Then she completely detonated.

Micah’s back arched off the bed, head pitching backward as a scream ripped from her heaving chest. She contracted tightly, relentlessly squeezing my tongue as it continued to push against her spasming walls.

The passionate view shattered any last shred of my control, dragging me over the edge alongside her. My strained cock pulsed in complete ecstasy, my orgasm lengthening with no end in sight.

My strokes slowed leisurely as I proceeded to lick her clean. I refused to let any go to waste.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Micah's head rested against my chest. She cuddled up to my side, wearing nothing except my shirt.

I was lost, completely overwhelmed. I was a part of her, all around her, fucking inside her. This wasn't just physical, the internal pivotal shift demanding more than I was willing to give, and fucking taking it anyway. We'd gone from nothing to everything in a matter of moments, the familiar inkling of fear creeping in, making itself known.

My fingers danced up and down her back. "You have to leave." Her brow furrowed before her eyes darted to the clock. Morning was quite a few hours away yet. "I don't mean right now. I mean for good, Micah."

She leant up on an elbow, her opposite hand tracing up my torso, searching for deceit. "You truly believe in what you're saying. I can feel it. I can also feel that you don't actually want me to."

"It doesn't matter what I want. It's about what I need, and I need you safe."

Her palm raised to turn my chin, trying to catch my stare. "I don't need you to do that. I'm responsible for my own safety." I tried to pry her hand away, but she tightened her grip instead. "Look at me," she snapped.

When our gazes finally met, her eyes were beaming with sincerity. And something else I wasn't ready to decipher.

A gaping hole widened in the pit of my stomach and the ever-present hopelessness of

my situation pushed to the forefront. I shoved up from the bed, ripping myself from her addictive embrace, and repeatedly smashed my fist into the concrete wall.

When I was spent, I pressed my forehead against the cold bricks, dragging in gulping breaths. My throat was raw, as if I'd been screaming, the skin over my knuckles scraped and tarnished.

Warm, gentle hands roamed over my back, the soothing motion regulating my pulse. Arms banded tightly around my waist from behind until she was lined against my body. Micah didn't say a word, her touch and presence enough of a comfort to have my barrier crumbling to the fucking floor.

"It won't be long until he finds out about you, and I can't lose another person to him. I won't. It fucking kills me to say, but I can't protect you in here, and I also can't risk her. Not again."

"I'm not leaving," Micah said, so straightforward, so unbothered that her words completely rocked me. She didn't know the severity, the extent of my own imprisonment.

I spun in her arms and her chin settled on my sternum as she stared into my face with determined resolution.

"This isn't some softcore bullshit, Micah. This is my life. He destroyed my fucking life. Someone I looked up to as a father—someone I regarded as family—stole my sister and imprisoned her for something I did, and bought my silence and cooperation with her fate. Twelve months later and I'm no closer to saving Ava than I was back then."

I led Micah backwards to the stretcher, laid her out and crushed my whole weight down on her. I needed her to feel my energy, understand my intentions and recognise

the reality of my position.

“He took from me the one person I truly loved in this world, the one person I was sworn to protect. If he finds out about you, finds out what you mean to me, you’ll be next. Don’t make me go through that again. Don’t make me watch it happen. Please don’t ask me to.”

I huffed in surprise when Micah flipped me over, legs straddling my waist as a smug smile graced her lips. “I don’t ask for anything, I take what I want. And I want you. If that means going on a rescue mission to save your sister, then that’s what’s going to happen, Psycho.”

My lungs inflated, hands tightening on her thighs, an involuntary response to her ownership. Was it truly possible to have another ally, someone I could rely on to help me?

“Oh, so now I’m Psycho again?”

“When you piss me off, yeah. I’m offering you an out, babe. I’m offering you my help.” I arched a brow. “I’m not going to preach to you about how honourable I am, ‘cause I’m not. I’m not a good human being, August.” She released a light chuckle. “In all honesty, I’m a terrible human being. And I don’t care. Every terrible deed I have ever done has been in the service of my family, and I’d do it again a million times over.”

That’s when I realised I had grossly underestimated the danger of this girl. She could cut my throat right now and I’d probably praise her. My dick hardened in agreement.

“Why does that make you horny?” She chuckled.

“Because terrible is my type of aphrodisiac, baby, and you just called straight to my

libido,” I groaned, laying her down on her side and cuddling up behind her.

If she wasn’t careful, I was going to fuck her into a stupor. I didn’t want that for her when I couldn’t promise more of myself. Not there, not right then.

Although. it didn’t help when her ass kept pushing back against my restrained dick. Placing a hand on her hip, I stopped her driving movements. “Behave, Golden Girl. Sleep.”

“Hmph.” By my command, her muscles settled amid the warmth of my body curling around hers. The gentle rise and fall of her chest evened and I dug my nose into the base of her neck, drowning in her scent.

MICAH

August’s fingers were interlocked with mine. We hadn’t slept, preferring to utilise the limited time we had together.

“August Mathers?”

He snickered, the vibration radiating up my spine. “Hmm. I was born in August. My parents lacked any imagination, it seems.”

“And Ava Mathers is your sister. Is there anyone else?”

August flinched, shocked to hear his sister’s name spoken aloud. A name he was willing to defend against all others.

August was still ruminating on the change in our relationship. We didn’t have a label (nor did we need one), though he was in borderline panic mode from the amount of vital information he had already surrendered.

Our trust was too natural, our reliance too easy. He was waiting for the kicker to roundhouse him in the face.

I waited. This was an internal battle he had to fight on his own. Then his resolution progressively hardened and he chose to trust in me.

Pressing a kiss to my shoulder blade, he relented. August chose to trust in us.

“Our parents were killed when I was fifteen years old, my sister thirteen.” He paused, dragging in a breath. “Fuck, I need a cigarette,” he muttered.

My thumb stroked the palm of his hand. I still found it remarkable how my Variant and body accepted him so fully, so wholeheartedly. I couldn’t risk over-analysing our connection, or we’d both go insane.

We’d settled into a quiet contentment, freely surrendering the innermost darkest recesses of ourselves, for the other to take and safely keep.

“We didn’t have anyone else. After they were gone, I didn’t want Ava and I to be separated in the foster system, so we ran away to live on the streets.”

“I was always good at fighting, so I naturally gravitated to the Caverns and made a name for myself, gaining as much power, money and stability as I could. I was her big brother and I wanted to—would—do anything to protect her. Which meant I was inducted into the Ludus Maximus at eighteen. I believed my initiation would give me everything I needed to keep her safe.” He shuffled closer, burying his face in my hair. “Instead, the person I sought refuge with used her against me.”

His experience was difficult for him to convey. I was certain that he’d never had to articulate his tragic past into words.



Although he spoke the truth, he'd given a simplified version, the complicated traumatic memories sending his emotional state spiralling. I squeezed his hand in comfort, all too familiar with the same emotions aching inside me.

For August to give up anything at all was a small spark of hopeful light, and with it I wanted to give him the world.

“Did you find the person responsible?” My gaze flicked over my shoulder with the underlying question. Did you kill them?

“Not yet, but I will.”

I bumped my nose against his. “I understand.” Above all others, I truly did understand.

I whispered a promise against his lips and he released a tremor. “I will find her for you, August.”

“How?” he murmured. I could feel a wisp of doubt, his resistance to hope for what he had yearned for, for so long.

My mouth lifted into an obnoxious smirk and I flicked the middle of his forehead. “I am Micah King. Put some respect on my motherfucking name.” His small hint of doubt simultaneously dissolved into amused disbelief, and a healthy splash of fear. I cackled like the mad woman I was, his worries leaving him, if only for a minute.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

The low hum of the tattoo gun wafted over me with familiarity, the sting of the needle a reassuring presence rhythmically piercing into my skin. A week had passed since August and I had stolen those snapshot moments in the basement of Oakview Asylum.

He now remained a constant presence. In my mind, on my flesh, throughout my dreams.

“Now you’re starting on your legs. You’re going to run out of room soon,” Emerson said, as she sat atop a desk in the corner, flipping through a design catalogue.

It was the early hours in the morning and we’d commandeered the most notable tattoo and piercing parlour in the city.

I ignored her, concentrating on the intricate pattern, when a bang sounded out back. I spared a vacant glance at the blue-haired woman with silver eyes who filled the threshold, wearing a recognisable smirk.

“How’d you go?” I asked, returning to my task.

“For someone that’s a prisoner, she really is a spoiled princess.”

Emerson snickered. “So you got along then?”

“Famously.” Spencer smiled as her face transitioned back into her own. No matter her mask, I would always recognise that aura.

“You didn’t threaten her, did you?”

“I told her to alert the Saint at Variant Sanctorum if she had to contact us,” Spencer replied, completely ignoring my question. Emerson tsked and I let it slide, thankful that she completed the mission without killing anyone in general.

I stretched out my leg to change the angle and get better access to my upper thigh. “They won’t believe she’s suddenly turned religious, Spence.”

She retrieved a necklace from her throat and dangled the silver in front of me. “Well, lucky she won’t have to wait long, huh. Tanner returns in a couple of days, then your precious boyfriend and his sister will be free. Then we’ll have the ammo to get to Maximus.”

It hadn’t taken us long to locate Ava. With her description alone, Spencer had already catalogued her image from previous scouting missions in Serpent’s Row.

Ava was heavily guarded and hidden in plain sight, her image solely what Maximus presented her to be. Disguised as a bartender in one of the Ludus’ most prominent and secure brothels, Forbidden Garden. The difficult part was finding a way to coordinate her rescue in conjunction with August’s. We could not take one without the other.

I reached for the necklace, Spencer snatching the chain out of reach at the last second. “Tell us what the tattoo means.”

I rolled my eyes, their never-ending questions and all-knowing expressions making me regret bringing them along.

Emerson bowed her head over my work. “Looks like another flower to add to the collection. What does this one mean, M?” Her tone was inquisitive.

I refused to answer, otherwise I'd never get any reprieve.

"Is that who I think it is?!" Spencer shrieked, launching across the room to point at an autographed photo amongst the countless others pinned to the wall.

My hand flinched at her outburst, barely correcting my hold to save a glitched line in my tattoo. I flicked a glance at the image she desperately fawned over. A smiling, dark-skinned man stood tall, his arm encircling a heavily inked brunette with purple eyes, multiple dogs surrounding their feet.

"Who is he?"

Spencer choked at the question. "Remember the guy who threatened the city last week?"

I stared blankly. "Of course I do. I was stranded at Oakview all night."

Emerson huffed. "I wouldn't call it stranded."

They both giggled. They did have a point.

Spencer fastened the necklace over my head and rummaged through the desk, retrieving an unopened bottle of vodka. "Him. He's the chemical weapon."

Emerson and I zoned in on the photo, assessing his likeness with renewed fervour. "He got his hands on Amp, used his Variant to influence the air particles and caused chaos through the streets so he could rob a bank. Almost got away with it, too. Fucking epic, right?!"

"How do you know this, Spence?"

“His wife—the woman in the picture—used to work at Playhouse. She disappeared at the same time. Women talk, the streets talk.”

“Why would they cover that up?” Emerson asked.

I ditched the tattoo gun to contemplate the severity of the crime. “The authorities don’t want to cause panic. There’s already mass prejudice towards Variants as is. If the general public caught knowledge of Amp and the implications this drug could cause, there’d be all out war.”

Emerson nodded. “Anti-Variant protests have been intensifying recently. It’s only a matter of time before these peaceful rallies spill over into violence. Discrimination is at an all-time high. Amp has to be kept under wraps before the rest of the Variant population is placed at even greater risk.”

Spencer lined up three shots, unperturbed that we were digging through a stranger’s things. “I say we all take Amp, overthrow the leaders and blow this corrupt system to the fucking ground.” Her green eyes sparkled. There was no question she was already concocting a plan to seize the government and crush the amoral institution beneath her designer heels.

They approached my chair, each with a shot in hand, Emerson shoving the third under my nose. “Let’s start with the underworld, then the rest will follow. They will regret the day they ever forgot the name King.”

A ring of fiery determination whipped through our small trio.

“They will remember,” I said, sealing the vow by clinking my glass to theirs and downing the contents.

My blood ranthin as I laid the finishing touches to my tattoo, the bottle of vodka

empty on the corner table. I could hear Emerson in the next room hunting for more liquor. I had no idea where Spencer had disappeared to. Suddenly, a piercing shriek echoed through the walls, followed by a plethora of curse words. Found her.

I didn't rush, knowing Emerson would check it out, when she also released a subsequent shriek. "There is no way I'm getting anywhere near your vagina. Fuck no!"

I snickered and followed the sounds of my arguing sisters.

"Meek, please! I don't want to stain my dress, and it fucking hurts like a bitch."

"I'm not putting my hand on your pussy, Spence, so stop fucking asking. It's your own fault."

I leant against the threshold of the piercing room to find Spencer reclined in a massage chair, her dress lifted up past her bent knees as she pressed a thick dressing between her legs.

Emerson stood in front of me, arms firmly crossed, radiating disapproval.

I arched a brow at their regular roles, ready to play my own as referee. "What now?"

Emerson huffed. "Talk some sense into your sister. She got bored and pierced her own clit. Now she wants me to heal her."

"You act like you haven't got your nipple pierced." Spencer rolled her eyes. "And it's in fact the clitoral hood, not the actual clit. Get it right."

"Like I give a fuck."

My lips twitched. “Why?”

“I’ve heard it increases pleasure, and the perfect opportunity presented itself. Why wouldn’t I take advantage?”

“And the best time to do that was right now?” Humour thickened my tone. Emerson’s shoulders laxled as mirth shone in her eyes.

Spencer’s gaze bounced between us, her face reddening from her rising frustration (not to be misconstrued for embarrassment). “This isn’t funny. You were taking too long. Will you help me or not?”

I turned to Emerson. “Can you heal her by hovering your hand in front of the dressing and not making direct contact?”

Her face drained of all humour. “You can’t be serious.”

I arched a brow and she hissed through gritted teeth. “It won’t be as effective. But I can at least blanch the bleeding.”

I gave a sharp nod. “Do that. She can deal with the pain.”

Spencer pouted and Emerson saddled up to her side. “Don’t remove that fucking dressing. The last thing I want is a view.”

Spencer shrugged. “Your loss. It’s a pretty view.”

Emerson and I shared a look before we finally succumbed to joint laughter.

“Laugh it up now. But you will regret that you didn’t get one yourself when my pleasure increases tenfold. Plus, this will only add to my overall sex appeal.”

“I’d like to say I’m surprised, but I’m not. I’m going to clean up. Then let’s go out, I need a drink. I’m way too sober for your specific brand of bullshit.”



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I exited the basic bathroom, adjusting one of my loose earrings that dangled freely. A sharp wolf whistle rang out, accompanied by spontaneous clapping.

“God damn, sis,” Emerson said. “Who’re you trying to impress tonight? The mayor, or your crazy boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” He is more.

“So he is crazy?” Spencer smirked. “If he isn’t already, he definitely will be once he sees you in that. Phew.”

They were both sprawled in different positions on the fighting mats. They’d been sparring for the past couple of hours while I got ready.

I’d stolen a dark purple gown from Spencer’s closet; long-sleeved with a high collar to cover the bulk of my tattoos. Depending on the position, my latest ink would peek out from the slit in my dress that parted all the way up to my hip.

Ignoring their taunts, I snagged a dinner roll and chucked a bottle of water to Emerson.

“You’re even flashing your new tattoo,” Spencer said, sitting at the kitchen island and shoving a lollipop in her mouth. “He’s going to think that’s permission to smell those fragrant flowers and fertilise your hidden garden.”

Emerson and I groaned. “Ignore her, M. You look beautiful. You’re alright on your own tonight?”

She and Tanner had argued that one of them should accompany me for back up. I refused. If my identity was compromised, at least they'd still be active.

It was election year, and Mayor Oakview was desperately grasping onto his seat of power. The night's fundraiser was for JC's elite, to pretend they cared about the lower ends of society, hence the asylum being the chosen location for the fancy charity ball.

I shook my head. "I'll be careful."

Spencer leant back on her stool, balancing on two legs, a wide, cheesy grin dominating her face. "Yeah, careful Psycho doesn't slip over and slide his dick into you. That type of careful?"

Emerson choked on her water.

"I'm not even going to see him tonight, perv. He's locked up in a completely separate area."

Spencer's eyes scanned up and down my figure, catching on my uncovered leg. "Mm-hmm."

I chuckled, turning for the exit. "Don't wait up."

Emerson called goodbye and behind her back, Spencer repeatedly pushed the lollipop into the inside of her cheek. "Yeah, sis. Bye," she finished, adding a suggestive wink.

I launched the remainder of my bread roll at her face, hitting directly between her eyes. She lost balance and toppled to the ground. I raced for the exit before she could retaliate, the echoes of distant laughter and grumbles from my siblings following me out the Temple door.

Oakview Asylum was transformed. Burner definitely wanted to make an impression.

The main hall was decked out in thick white drapes, a dazzling chandelier in the centre reflecting dancing prisms throughout the room. A string quartet played in the corner, a beautiful symphony accompanying the classical ambiance.

It was a well-built illusion, the aristocrats and politicians of high society tipping their false smiles and veiled insults. As if the insane weren't knocking right next door.

I roamed the gathering, not committing to any particular conversation or individual, my Variant flaring at the self-obnoxious entities.

A sudden hush steeped the crowd at the arrival of tonight's honoured guest, Mayor Oakview, fashionably late. He swaggered through the space with purpose, steps sure, posture confident, permeating charisma. Burner followed one step behind, his grin so wide and forced that his mask nearly cracked from the strain.

As others fell over themselves to grab his attention, I pivoted for the abandoned bar.

Expensive champagne bubbled down my throat as a classic blonde beauty saddled up to my side. She was middle-aged, with hardly a wrinkle gracing her skin, her demure nature in complete contrast to her piercing blue eyes—eyes that pinpointed onto my outright appraisal.

She lifted her glass in a silent cheers and sculled the contents down in one continuous gulp.

“Impressive.” I lifted a hand to call the bartender for another when she shook her head and leant back against the counter, us two lone souls remaining on the outskirts, watching the catastrophe that was the elite of Junction City.

“I hate this place,” she said, releasing a shiver.

“They don’t seem to agree.” I tipped my chin at the growing flock of vultures circling Mayor Oakview. “It actually looks like they’re enjoying themselves.” Boisterous laughter cued right on time.

I leant in and whispered, “Absolute morons.”

She snickered, and the action made me pause, the sound transient, however oddly familiar.

I shifted closer, my attention piqued. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

Her features shifted. “You don’t kn—”

“Alison, there you are,” Mayor Oakview interrupted, careening for the blonde at my side. Her transformation was immediate. All traces of amusement disappeared, a smoothed, uptight mask taking place. Not one morsel of her previous persona was present. A perfectly manicured socialite was all that remained.

He approached, wearing a gleaming professional smile, brown eyes settling on me. He was handsome, impeccably tailored, supremely polished...and yet, I wasn’t impressed.

Mayor Oakview gave a shallow bow, his greying black hair flashing in the luminescent light. “Hello, my name is Arthur Oakview. I’m at a loss. I don’t think we’ve met?”

“Pleasure to meet you. I’m Olivia Chaser.”

Although his expression remained polite, his eyes roamed over my lips with

unashamed hunger. My Variant sparked at the onslaught and a bitter taste lingered in the back of my throat.

A figure pushed through the bystanders and Mayor Oakview was rocked off-balance. Burner had inadvertently pushed into his side while attempting to wedge himself closer.

“Let me introduce you,” he announced. “This is Doctor Chaser. She is our newest recruit and resident psychiatrist. She has been working wonders with the patients here.” The flamboyant statement was followed by overzealous ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’.

Mayor Oakview smiled and pressed a kiss to the back of my hand. “Thank you for your service, Doctor,” he purred. “I look forward to talking with you further about Oakview Asylum and the great work that you’re doing here.”

I relented, giving a subtle nod. Manoeuvring out of his hold, I sipped from my full champagne flute, swallowing the bile that salivated my mouth.

Mayor Oakview turned to the lady he called Alison, offering an arm. “Come now, wife, it’s time for my speech.” She placed her hand in the crook of his arm and her brow slightly furrowed, internally cringing as if she found his touch as repulsive as I did.

Her stare flicked to me as they passed, golden amber eyes clashing against a sea of vibrant blue, their depths flashing with some form of recognition. Who was she?

“A pleasure meeting you, Alison,” I said. Her lips gave a miniscule twitch in acknowledgement and with the couple’s departure, the rest followed.

The political duo ascended the podium as if it were a throne. They made an attractive pair, both regal and majestic, screaming old money and upper class. Men and women

alike either hated them or wanted to be them, the potency of their writhing jealousy carving daggers into my skin.

The smell of pungent perfume alerted me to Katsy's presence before she leant into my side.

"I can't believe it. Tell me you're going to get his number," she said in a scandalised voice, pretending to whisper, when in reality everyone in the immediate vicinity overheard her.

The quartet ceased their playing and the room hushed in awe, prepared for his speech.

He spoke of the usual nonsense, the furthering of our great city and what he was doing to contribute to the masses. His words didn't register for me, more so the way he held himself. Arthur spoke clearly, assertively and had no qualms talking publicly, each person hanging off his every word.

"It was five generations ago when our ancestors donated this family castle to the people," Arthur proclaimed, swishing a hand in the air. "I am pleased to see this historical site thriving and being utilised in a way that is beneficial to all citizens of Junction City."

Katsy giggled, the alcohol giving the sound a vicious edge. "Not his ancestors."

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes lit up with the knowledge of knowing information that I didn't. "He married into that name and lineage. He was nobody when he met his wife. He isn't even an Oakview. Alison is."

Arthur continued on. "I guarantee that greater measures will be put in place to

catalogue and ensure safety from Variant violence and immorality.” His gaze travelled over the crowd, always returning back to hold my own.

Katsy gasped. “Oh my god, he is eye fucking you right now. In front of everyone.”

I huffed in return when a flippant shadow caught my eye. One of the Mayor’s guards, hidden behind the thick white drape bordering the podium.

As if a phantom wind heard my call, the fabric brushed open and my body was overtaken by a blistering chill. Trembles racked my frame and my chest tightened, lungs spasming from the lack of air that I couldn’t choke down my closing throat.

Oscar Masatino.

A man made of full flesh and bone, when he was supposed to be ash and dust in the fucking wind. How did my father’s enforcer and close friend end up a security guard for the Mayor of Junction City?

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

My legs were pushing me forward before I could even register moving. My crystal flute crushed within my grip, champagne and glass flowing to the floor. The fractured stem remained between my fingers, staining red from the cuts on my flesh, the pain a welcome reminder to stay in reality and not get lost in my Variant.

Instead of heads swerving my way, they were redirected to a commotion at the main entrance. High-pitched cackling and fearful screams splintered off the walls.

Despite the commotion, my focus never wavered, attention only spared for the one-eyed, patch-wearing mammoth of a man I once called Uncle.

My progression was hindered by the rising panic that sifted through the crowd. I shoved people out of my way in the fight to get to Oscar. My hopes shattered when he threw himself over the Oakviews and dragged them out a hidden door sidelining the podium.

I was too late. I'd never catch them.

My eyes closed and I heaved in mouthfuls of air to quench the rushing beats that drummed in my ears.

"They're insane, they're fucking insane!" Katsy yelled before she clasped onto my arm, her touch alone releasing my demon from within. Darkness immediately took hold to come forth and consume both of us whole.

I pulled her into a tight embrace, stabbing the fractured glass into her gut. With a rattle from her chest, I shoved hard on the upstroke, the stem slipping upward beneath her ribcage.

"I am insane," I whispered over her flushed face.

Katsy's eyes flickered before me, a beautiful symmetry of disbelief and pain passing in their depths.

My Variant soaked in her despair like a drug, feeding on her deterioration to satiate my triggered bloodlust.

She flopped to the ground with a final sigh, my entire front saturated in her blood. It was a welcome addition to my outfit, mostly camouflaged by the dark material of my dress.

Surroundings suddenly bled into recognition. Crazy inmates ran rampant through the



room, harassing and chasing guests. I didn't know how they were released from their cells, and I didn't care. I revelled in the havoc that permeated the space.

A thin, wiry patient stood at the refreshments table, one hand chucking food at terrified guests, the other shovelling the rest into his mouth. Food particles plastered to his naked body as he toothlessly cackled.

The speakers whined until a clear, high voice rang through the microphone. A copper-haired inmate wearing a makeshift flower crown had seized the stage. At least this one had clothes on. "All must bow before our gracious light and sun. She will burn all you sinners to the ground. Repent or burn! Repent or burn!"

The main exit remained blocked by the stampede trying to escape. I bypassed the crowd and jumped over the podium, inclining my head to the hippy flower guy as I passed, giving him recognition for a job well done as I departed out the hidden back door.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I paced my padded cell when the door clicked open and my least favourite person hijacked the entryway. Captain Fucking Douchebag lifted his chin with the smuggest smirk known to man (not that it had much effect). A splint remained strapped to his broken nose. I visibly sneered at him.

“I can sign it for you, if you want?”

Fern pulled at my shirt, dragging me down the corridor, all humour lost. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Ripping out of his grasp, my eyes narrowed. “You aren’t taking me fucking anywhere.”

“Not even for your good doctor? It’s the fundraiser ball tonight, you know.”

I fucking know. The orchestra melodies vibrated through the castle, the tune haunting and sinister.

I lifted a brow and his smirk reappeared full force, like he was privy to something that I wasn’t.

“Fine,” I said. “But touch me again and I’ll break your jaw to match your nose.” He growled before turning on his heel to lead me down the corridor.

After re-emerging from the theatre with my brain fully intact, I wanted to kill him. I desperately wanted to rip him apart and gnaw the flesh from his fucking skeleton.

Micah forbade me. I couldn't risk any upsets until she found my sister. So I relented. Even though it clashed with every goddamned cell in my body, I relented. For her. For them both.

As Fern's back turned, I used the opportunity to ingest the vial of Micah's elixir. I wouldn't let this imbecile fool me again.

He swiped through to the security control room, simplistic and unadorned except for the wall opposite, overloaded by monitors. All screens displayed various angles of the communal hall, decked out and filled with the rich and famous of JC.

I refused to step foot in the enclosed space. There was no one else around, which meant this was a trap.

Fern swung into a lone office chair, typing away as the images redirected to zone in on one particular individual—Micah King.

My breath hitched in my throat. Micah was a vision in dark purple, her gown skintight with a deadly slit that practically came to her navel. I choked down a groan. Fern could get fucked if he thought he'd get a reaction out of me.

He spun in his swivel chair and looked me dead in the eyes, twirling a pen between his fingers.

“You think I couldn't tell? Think I didn't catch the preferential treatment she gives you? Think I didn't notice the way you look at her?” He tapped the end of the pen to his temple. “I see everything. And with this knowledge, I'm finally going to destroy you...by destroying her.” His mouth lifted in a triumphant grin.

Fuck the trap. My feet drew me forward until I passed the threshold. I closed the door behind me, the lock automatically clicking into place.

“Are you threatening me?” I managed to force through my lips.

His head fell back with a raucous laugh. “I took some advice from Katsy. Surprisingly, I think it’ll work. A reward system,” his tone turned teasing. “But what could I use against the famous Psycho? A man truly mad, truly nuts that he cares for nothing, for no one...or so I thought.”

He lifted a side eye to Micah and released a low whistle. “She’s a beauty, ain’t she? Who knew she was hiding those legs under all that fabric.” He licked his lips and I had to prevent myself from pummeling him into the ground.

Fern tsked. “Now this is what’s going to happen. You will follow my every demand. Each and every one. If you don’t, she will pay the price. Do you understand?”

I nodded, my eyes focused on the flawless female that dominated the screen. Fern didn’t waste any time and dropped his pen, allowing it to roll between us.

Leaning back and spreading his knees wide, he pointed to the offending object. “Pick it up.”

I stared at him impassively and followed his command. When he outstretched his hand, I snatched it back out of reach.

“You really are as dumb as you look, huh?” He flinched and I let my mask fall, letting the real crazy shine through. Ecstasy laced my veins as the elixir took effect, my instincts transitioning into a fraction of my former glory. It was enough. “You think you could show me my golden girl, threaten and flaunt her in my face, and get away with it?” I released a quick laugh, then sobered immediately. My voice had changed. It was more menacing, more disturbing. “You just invoked your own death warrant, Fern. Any last words?”

Fern stuttered and drew his baton, his other hand hovering over the gun slung at his waist. “I’ll shoot you, Psycho. Don’t test me.”

“Don’t fucking test me! SHE’S MINE!” My body launched forward, the baton clanging to the ground as I blocked his downward strike. Dodging his half-assed fighting skills was child’s play. He went to unsheathe his gun, but he wasn’t fast enough. I took advantage of the distraction, wrapping a hand around the back of his head and stabbing the pen directly through his eyeball.

“I said I’d take your jaw, but your eye will do.”

He screamed, pushing against me in desperation. “I’m going to kill you, kill her. I swear, I swear.”

“You can’t do shit when you’re dead.” I pushed harder, my hold steady and sure despite the blood saturating my fingers.

I heard his breath hitch, then his broad form slumped dead, the pen fully embedded into his eye socket. Thankfully, he was situated on one side of the room, so I still had floor space to move around in his swivel chair. The seat cushioning was comfortable and remained warm. Getting in a cosy position, I couldn’t detain my grin as I enjoyed the view.

My slanted grin soon dissolved. Mayor Oakview filled the screen, his greedy expression directed at Micah.

I didn’t like the image: his beady eyes undressing her, imagining her naked and writhing beneath him. One didn’t have to guess what the fuck was going through his brain.

It didn’t matter if his last name was plastered over the entrance, or that he was the

leading politician ruling the damn city. He was looking at my girl like he was going to eat her, and she was entertaining his hungry stare, wearing an accepting smile.

A growl sliced through my clenched teeth. If she wanted some big-wig rich dude with a dud cock, she shouldn't have demanded my attention.

It was too late for her, too late for us.

My fingers flew over the keyboard, and with a smug chuckle I pressed enter on the computer. I leant back and my hands flexed behind my neck as I watched the masterpiece unfold. Every single door in the asylum clicked open. The fundraiser was about to get a whole lot more interesting.

Did she fucking kill her? I think there's a high possibility that she fucking killed her.

As I watched Katsy's body slump to the ground on the security monitor, a huge weight lifted from my soul, the exact size and heaviness of the blonde tormentor who was now unalive.

My golden girl was blood-drenched, streaks of red smudged over her face as she escaped the clawing celebrations and stalked through the corridors. Inmates ran crazy, chanting and hackling, enjoying their freedom by destroying whatever they could get their hands on. I'd caused an all-out riot.

Guests fled the scene and security were overwhelmed. A deafening alarm chimed through the facility and Fern's emergency beeper buzzed non-stop, vibrating next to his still chest.

I eyed Micah's procession, attempting to guess her intended destination as she geared further into the unit.

She wouldn't be coming to see little old me, would she? Should I wait in my room, naked? Strike a sexy pose?

Twisting down the hallway, she filled the frame of the kitchen, watching Walter and his goons harass young Cookie.

Fuck this destitute, useless castle with dodgy cameras. I was observing body language alone, the camera's vision restricted to blurry images shifting in and out of focus.

Walter soon had her in a chokehold, his arm locked around her throat from behind. He leant forward and licked up the side of her face. I bounced on the balls of my feet, ready to fly to her side and rip out his fucking tongue.

I hesitated. Micah's mouth stretched into a serial killer grin. I'd only ever seen that expression on one other person. Me—in the reflective pools of my victims' eyes.

All went black.

MICAH

Ace's whimpers plagued my retreating form until I found myself at the communal kitchen door, Walter and his crew bullying the poor boy huddling beside the sink.

“Leave him,” I said, stealing their attention.

Walter clucked as his eyes roamed over my body, approaching as if he was a hunter. You'd think he would process my red-stained skin or soiled dress. Instead, power and lust clouded his judgement, his two sidekicks not any smarter as their eager steps brought them closer.

“Doctor Chaser, you look breathtaking. Have you come to join us?”

“I came to join Ace.”

“He’s a boy. He wouldn’t know how to handle all of you.”

I ignored him and pinpointed my attention solely on Ace, his head popping out from behind his assailants, wide eyes bulging.

“Lay low,” I said, and he gave an imperceptible nod.

Walter didn’t like to be ignored. Blocking our view, his grasp tightened on the makeshift shank in his hand.

I wonder if he knows how to use it. I was intrigued enough to give him a shot and find out.

Walter jerked forward, flipped my position and had me in a chokehold in a matter of seconds. Sure, his movements were delayed, his fluidity ragged, but I was surprised he could execute the manoeuvre at all.

“I’ll show you a good time, darling,” he said, trailing his disgusting tongue up the side of my face.

My skin stretched thin, lips tilting into an obscene arch. “My turn.” Kicking back, his knee fractured inward. Ace switched off the lights and my bloodlust thrummed back to life with our descent into darkness.

I flipped easily out of Walter’s crumbling hold. His knee had shattered and I’d hardly put any pressure into the assault. I grabbed the handle of a frying pan I clocked on entry and proceeded to beat the three idiots over the head with it. Groans accompanied the vibrating hits as steel made contact with their thick skulls. It didn’t quantify as a fight per se, their disorientation barely a challenge.



The pan clanged to the floor as I swapped it out for a knife. Grabbing Ace by the shirt, I dragged him to his room. As soon as he was shoved inside, I slammed the door shut and stabbed the knife into the electronic keypad. Energy buzzed around the embedded blade before the lock clicked into place. No one else would be able to enter until it was manually opened, which wouldn't happen tonight.

Satisfied, I turned on my heel and aimed for the control room in search of the one person that would be able to calm the vicious mania that I was engulfed.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Micah launched through the entryway with stealthy precision, stiletto elevated and ready for attack. My arm barred upward, blocking the heel from gashing into my flesh, the shoe scattering to the ground.

I stared directly into her amber eyes, blazing with the intense power of a thousand stars, the red-stained streaks over her face highlighting the cold-blooded frenzy that had overtaken her. It called to me, lured me in, seducing me into their depths. I was on the precipice of pure and utter destruction. One word from her and I'd burn this place to the ground. One heated look and I'd destroy the fucking world.

To create a semblance of distance in the confined space, I reversed until my legs hit the monitor. Exposing my back, I turned, dancing my fingers over the keyboard to complete my final task. I corrupted all footage from the last twenty-four hours and subsequently shut down all security cameras across the whole asylum.

No one would know what transpired tonight. No one would have the visual of my golden girl transforming into the breathtaking predator that now stood at my back. Her deadly metamorphosis was for my eyes only, stored in my memory bank with fond appreciation.

Micah stepped up to my side, processing the entire wall of tv screens, which transitioned from a buzzing grey to clear, blank nothingness.

Her hand slipped into mine without ceremony, our fingers interlocked. Squeezing lightly, I could feel the tiny shards of glass penetrating her palm. When her face eventually tilted my way, her emotionless expression had dropped. Her features were open, eyes filled with so much acceptance and trust that I almost buckled under the

severe weight of her stare.

Without a word I cleared the room of evidence, stole Fern's swipe and left his corpse in the corner, the identity of his killer to forever remain a mystery. Holding her shoes in one hand and her palm in the other, I led Micah through the corridors. It was easy to manoeuvre undetected through the madness. The alarm had ceased and security reinforcements had barricaded the asylum perimeter, containing the inmates and guiding guests to safety.

I stole a first aid kit along the way to my room and barred the door. No one would disturb us. The two that would've dared were both dead.

I switched on the UV lamp in the corner, trudged into the adjoining bathroom and thoroughly washed Fern's blood from my murderous hands, Micah following noiselessly.

From the first moment I'd always considered her a goddess, and tonight she personified the Goddess of Death; blood hardened over her entire front, her brunette hair a tangled mess down to her waist and a soft, purple glow silhouetted her frame—a vision of unadulterated sin and wickedness.

She remained standing in the bathroom doorway. "Are you sad she's gone?" Her first words were toneless, impassive.

At first I didn't know who she referred to, until my mind replayed the scene of Katsy's death.

"You think I care for that bitch?" I approached her in reverence. "I only wish I'd done it sooner."

"I'm sorry I took that from you."

“Don’t be. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever fucking seen.” I lifted and kissed her injured palm, her skin cold to the touch. “To know it was your hand that dealt the blow, that avenged my dignity. Baby, don’t ever be sorry.”

As I stepped closer, she pulled out a necklace hidden beneath her dress collar. A gleaming silver chain with a distinguishable oval pendant attached, the letters A.M. engraved in the centre.

My legs faltered and a rushing took precedence in my ears. It was an out-of-body experience as Micah clipped the necklace around my neck and stretched higher to press a soft kiss to my cheek.

“Ava passed on those two keepsakes, and a message.” Micah cleared her throat as if she was about to make a huge pronouncement, her tone scarily similar to my sister. “Hurry the fuck up, Psycho, before these women do all the work for you.” Amusement sparked over her features before she disclosed everything without my having to ask: where Ava was hidden, how she was found and the thorough plan for our joint escape.

My hand raised of its own accord to cup Micah’s cheek as my forehead pitched forward to press against hers. Completely dazed, I breathed her in.

I was simultaneously awestruck and terrified. How could I ever be worthy? Micah was so valuable, I couldn’t even comprehend it.

But I wanted it. Oh, how I desperately wanted her.

“I’m right in front of you. Take me, August.”

And when I looked into her eyes and saw nothing but commanding resolve, I realised that’s exactly what I’d do.

I'll take it all.

I lifted her to sit on the bathroom counter and pressed between her parted legs. Grabbing a pair of tweezers from the first aid kit, I gently pried the broken fragments of glass from her torn palm. It was intricate work, a constant trickle of blood obscuring the view. She never flinched or made a sound, even when I had to go digging under her flesh for wayward shards.

With her breathing even and muscles relaxed, she leant her head back against the mirror, eyes lapsing shut. I froze, catching sight of the underside of her chin. A small fluorescent tattoo in the outline of a skull glowed like a beacon, reflecting off the purple light filtering from the adjoining room.

“Ultraviolet?” I whispered, my mouth voicing the word before my brain could even compute.

Her eyelashes fluttered as she raised a finger to trace the incriminating symbol, the motion casual and unthreatening, as if I didn't just find out she was a member of one of the most prestigious and notorious assassination groups in the world.

I'd only ever encountered one, and it had been the closest I ever came to dying. I didn't know he was Ultraviolet until his lifeless carcass was dragged to the infirmary for investigation. Tattoo ink invisible to the naked eye, made visible beneath the radiance of blacklight.

“Does that scare you?”

I shook my head. “Nah, baby. If anything, this makes complete sense.” Everything clicked into place. Her ability to infiltrate Oakview and her resilience to any chaos that was thrown her way. Also, her capability to manipulate those around her to get what she wanted. A true professional, and a specialist in her trade.

“Micah King,” I said with pent-up awe. “Who are you?”

She leant forward, raising her injured hand to my jaw. “A sister, a daughter, a criminal...and yours.” Then she closed the minute distance between us and kissed me with her full, wet lips.

My pulse stuttered from her declaration. I didn’t deserve her. I would never measure up.

It didn’t matter. I was a selfish motherfucker, and I was more than willing to take whatever she was ready to offer. Only she mattered now, my tumultuous mind zoning in on one primal possessive belief. Mine.

I took my time, savouring the welcome feel of her tongue swiping my own. My hands tightened on her waist, pulling her forward until her centre was directly lined up against my growing length.

Slow down, boy. Savour her. Feel her.

Pulling back, I was caught by her all-knowing gaze. Micah was right there with me, fully present and consumed in the essence of us, as an overwhelming necessity of electrifying static sparked in the space between.

Within her, I found all the answers. Everything I’d never asked or searched for...yet, everything I’d ever want or need.

My survival. My lifeline. My home.

MICAH

August stood frozen as I peeled his shirt up over his head and traced the tattoos laden

over his chest.

The distinct gladiator helmet stamped over his right pec, displaying his allegiance to the Ludus Maximus. The rest was a transient montage of tortured wraiths and faceless ghosts, each on the verge of death from a specialised weapon. Anyone would find the images disturbing, whereas I found a certain kinship with them. Death, a regular visitor who always welcomed me with the fondest hospitality.

“What do they mean?” My mouth pitched forward in gentle exploration, his warm skin heating beneath the light pressure of my lips. “They look like screaming souls begging for mercy, begging for their lives.”

August’s rib cage expanded beneath my hands. “That’s because they are. What do you know of the Gladiator Games?”

“The Games are a biyearly event that the Ludus Maximus are renowned for. Only one survives. And you, Psycho, are the most famous gladiator of all.” My tongue flicked against his nipple, sucking it between my lips. He surrendered a shudder and I repeated the process on the other side, his restrained growls nowhere near close enough to what I desired.

I needed it, fucking craved it. To make him act as crazy as he made me feel.

My head tipped back to catch his stare. “Each person can choose one weapon to take into the death match. What was your weapon of choice, Psycho?”

Without a word, he lifted his hands to bracket my neck, fingers constricting around my throat. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, his gruff voice intoxicating my mind.

“Observant as ever, baby. I have a tattoo for each gladiator I defeated in the arena. I

never needed a weapon, 'cause I killed them with their own."

"I wonder...did you kill them out of mercy, or power?"

"You're cute to think I ever had an option. Only one person makes it out alive, and the finale always comes down to Maximus or a special guest. I only ever saw one signal from my time in the games." He lifted a fist and tilted until his thumb was pointing down.

The mark to kill.

"I chose this path. I chose to take life to compensate for the protection of me and mine. If I had to do it all over again, I would still choose to be exactly where I am right now. With you."

August and I were marked by the greatest sin, death's willing companions, overrun with darkness and immorality. His words washed over me with purpose, holding no remorse or regret.

We were truly aligned.

Pushing him to step back, I slipped off the counter, his thumbs stroking against my jawline.

I kissed the centre of his chest as my hands settled on his waistband. "I want to see," I whispered, pulling his pants and trunks to the ground, his body left open and on display.

August hissed at the sudden exposure, but he didn't stop me.

I gathered to my knees, his dick beautiful, long and hard, begging for attention.



Shifting my focus, my eyes and fingertips traced over the expansive tattoos that lined his muscular legs.

Too many souls to count.

My fingers stilted upon a disguised tattoo on the side of his knee. “Don’t tell me, is that a—”

“Yep, it’s a dildo,” August snickered. “One challenging gladiator thought he’d be funny and chose a huge plastic dick as his weapon. To ‘fuck me up the ass,’ he said, or something along those lines.”

“I can’t believe you got that tattooed on you,” I huffed, half in amusement, half in disbelief.

“In spite of his foolhardy boast, he fought hard. Simply not hard enough to beat me.”

“Did you use his own weapon against him, then?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want an answer to.” His tone altered from teasing to straight masculinity, his eyes shifting to a hunter’s gaze. “What about you? What’s your weapon of choice, Golden Girl?”

I refused to look away, raising one hand to settle around the base of his cock as I proceeded to lick the precum leaking from his tip. The appetiser lingered on my tastebuds, inflaming my ardour within.

My tongue stroked up his shaft, exploring, playing and searching until my lips wrapped around his balls, massaging the aching spot with my salivating mouth.

“Fuckkkkkk.” August’s thigh muscles spasmed beneath my hold as he

hyperventilated, his features swimming in wonder and desperation.

“Micah,” he choked. In warning or encouragement, I didn’t know. Either way, I was ready to give him what he needed. What we both needed.

Humming in satisfaction, I suckled the head before guiding his length into my wanting mouth, his unrestrained groan sending waves of lust directly between my legs. I was stretched wide, his girth large and imposing, filling me to the brink.

With renewed hunger I pushed forward, adapting to his size as it hit the back of my throat. Our moans and sighs tangled together as my core throbbed in perfect synchronisation with his thrusts.

August continued to curse under his breath, never quite finding the words he was looking for. When my throat muscles relaxed and his cock fully settled inside me, his expression transformed into a feral monster, eyes predatory and savage.

Grasping onto my hair, he took control of my movements. “You’re gonna fucking get it now.” Pulling at my roots, he pounded into my face so hard that my eyes lined with tears, the sharp sting of pain making me wet with longing.

“Micah! Fuck, you’re too good.” I increased my efforts, his words inciting my demand for his release, for his surrender.

When he grew desperate and deranged, I bared my teeth, scraping against his tender flesh. With a mighty groan, he released inside me, his cum saturating the lining of my throat as I swallowed.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I couldn't fucking think straight. Micah's magic mouth had sucked my brain straight through the eye of my throbbing cock.

Taking no prisoners, leaving no survivors. An assassin without mercy.

My Variant still thrummed in my veins from the elixir I had taken earlier in the night. I couldn't handle the overstimulation.

Despite the euphoric haze, I was pissed. I had come before her. Hell, completely without her.

Utter blasphemy.

I lifted her to stand and flicked her nose. "You're gonna pay."

Micah clucked as I turned on the shower, the raising mist clouding the compact bathroom.

She turned, lifting her stained hair so I could reach the zipper at the base of her neck. Micah arched while I unzipped her dress, goosebumps trailing down her spine to chase my featherlight touch as a hesitant sigh left her swollen lips.

Oh, that won't do. I required her screams—preferably my name ripping from her lungs.

I shimmied the gown over her hips, letting it pool to the ground, leaving Micah in a sexy black thong that had me dying of starvation. I groaned and shoved a fist in my

mouth, teeth sinking into my flesh to prevent them from sinking into hers.

She flicked a sly eye over her shoulder, winked, then stepped beneath the cascading water. My head dropped back in weakness, my dick already hard and leaking, seeking her touch once more.

I lined up to her back and dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder. “My turn.” Lathering soap, I proceeded to wash the red stains from her skin and hair, my touch devoting, my caress intimate.

Micah had a tattoo spanning her entire back; a sprawling landscape of forestry. It appeared so lifelike, as if I could walk amongst the trees themselves. Massaging the artistic lines, she softened, leaning back against me.

“I was born and raised at the King Estate in East Harbour. We lived in a pretentious manor that overlooked the water. It was a beautiful, expansive compound surrounded by acres of forestry and vegetation. We’d spend hours lost in those woods. They were the happiest days of my life.”

I could hear the melancholy in her voice, the despondency in her tone. She turned to face me, her hands raising to rest about my neck, bare breasts pushed up against my chest. My palms leisurely skimmed up and down her arms. Arms that were riddled with coloured flowers and plants.

“Why do you hide them? They’re beautiful.”

Micah gave me a sad look. “Mainly to desensitise my Variant. It’s powerful enough that it affects every facet of my life, a constant presence absorbing into my very skin.” She lifted a hand to examine her injured palm, now free of glass. “I realised quite early on that the tattoos and clothing dampened the effects. I can’t stand people close, their touch near unbearable.”

She was being so genuine, so real, her statement took me by surprise. It shouldn't have.

I couldn't force my desires on her. I fucking refused. My respect was way too high to ever expect or want something she was unwilling to give. Even if only a little bit.

When I attempted to detangle our position, she stopped my retreat by grabbing my hands and placing them on her hips.

"Except yours, August. Never yours. If I didn't have your touch," she shuddered. "I think I'd die without it."

My neurotransmitters sparked with a detailed map to each point of contact where her body touched mine. I remained still, refusing to move, not giving a single inch or I would truly break.

Micah continued to guide my limp hands upward until they rested on top of each breast. "So touch me, August. You wouldn't want me to die, would you?" she finished with a smirk.

My forehead bumped against hers, palms kneading her breasts in soft, needy strokes. "When I'm done with you, you're gonna wish you were," I said, pinching her peaked nipples as her sweet mouth rewarded me with a surprised gasp.

My senses had increased tenfold, and I was more than willing to use the advantage to enhance her pleasure.

With my Variant uncaged, I was my true self. With her by my side, I was simply complete.

MICAH

August worshipped my flesh with the fervent devotion of any faithful servant. His leisurely touch revered my body, the strokes of his tongue whispered prayers into my skin.

I latched onto his broad shoulders, requiring stability and a stronghold to lean on before I toppled to the fucking ground, losing all meaning of space and time.

August pushed me against the wall, his mouth venturing lower, skimming my jaw and collarbone. His hands tantalised my nerves, leaving rippling tremors in their wake. And when he caught my nipple between his teeth, my eyes pinched closed as my pussy pulsed.

“Eyes open, Golden Girl. I want you to see everything, feel everything.” Upon his command, my eyes opened to his possessive stare.

“August,” I could scarcely breathe. “I need you.”

His palm soared lower. “You’re so fucking gorgeous, baby.”

My hips gyrated forward to meet his fingers as they skimmed over my laced thong, placing the lightest pressure over my clit. I wished I could delude myself into thinking they were drenched from the shower alone. We both knew better.

August’s mouth returned to mine, breathing life into my failing respiratory system. He continued to tease me, his perfect, hard cock pressing against my inner thigh as his knuckles caressed the edge of my panties.

My body demanded more. I was over waiting. I would force him to relinquish control, as I had none left to give. Motions turned ragged as I wrenched him closer, lifting a leg high over his hip whilst my tongue fought for dominance.

A masculine growl vibrated from his rib cage and I bit his lip, hard. “Stop playing with me.”

“But it’s my favourite. I love playing with you,” he said, slipping one single finger beneath the thin material to push inside me.

My head fell back from the instant pleasure—until he retracted his touch to lick his finger completely clean.

I stilled at the sight, my inner walls clenching from the loss. “I swear I’m going to fucking kill you.”

“Not until I make you cum, you won’t.” He spun me so fast my palms slapped against the shower wall, his front pressing up to my back. I pushed my ass against him and drank down his audible hiss when his cock pushed between my cheeks. “Hold on to the wall, you’re gonna fucking need it.”

Before I could cuss him out, he pressed his foot against mine, widening my stance. His palms and mouth traced the tattoo down my back, August settling on his knees behind me. My legs shook from his proximity, his hands rough as they kneaded my ass cheeks. Then I felt the predator stalk forward to take me in his jaws.

August licked from my pussy all the way to my back entrance, finishing the upstroke with his teeth latching onto the plump flesh. I yelped from the sharp sting that undiluted into a burning desire.

“This wonderful ass. I’m gonna fuck it one day,” August purred. I hummed in reply, my mind vacant, lost to his savagery.

August hooked his fingers into my thong and gently pulled it down, the last barrier eradicated. I was running hot. Feverish.

August wasn't faring any better, vibrant jolts of lust shooting from his very core to ricochet up my body. Then his proverbial barrier completely snapped, the beast clawing from his insides finally freed.

He jerked my hips down to his upturned mouth, snarling like a wild animal. "Back the fuck up and ride my goddamned face, Micah."

His tongue attacked me from behind, my legs barely holding out, muscles spasming from the intimate claiming.

August fed on me, not missing a single morsel. When his lips sucked me in, I relinquished to his ravenous hunger. My hips writhed to a punishing beat, my forehead hit the tiles and my panting moans echoed through the acoustic bathroom.

"That's it, baby. Ride me hard," his voice muffled from between my legs as his motions increased in tempo.

My skin prickled at the impending high when August suddenly slapped my ass hard, then immediately shoved two fingers so fucking deep I never stood a chance.

The world blackened and my tight walls spasmed, clenching onto his intruding fingers as they fought to stay inside me. I collapsed, August catching my descent with his waiting mouth.

He continued at a leisurely pace, easing the aftershocks of my orgasm to a persistent rhythm of desire that refused to completely disappear.

When I was stable enough to stand on my own two feet, he steadied my stance and rotated my hips so I was facing him once more. August remained on his knees, his expression filthy and smug as all fuck. Until his eyes caught on my new tattoo. His features transformed into the most serious expression I'd ever seen.



He reverently stroked the red flower and rose to stand as sure-footed as any gladiator who had conquered another arena. “Gladiolus? That wasn’t there last time,” he said, fingers digging into the image stamped on my upper thigh.

I peppered kisses up his throat, if only to escape his penetrating gaze.

“Did you know that in Roman times,” I said. “when gladiators fought to the death in the arena and won, they’d be showered in Gladioli flowers?”

He nodded. “I also know it’s the birth flower for the month of August.”

I pulled back at his restrained tone, catching the strangest look in his eyes. “You’re undefeated, are you not?”

He shook his head, grasped one of my hands and placed it over his sternum, his heart pummelling beneath. “You’re wrong. I’ve been bested—completely annihilated—by the most worthy opponent,” he said, voice guttural and hoarse.

What is this feeling permeating from his chest into mine?

“You brought me to my knees, Micah. A place I never considered I’d want to stay.” He lifted my legs so I could wrap them around his waist.

With August’s smooth length pressed between us, he began to thrust slowly, his throbbing cock sliding against my clit in blissful pressure. “Now I stand before you as a humble servant, awaiting your royal decree, begging for mercy.”

Then it all clicked together, his words and expression cementing his image into place. I don’t know how I’d missed it before. I’d been too caught up in the frenetic events of the night to truly capture the essence of him.

I stared into the bottomless voids that were his eyes. But instead of getting lost, I found him—all of him. Two halves connected as one. Truly an otherworldly being that was so bright and beautiful, my heart expanded close to bursting from the knowledge.

“Psycho?”

He inhaled a raspy breath, triggering his Variant to unforeseen lengths. I watched him become one before me, potent emotion leaking from his very pores.

Fulfilment, completion and gratitude. It all wrecked me, attacked me, consumed me.

I closed the distance between us, pressing my lips hard against his, winding my fingers tightly through his midnight blue hair.

After a split second of hesitation, his tongue fought mine, and when his teeth scraped against my lower lip, a moan climbed up my throat for him to consume.

When he positioned himself at my entrance, he stilted for permission.

“Are you Psycho, or August Mathers?”

“He is me. I am him. We are one in the same,” his words ethereal, two vocals thundering together to form one voice.

I licked my lips, his gaze catching on the movement.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

I nodded. “A gift I’d afford no other.” Pushing my hips forward, the tip of his cock slid inside me, the movement triggering his complete undoing. With a strong surge,

he thrust all the way to the hilt. We both groaned, my pussy adjusting to his intimidating size.

“Fucking...so soft, so warm and so fucking tight,” he said while pumping in and out, hitting that sweet spot each and every time.

“So full. I’m so fucking full—” He cut off my tirade by shoving his tongue between my teeth. Our carnal desperation fused together, rising to impossible heights.

“You’re mine, Micah. You’re fucking mine, you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“You’re so sweet, so wet, baby, dripping all over my fucking cock.”

I begged and pleaded, incoherent with my mumbled ramblings. How he made sense of what I was asking was beyond me, but he gave it to me anyway.

Increasing his pace, he slammed into me so hard I could feel him twitching. Both of us were so damn close to orgasm. My mind fractured at the tips of reality.

“Fuck. No!” Psycho snarled. I whined when he slipped out and left me empty and wanting.

What the fuck is he doing?

In one fluid motion, Psycho lifted me high, legs parting wide to settle over his shoulders. Before I could contemplate how the hell I got up there, all thought washed down the drain when his mouth attacked my core. He was a straight savage, salivating over the flesh that he tore from my bones. The apex predator that delighted in his kill.

I ground against him and fell prey to his aggressive attack, Psycho holding me steady as my body thoroughly broke apart, my climax so primal and raw, it stole all my faculties.

I was a whimpering mess, completely limp and entirely useless.

Before I could regain any semblance of reorientation, he slid me down to settle against his front, my responsive nerve endings inciting from the added contact.

My thighs hung loosely over his forearms and his hands braced my ass as he realigned his dick with my entrance.

“Stay here with me, Golden Girl?”

I mustered the strength to raise a single palm to his cheek. “Claim me.”

His gaze locked on mine, never wavering as he slid back into my rippling flesh where he belonged. I sighed in contentment. He felt so deep this way, hands dictating our movements, thrusting in and out with flawless accuracy.

Heat razed my centre as my receptors refused to resist the call, hips pushing forward of their own accord, chasing the potent high that only he could provide.

“One more time, baby. Cum for me one more time. Clench that pretty pussy and stroke me good.”

Each touch, each lick, each whispered word threatened to undo me. Then he gave one last punishing thrust and my vision exploded in technicolour as we climaxed together. Euphoria anaesthetised my veins, corrupting my DNA, until all that was left imprinted on every cell was the name August Mathers.

My head dropped to the base of his neck, sagging against his solid form as he emptied deep inside me. “There’s no going back now. I fucking own you.” I imprinted into his skin.

He chuckled, knowing full well I spoke the utmost truth.

I beckoned August closer as I leant against his headboard.

Bare except for a pair of sweatpants, he climbed between my legs and rested his head on my abdomen. I'd stolen one of his shirts, the fabric soft and saturated in a fragrance entirely his own. My fingers idly twined through his damp hair while his hand snaked beneath my thigh, methodically tracing the lines of my tattoo. He couldn't stop touching it, entirely possessed.

"What happened, Micah?" We'd settled into a post-lust haze, the soft purple glow of his cell lulling us into a phantom space of unlimited time. "I've only known the bare minimum about your family. From what I've heard, no one has knowledge of any intricate details."

"What do you know?"

"The Sovereign was one of the four powerhouses of the underworld. Then out of nowhere, they were completely wiped from the playing field. Hell, I didn't even know King had a daughter, let alone four. It was said he had a couple of sons who were killed in the explosion of the King Estate, but nothing was confirmed." He trembled slightly, thinking of the violent rumours he'd heard.

True. Hardly anything was known about the downfall of the Sovereign. But it was an undeniable fact that the organisation was betrayed and completely massacred. Each and every member, affiliate and sympathiser was disposed of, or disappeared as if they never existed at all.

I inhaled a vital breath. I'd never spoken about it, never articulated my tragic past into

formulated words, severely protective and simultaneously wary of trusting anyone outside my circle.

Exhaling the same elongated breath, I surrendered my last remaining resolve and returned Psycho's openness with my own.

"We owe our survival, in part, to our father," I said. "Oliver King was a vigilant and semi-paranoid man, like most people in our area of work. He did everything in his power to keep our identities a secret. He even gave us all masculine, dominant names to add to that narrative, which fulfilled its purpose."

"Soon, all of Junction City believed my father had sons to further the King bloodline. He didn't confirm or deny these rumours, and no one would dare ask otherwise. So, when our house was raided and sacked, they had no reason to assume they hadn't completed the job. Because, to the masses of the JC, we didn't exist."

August hummed in unabashed awe. "Holy fuck. He was a genius."

"Not enough to prevent himself from being betrayed and killed, unfortunately," I said bitterly, unwarranted spite and accusation thickening my tone.

Though I missed my father, I still held him responsible for leaving us, and losing our sister in the process. You'd think with the nature of my Variant, I'd be more empathetic and in tune with my emotions. Instead, the truth became a burden, my endless reel of pain corrupted me, tainted me. Unable to forgive, nor forget.

August continued to mindlessly stroke his fingertips over my skin. Nothing I'd revealed unsettled him. All he cared for was my wellbeing and position in all of it. He was a soothing balm that settled my soul like no other.

"What made you come back now? What brought you back after all this time?"

“For the past four years, my siblings and I have searched for any scrap of information we could find about that night. It was bizarre. No one claimed the win, the responsibility for the downfall of one of the most powerful organisations in the country. Even more strange was that no one took ownership over the open drug trade in Junction City. With the Sovereign wiped out, anyone could have stepped up and taken everything for themselves. Yet, no one ever did—until now.”

August tilted his head at my clear observation, the new information seeping in.

“Ludus Maximus?”

I affirmed with a nod. “Ludus Maximus. I know you were sent here before they started distributing, but—”

“Tell me what you need from me, baby.”

“We need to get to Maximus, but he’s locked himself deep in the Caverns. Which, as you know, are impenetrable. We can’t get close, or even manage to get a glimpse of him. We need to know his role.”

“He’s truly in the drug game?” August’s brow furrowed, sceptical of the information I was providing.

“He’s not just in it, he’s taken over the entirety of the Sovereign syndicate and its jurisdiction.”

PSYCHO

I shook my head, still hesitant to believe he had changed his mind since I’d been locked away. Maximus was one of the most stubborn people I’d ever met.



Raising from the bed, I lit a cigarette. “When I was inducted, Maximus was already plagued by paranoia. He understood there were higher powers at play when it came to the downfall of your house, and was always adamant not to trample on the bones of the Sovereign. Maximus was never interested in that side of business. He’s a bastard, but more astutely, he’s a survivor.”

“You’ve been away for a while, August. Power and money easily change a good man, let alone a bad one. Hell, people will give just about anything for a hit of Amp.”

“Amp?” Where have I heard that before?

Micah shuffled forward, sitting on the edge of the bed. “An amplifier drug that came on the market four months ago. It enhances one’s Variant. Highly potent, but difficult to acquire. Ludus Maximus is the sole provider, along with other drugs.”

I paced, a trail of smoke floating to the roof. I’m missing something vital. Then every tendril of convoluted web stitched together and clicked into place.

“Ludus Maximus isn’t sourcing the drugs. They’re only distributing them.”

“All evidence says otherwise. How do you know there’s a third party involved?”

“Because that’s why I was sent to Oakview. That’s why I was locked away in this fucking shithole.” I wanted to tear myself apart for my own foolishness. More than that, I wanted to rip the core foundations out from the whole underground until all that remained was the tortured corpse of Maximus, dead at my feet.

Fatigue dragged down my muscles and exhaustion pulled at my lids. My sole undivided focus concentrated on staying upright.

It had taken me five days to fulfill the Boss’s order. With hardly any sustenance and

even less sleep, I had found and slaughtered the entire Crisis MC. Dishevelled, bloodstained and an all-round goddamned mess, my feet reluctantly tugged me through the Caverns towards Boss, instead of slipping into a well-deserved coma.

His private quarters were deserted. The place was usually bustling with either soldiers, servants or whores (which, in some cases, could be considered one and the same).

I didn't have time to contemplate the strangeness of it all (nor did I care, for that matter). He'd demanded a report immediately after the job was complete, and he'd be happy with the outcome. Wanting to get the debrief over with, I aimed for his office.

I raised a fist to knock on the closed door when elevated voices filtered through the thick wood. Boss loathed insubordination, and interrupting his meeting would not be taken lightly. I had no choice but to wait.

Leaning against the opposite wall, my head dropped back. I was utilising all my willpower not to lower to the ground and curl up like a kitten, right there in the middle of the bloody hallway.

Raised, aggressive voices jolted me awake, unsure if it'd been five seconds or five minutes, microsleeps catching me unaware, luring me into brief bouts of unconsciousness.

"She's not happy with your results," said a masculine voice I'd never heard, as it carried through the closed door.

"What do you want me to do? Her requests are unreasonable," Boss said, his gruff, aged tone recognisable.

"Your excuses grow weak, Maximus. Maybe you're too old. 'Bout time you found a

successor.”

The distinct sound of a violent struggle followed, loud thumps and crashes siphoning amongst one another.

Whoever the hell was fighting Boss must have had a death wish.

My attention spiked, debating whether I should go in and help or remain outside and mind my own damn business.

A forceful thud hit the floor. “Don’t ever associate me with the word weakagain,” Boss said.

The other guy laughed and I cringed. Whoever the fool was, he was going to get his tongue ripped out.

“Watch yourself, or your precious Ludus will be next. You know we have the means and resources to make that a legitimate threat,” the stranger snickered. “We will deliver Amp in two months. Be ready—or else.”

My hand flexed at the deliberate warning. Did this imbecile know the Ludus at all?

Soft clicks alerted me to a petite woman approaching down the corridor. She halted beside me, her expensive perfume overpowering and irritating my nostrils. Her attire screamed luxury: designer heeled boots paired with a skintight dress, her lime green hair and pierced nose clashing with her extravagant getup.

She tsked. “You shouldn’t be here.” Her eyes twinkled with danger.

“Says who?” Was it me, or was my speech slurred?

She shrugged in return and pushed the door wide open without preamble. “We have a lurker,” she announced to the now-silent room. All sets of eyes bounced to me as she grabbed my shirt collar and hurled me onto the office floor.

My reflexes were sluggish, deprived of any energy, the lack of sleep from the past five days reigning down on my rebuttal. My Variant even flapped around in my chest for a good second before wallowing away to nothingness. I was tapped out.

The other stranger pointed an accusatory finger at Boss. I could now put a face to the voice. The guy was slightly shorter, but stocky, his brown hair spiked in a purposely messy way, a nice shiner growing over his right eye. “Is this the so-called loyalty that you proclaim? You’re fucking over with!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Boss said. “Nothing will be repeated. Right, Psycho?”

Maybe I was having some weird as fuck dream. Surely Boss wouldn’t concede to these two amateurs. They appeared to be around the same age as me.

My gaze bounced between the three, trying to figure out what the fuck was going on. Boss’s eyes caught on mine and I could easily read the rage cultivating in their depths. He was angry—at me.

I found myself nodding. “I won’t say anything.”

I wouldn’t, cause I fucking couldn’t. I had no idea what the fuck they were on about.

The female sauntered to the middle of the room, demanding all attention. She licked her lips as her head snapped to Boss. “You will ensure that, won’t you, Maximus?” Her tone was authoritative and arrogant.

As I was about to scoff, Boss submitted with a resolute nod. I was rendered

speechless.

He kept his promise. And in doing so, destroyed my life.

“None of it ever made sense to me. I didn’t know or understand anything. That day, I heard and saw something I wasn’t supposed to. Only now am I starting to get an idea of what that was.” I stopped pacing, eyes tracking over my golden girl with enlightenment.

“Who are they?”

“I don’t fucking know. Their names were never spoken. I only saw them for a short period, and even then, my memory is unreliable. I was so sleep deprived, at first I thought I was hallucinating. Until my head was shoved in a brown sack and I was brought here.”

Micah raised, venturing closer.

Watching this perfect being approach was bittersweet. She was flawless, ethereal in her presence, and here she stood. In my tattered shirt, locked in the loony bin assigned to a psychotic killer.

Micah grasped my hand, pulling me forward. With no will to resist, I drifted into her embrace, fingers automatically latching onto the Gladiolus tattoo permanently settled on her upper thigh, a bright beacon for me to own. She’d inadvertently called to the most visceral part of me. With this demand, I had wordlessly claimed her mind, body, and soul.

“We will find them,” she said. “And you’re going to help us. Help me.”

I held no reservations, only acceptance at her request.

Pressing a kiss to her hair, I said, “Revenge against Maximus?”

“Revenge,” she said, the vow sealed into my skin. “There will be a full investigation into what happened tonight. You’ve already killed Fern. Please refrain from killing anyone else in the meantime.”

I smirked. “Hey, you killed Katsy. We’re even.”

“Fine, just promise me you’ll keep a low profile. Stay undercover. I can handle everything else. We’re so close to getting you both out. Wait for me?”

“Forever,” I said, so low I was unsure if she even heard.

MICAH

He did not stay low. He did not stay undercover.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I tracked empty corridors, sticking to the shaded alcoves supplied by the overcast night, my pulse beating to the drum of my ever-growing anger.

Even with my large frame, my movements were smooth and fluid. With the elixir on board, I was virtually undetectable. Micah had left a vial for emergencies. To me, this was the definition of an emergency—to impose reasonable justice on those who forgot their place.

I slipped through the crack of the door to hide in the corner of the room, draped in darkness. The only sound was the click of the lock bolting shut.

The decrepit cesspit of an inmate jerked upright in bed, shank clasped tightly in his hand, the blunt blade shaking ever so slightly.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

“Who the fuck is there? Who would dare come into my room?”

My shoulders rolled back and muscles tensed as I stretched to my full height, neck cracking from left to right.

“Now, Walter, is that any way to welcome a guest?”

Walter’s eyes widened on my hidden figure. Impressively, his tone remained hard and unrelenting. “Psycho. What the fuck, man? I was sleeping.”

I stalked forward as my blood heated at the inevitable hunt. I was a predator, my eyes

well and truly accustomed to the immediacy of my prey, his jugular pulsating to the supple beat of my own heart's desires.

“When I arrived here, I had one rule. One request. Do you remember what that was?”

Walter stood, his instincts identifying the threat as his slow, dim-witted mind tried to catch up. “I...I haven't done anything. I've kept away, haven't interfered in any of your shit.” This dumb fucking asshole actually shrugged. “We're cool.”

My lips spread into a maniacal grin as I stared down into the eyes of this peasant. Before he could take another breath, I twisted his wrist with a hard jolt, a resounding snap echoing with the impact. His shank bounced to the floor as his hand lay limp at an odd angle.

Walter's eyes burned with hatred as a loud grunt escaped his throat. I had to give him credit, he earned points for not squealing like a pig as his bones shattered. Even a few more, for having an ounce of practicality and not outright attacking me on instinct alone.

My fingers raised to circle his throat. “I had one rule. What did I say?” He shook his head (well, as much as he could with my hand cutting off his airway). “I told you never to touch what was mine.” Then I shoved him back on the bed.

Walter choked while scurrying back against the headboard, as far away from me as possible.

“I didn't take shit. It wasn't me. You've got the wrong guy.” I bent and twirled his shank between my fingers, admiring the handiwork and ingenuity. “I swear, Psycho. I haven't touched anything.”

“Ah, but that's a lie, isn't it? You touched her. And she's mine.”



Realisation sparked in his features, his pale face now sweating profusely.

I knew what he saw when he looked into my dead, black eyes. I gave him a glimpse into my tarnished soul, an open gateway to the beast inside, manically laughing in the background of his misery.

“You roamed your unworthy hands over her body, placed your diseased tongue over her perfect, unblemished skin. You touched what is mine!”

Walter sobbed. “Fuck! I didn’t know. I’m telling you, Psycho, I didn’t know she was yours.” I ripped out his legs and dragged him over the edge of the bed, his body thumping hard against the ground.

Solid and unmoving, I stood over his whimpering form. The executioner had come to collect.

I live for this shit, die for this shit, fucking get hard for this shit.

“You will repent by saying her name. What is her name?”

“Dr Chaser.”

“That’s not it.”

I preened at the knowledge that I was one of the select few who knew my girl’s name—her real identity. I swear that lit some type of bliss in my stone-concrete organ of a heart.

“I don’t know...I-I don’t fucking know her name.”

Latching onto his greasy hair, I yanked his head back for the disrespect, his neck

straining as my gaze bled into his.

“That’s right. And you’ll never know,” I said, before slamming his face into the ground.

I veered around his trembling body as liquid pooled over the floor.

Did this motherfucker piss himself?

Sidestepping the puddle of urine, I lifted his uninjured hand. “You defied my request, made a mistake. And you will pay for that mistake. Once I’m done, consider justice paid in full. Let’s see if you survive it.” Bending over, I got to work.

MICAH

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THERE’S NO FOOTAGE?!” Mayor Oakview screamed through the monitor, the speakers crackling from the onslaught.

We were jammed into Burner’s office, forced into an emergency debrief meeting regarding the astronomical failure that was the fundraiser ball.

Oakview Asylum was in lockdown, two staff members murdered and no suspect in sight. Since their gruesome deaths, most hadn’t returned, leaving Burner and I to clean up the mess.

“I don’t know, sir. The whole server’s been wiped,” Burner said. “The police can’t find anything.” He looked like shit, his appearance unkempt, an all-around fucking disaster.

“It was one of those lunatics! I don’t care which, pick one and be done!” Mayor Oakview shouted, his carotid thumping down the side of his neck. He should have

been more careful. He could have given himself a cardiac arrest, with all that stress.

I forcibly pushed my smile back, adopting the ideal mourning image.

“And now we have to deal with this inmate in the Intensive Care Unit. How the fuck are you running this place, Burner?”

Burner’s knee bounced beneath his desk. “We assume it’s the same person. They used Fern’s swipe card to access Walter’s room.”

My attention perked at the name. “What happened to Walter?”

Burner softened his tone. “He was attacked overnight. His hands were mutilated beyond repair. Plus, he’d lost a lot of blood by the time he was found. His tongue was cut out.”

“Prognosis?”

“It’ll be a miracle if he makes it out alive.”

Mayor Oakview grunted, unfazed. “Good. He can be our suspect.” Said and spoken like a true politician.

My lips involuntarily pursed and Mayor Oakview caught the expression, as if only just realising I was in the room.

“I apologise for the callousness, Dr Chaser. If you’re struggling, please go home and rest.” His voice was calm and soothing.

“I’d prefer to continue as normal, please.” They both agreed, and I excused myself from the stifling environment.

I had to see August, and I had to see him now.

What is that imbecile thinking?

Yes, I was frustrated, however my body also hummed with warmth as my lips tipped upwards of their own accord.

Get a fucking grip, woman.

I burst through my office door, slammed it shut and didn't give him a chance to blink before I spat.

"What the fuck have you done?"

August exhaled a long puff of smoke before turning his head and tracing his deadly eyes up to mine. My breath caught at his sexy, sideways smirk.

I am so screwed.

"Hey, babe. I missed you," he purred. His voice slithered over me like a creeping fog, suffocating me with his honesty. That's what got me the most: when he spoke, when he said these things to me, he was speaking the utmost truth. I could feel it. He did indeed miss me.

I stood there staring at his stupid beautiful face, hardly breathing, and crossed my arms to prevent them from reaching for him.

He clocked my stance and raised an eyebrow, accepting my challenge.

"No kiss hello then?"

“Don’t fuck with me, Psycho.”

“Psycho? Hmm, I must be in trouble.”

“Did you maim Walter?”

“Well, not just me,” he shrugged.

My fingers twitched at his clipped answer. “Who else was with you?”

“You gave me the elixir. So you are, in fact, my accomplice,” he said, before taking another drag of his never-ending cigarette.

I plucked the offending stick from his mouth and stabbed it in the ashtray, my eyes lapsing shut as I inhaled sharply.

“You drive me crazy,” I huffed. “I tell you to keep a low profile, you disobey me. I tell you to stay hidden, you disobey me. I tell you I can handle it, you fucking disobey me.”

A light pressure of hunger teased my flesh, and when I opened my eyes, August stood directly in front, chest an inch from mine and heaving.

My head tilted back to gaze directly into his infinite black eyes.

“He’s lucky he’s still breathing at all,” August whispered with conviction. “He touched you, babe, and he paid the price. With every finger, with every fibre of him that defiled your honey skin with his unworthy touch. He fucking paid.” His breath wisped over my face, drowning me in possessiveness, protectiveness and total necessity. “I know I went against everything you told me to do, that I disobeyed your word, so if you want to punish me, Micah, baby, have at it. Handcuff me, tie me up.

Hell, spank me if that's what you want. As long as you put those fucking hands on me again before I surely go insane with need."

We weren't physically touching, but we may as well have been, my whole body caught up in him.

I had no misconceptions that he had done all this for me. And for some reason, that didn't feel so bad.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Emerson and I leant over the railing of the domed tower of Variant Sanctorum, wind whistling in our ears as the sun sank low, spraying the city in a burnt orange glow. Our joint melancholy eclipsed the beautiful landscape, settling into our bones, as it usually did this time of year.

A resounding boom sent shockwaves vibrating across our landing. The heavy entrance door, once flapping wildly in the wind, came flying off its hinges, landing with a thud.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Spencer screamed. The door had come within an inch from crashing into her face, and she’d retaliated by kicking it down. Crazy bitch.

Emerson giggled. “It’s sacrilege to swear in a house of worship.”

Spencer’s eyes darted our way, narrowing into slits until they roamed past us, processing the steep drop to the city streets below.

Her face paled of all colour. “Get me out of here,” she managed to breathe. I didn’t need my ability to know panic was running thick through her veins.

Chuckling lightly, Emerson and I grabbed a wrist each, steering her through the doorless entrance and down the stairwell.

“Why’d you come up, Spence? I’m surprised you even came this far.”

“You think I wanted to chase you morons up here?” she seethed behind me, twisting

out of my grip. “Neither of you were answering your phone. What other choice did I have?”

“What happened?” Emerson asked from the rear as I pulled out my phone.

Skimming through the countless messages, my gut churned, hastening my descent by skipping every second step. “We have to leave. Now.”

Spencer huffed. “Oh, so now she wants to rush.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Emerson asked.

“It’s sacrilege to swear in the house of religion, oh pious Meek.”

“Spence. Start talking.”

“Ava sent a message,” Spencer said. “Something big is happening at Forbidden Garden, and they don’t want the princess around to catch a whiff. They plan on relocating her tonight.”

Emerson hummed. “Tan doesn’t get back till late. The plan was fo—”

“Doesn’t matter,” I interrupted. “I’m not losing her. I made a promise.” The potential danger loomed over my head like a noose. If they succeeded in taking her underground, we may never find her again.

“Well, are we going to break Psycho out first? As planned?”

I ran a hand down my face. “There’s no time, we might miss her.” I reached the bottom of the staircase and rounded on my sisters. “Which means it’s up to us. Will you help me?”



Spencer slid down the last step, her face splitting into one of her most charming smiles. “I’ve already got a plan.”

Emerson sent a wink over Spencer’s shoulder. “Then let’s fucking do this.”

“Blasphemy!” Spencer gasped, holding a hand to her chest, as if her mouth wasn’t as foul as the rest of ours.

I stepped between them and hooked an arm over each of their shoulders, leading to the hidden passageway to our underground Temple. “It’s been a while since we were on a mission together.”

Emerson leant into my side. “Definitely long overdue.”

Spencer’s smile grew wider, almost predatory. “I’ve been waiting for our killer band to regroup for so long. Wait ‘till you see what I have planned.”

My lips curved higher. Knowing my sister, her plan was absolutely crazy and rash—exactly the way we like it.

Forbidden Garden was a hot mess, the interior drenched in various shades of pink (which wasn’t completely horrid, in itself). More so, it was the overdramatic embellishments that gave it a tacky appearance: ostentatious chandeliers, plastic oversized plants and cheap furniture dominated the space.

Regardless of my harsh assessment, Forbidden Garden was bustling with irresistible enticement and sugary temptation.

I wore a lingerie one-piece in the design of a red rose, the green stem a thin piece of string replicating a thong. The flower embroidered over my front, with mini petals blooming to barely cover my nipples and centre. I’d airbrushed my skin, tattoos

disguised beneath the pristine makeup, resulting in a sheen finish reflecting off the dimmed lights.

An external spore of desire was the only warning my Variant gave before a hard palm slapped against my butt cheek.

“Grab me another bourbon, Rose Petal, and I’ll soothe that ache for you,” said a gruff, masculine voice. He had platinum blonde hair that fell into his cold, dark brown eyes. He seemed familiar, though I was sure I’d never met him before.

My fingers twitched to return the favour. Instead I inclined my head and aimed for the bar, lined against the back of the theatre room. I spared a cursory glance to the elevated stage up front, two women provocatively dancing a well-rehearsed strip tease.

Ava mixed drinks behind the bar, tracking my approach. She didn’t know who I was, curious eyes shifting over my stranger’s face. She wore a full-length sheer gown, embroidered daisies perfectly situated over her most private areas.

Every female in Forbidden Garden, no matter their rank or position, was named after a flower, their attire displaying their alias for clientele simplicity and anonymity.

Ava was tall, with familiar midnight blue hair and recognisable facial structure. Her similarities with August threw me the first time I’d caught sight of her, the resemblance irrefutable. She didn’t have any visible guards, however many Ludus members loitered the halls. Taking her would be a challenging feat, but one that would be satisfying when successful.

I leant over the bar, wearing an easy smile.

“Wait your turn, bitch,” said a high-pitched voice from behind. I glanced over my

shoulder to catch a woman with a stylish bob, wearing an outfit wholly consisting of draping jewels. She struggled to hide her aged skin beneath caked make-up, accompanied by gigantic eyelashes nearly as big as her ego.

She barked her order and placed a living, breathing chihuahua on the bar, its gigantic balls hanging so low they almost scraped the countertop.

Fucking unhygienic, much?

Ava wordlessly planted the drink in front of her, not meeting her eyes.

“You forgot something,” I said. “Your manners for Daisy here.” My gaze flicked to Ava, whose mouth was agape.

The woman sneered. “Mind your business, whore.”

“Original. If you didn’t notice, we’re in a whorehouse.”

She turned, full-bodied, her mouth twisting into a grimace. “I’ll let you off this one time, since you’re new. But let me put this plainly for your stupid, slut brain. I’m Eden, the Mistress of Forbidden Garden, and paramour to Maximus.”

“Not the only one, I bet.”

Eden shoved my shoulders. “Watch your fucking mouth.” After that, she was too busy chastising me to notice when I danced my fingers in the air to gain her dog’s attention, who chased the movement.

With the perfect accuracy of coincidence, someone called Eden’s name. As her head turned towards the call, her dog trotted forward, directly over her drink, saggy balls dipping low in her glass as it passed.

I tried and failed to hold in a chuckle. I thought I did well not to burst into hysterics on the spot. Eden's head snapped back to find her faithful chihuahua enjoying a good pat from me. The little fella deserved it.

Eden snatched him out of reach and cooed. "No, Franny. We don't associate ourselves with filth. You're lucky I have VIP guests to attend to," she said, grabbing her drink. As her parting back disappeared through the crowd, her head lowered to sip from her glass. I couldn't prevent my lips from lifting into a wide-toothed grin.

Ava stood frozen. She'd had a front-row seat to that whole shit show. I winked, then released another carefree giggle before disappearing myself.

I found the heavy-handed asshole on a chaise sofa facing the stage, a flower girl strewn over his lap as he licked chocolate syrup off her breasts.

Another male sat across from him, identical in physical appearance. Even with their alarming resemblance, they couldn't have had more conflicting auras.

The first was volatile and unpredictable; pale scruffy hair, expensive suit creased and sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Whereby his counterpart was the image of polished precision; black, vibrant hair impeccably slicked back, each button and stitch of his suit in perfect alignment. The only abnormality was the piece of thin silver dangling from his pierced ear. He ignored everyone and everything in the room, including the duo that canoodled across from him. He was rigid and unapproachable, difficult to read—even for me.

I placed the drink on the glass side table and turned to leave. Fucked if I was going to interrupt and ruin a girl's pay check. Before I could disappear, a fresh lick of fear danced down my spine. I sucked in a breath and contemplated my options.

To stay or leave?

A pained groan released from the mahogany-skinned woman wedged between his legs. He held a firm hand over her forehead, while the other lined her jaw, grip so tight he had her pinned, bruises sure to leave a mark.

“Lily, you’re needed in the pink room,” I said. At least it wasn’t hard to guess her pseudonym.

Lily detangled herself and squeezed my hand, purple eyes flashing in gratitude.

Why am I such a pussy these days?

“All rooms are pink,” he said, challenging my order. He knew I was full of shit.

I gave a timid smile. “She knows which one.”

Lily nodded in reply as I ushered her away. I didn’t get the chance to follow.

“Come here,” he ordered. I stepped forward.

“Closer,” he reprimanded, flicking his fingers until I was bent directly over him.

I knew what was coming, not that it helped. I could have blocked the advance and squished his hairy balls until he squealed like a pig. Unfortunately, a pitfall of the job was to stay in character, and I was ever the professional. Forcing my muscles not to react, I took the hit. He backhanded me so hard that I landed on my knees between his feet, the imprint of his slap ingrained into my fucking cheek.

“I’m glad you sent her away,” he purred, nuzzling my hair out of my face. “She wasn’t strong enough to handle me. You are, though, aren’t you Rose Petal?”

I kept my eyes on the ground, knowing that’s what he wanted.

My humiliation, my surrender, my pain.

“I like to give pain, so much pain. And my brother here, he likes to give pleasure,” he continued to stroke my hair, whispering in a placating tone. “Once I’ve finished taking you apart, he’ll put you back together again. Make you whole.”

“I’m fully booked tonight.”

His fingers tightened, my scalp screaming from the tension. “I will have you.”

To alleviate the sting, I grasped his hand, ready to snap it the fuck off, then stiffened. My fingertips brushed against a small-circled brand raised on the inside of his wrist and an involuntary gasp escaped me at the unexpected find.

Out of nowhere, the polished brother opposite pinpointed his attention in our direction, the first and only time he’d pitched his interest towards anything. His stoic mask hardly cracked, dark brown eyes flat and hollow as they slithered over our position. He simply raised an eyebrow to his brother, whose fingers still remained in the roots of my hair.

In one glance, they held a full conversation without expressing a single word. The telepathic communication of siblings was all too familiar amid me and mine.

The violent sadist was a predictable beast, one I had conquered numerous times. Though the other was an intimidating monster all on his own, purely on the basis that I couldn’t sense anything. Not because he was blocking me with his own Variant, but more that he was so unfeeling that he felt nothing. Nothing at all.

The pale-haired brute shoved me to the ground, his gaze never wavering from his brother’s. “Fucking leave us.”

I didn't give him a chance to reconsider, disappearing before either of them could break eye contact.

I had to find Emerson. The plan had changed.

Emerson was exactly where she was supposed to be, situated at the large, industrial kitchen sink.

She was disguised as a dishwasher boy, her female curves easily cloaked beneath her oversized mens' clothing. An additional apron was thrown on top and her long, sunkissed hair was wrapped tightly in a filthy chef's hat. Most impressive was her slumped posture and clumsy movements. She really did pass for a lanky teenager.

"Come here, boy, I have a job for you," I said. She nodded fervently, tripping over her own feet to keep up with my long strides.

We slipped into a shadowed alcove, Emerson leaning against the far wall. "What happened to your face?"

"I've got it sorted." She raised an eyebrow and I rolled my eyes. "Let's fast forward the plan, before I end up killing every single fucking person in this place."

She snickered, reaching into her pocket and raising the bag of Haze Dust. It was empty.

"You spiked the food already?"

"You'd be surprised how many of these morons come to a female brothel looking for something of the sausage variety," she huffed. "I'm never disguising myself as a boy again."

I pouted. “But Meek, you’re so convincing.”

“Well, due to that, there’s a couple of bodies stashed in the back of the walk-in freezer, ‘cause they couldn’t keep their hands to themselves.”

“How many?”

“Enough that it will start to cause suspicion.” Beeping sounded from her apron and Emerson fished out a kitchen timer that had clicked down to zero. “Lucky for us, the Haze Dust should be kicking in.”

Familiar erotic music with a pounding base pulsated the air. Our eyes met, the mirror image of a sly smile stretching both our lips.

We weren’t the only ones wanting to speed up the plan.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Emerson and I raced into the theatre room and my smile turned rabid. My arms stretched wide in welcome, embracing the madness before me. Flares of wayward emotion filled the atmosphere with spectacular colour and finesse.

Spencer was centre stage, working the pole like a true professional. It would have been sexy if she wasn't wearing a full-bodied flamingo suit, her hair and eyes altered bright pink to match. That wasn't even the most bizarre scene.

Considered one of the most potent hallucinogenic drugs on the market, the Haze Dust had certainly taken effect. And with the amount we had laced the food with, everyone was well and truly fucked.

My eyes skimmed over the crowd in glee. Most were screaming, fighting or fucking. Whatever their idled brains could handle.

My gaze stalled on Eden, who was seated in the VIP seat front-of-stage, tongue molesting her chihuahua's mouth. I gagged, my body releasing an involuntary tremor.

"Go and save that poor dog and grab Spence," I said. "I'll get Ava and meet you at the point."

Emerson agreed, parting for the stage, her expression warped in blatant disgust.

On my way to the bar, I found the pale-haired sadist, alone and hunched over, his head buried in his hands. The sofa next to him was empty, his brother nowhere in sight.

I made myself comfortable, shuffled up to his side, crossed my legs and perused my nails.

“Now, what is the Treasury doing in a brothel owned by Ludus Maximus?” I whispered (not that we could be overheard by the intermittent screams that laced the environment).

Without hesitation he launched on top of me, his hands wrapping around my throat, an endless rage leaking from his pores. I smirked up into his veiny eyes, bulging from his skull, pupils dilated from the drug-induced high. His hold wouldn't last, his movements uncoordinated and jolty. With an easy twist of his arm, he crashed to the ground.

I crouched in front of him, assessing his sprawled form. “You're lucky I have bigger matters to attend to tonight. But trust me when I say I will find you again.”

I ran my tongue across the pad of my thumb and rubbed between my breasts. The make-up smeared and a glimpse of my most sacred tattoo peeked through beneath.

It was reckless, but the innate wrath that forever lingered inside me was alive and thumping, clawing for a way to get out.

His gaze skimmed the offending area, then returned to my eyes, disbelief clear in his dark brown orbs.

“You're all dead,” he managed to mumble through his hazed brain.

“If only.” Tilting my head, I sealed his fate with a promise. “The Sovereign will collect what is due.”

He bellowed, but instead of attacking me, he turned and smashed his head into the

glass side table over and over again. Accompanied with his self-inflicted assault, he permeated a shockwave of guilt that followed each and every hit—an emotion I wasn't expecting to feel from him.

The out-of-town dealer hadn't exaggerated, the Haze Dust potent enough to incapacitate even the strongest of minds.

I left him behind, leaving him to drown in his self-made hallucinations.

The crowd grew in chaotic disarray as I dodged screaming patrons in the thick of their loaded high. I spared a glance towards Spencer, whose performance now involved a vat of glitter that was upended over the stage. She was covered in glimmering pieces of tinsel, and the crowd roared in mixed enthusiasm and fear.

I vaulted over the bar to find Ava crouched below. I remained still as her gleaming grey eyes rose to mine, clear and void of any drug, showing only a healthy dose of weariness.

I pinched a corkscrew and knife off the counter. "Ava, it's time to go."

Her response was muffled by a series of loud booms resounding off the walls. Pink mist and fluorescent confetti engulfed the room, obscuring everything in sight—Spencer's warning that Ludus Maximus enforcements had arrived.

Crouching next to Ava, visibility was fading fast. "We have to leave. Now," I implored.

I closed her fingers over the knife handle and gave half a shrug. "I'd offer you a gun, but I couldn't hide it anywhere," I said, smirking down at my outfit (which could arguably be classified as such).

Her grasp tightened, features animating out of shock. “Are you Micah? Spencer told me you’re Au—”

I pressed a finger to her lips. “Those names are too dangerous to state out loud. But yes, I’m his.”

Her wavering lips lifted into a smile and I offered my own in return.

“I know a back entrance,” she said. I let her lead me by the hand, her contact more bearable than most.

We reached the end of the bar where a guard blocked our way, only his imposing outline recognisable through the thick smoke.

“What do we have here?” he asked, voice mocking and clear, portraying his lucid mind. “Our Daisy isn’t trying to leave us, is she?” he clucked. “Get on your knees while we wait for this fucking mess to clear. You should know better, little flower, there’s no escape for you.”

I pushed Ava behind me and crouched into a fighting stance, the corkscrew sticking out between my fingers. “Your wish is my command, sweetie.”

He swaggered forward and, like a good girl, I did as he asked and dropped to my knees, plunging the cork screw directly into his thigh, right to the hilt. I couldn’t pull it out—I tried—my weapon stuck in his torn flesh.

With each tug, his breath hitched, a pained wheeze escaping through his teeth. Identifying a lost cause, I bolted to my feet, my hand blindly closing around the closest solid item as I proceeded to smash it over his hard skull.

His shadowed form unceremoniously slumped to the ground, alcohol and glass

spraying in all directions. A regrettable frown dominated my face when I realised I was holding the remnants of a \$10,000 champagne bottle. I brought the remainder to my lips and poured what was left of the expensive drink down my throat.

We skimmed the outskirts of the party, Ava blindly steering us down a smoke-filled corridor when my Variant stirred in my chest. Before I could recognise the call, the thick cloud diluted for one solitary second, one stagnant lapse in time that refocused my whole motivation, my entire night, my one goal.

Oscar Masatino strode directly past, no flicker or acknowledgment on his hard, determined face, resolute on his intended destination.

I hadn't realised I'd frozen until Ava dragged me around the corner, hand outstretched to open the side exit. I stopped her, enclosing her fingers in mine.

Leaning forward, I whispered instructions into her ear, omitting the most vital part: why I was deciding to stay.

She shook her head, attempting to protest and begging me to go with her, to no avail.

I would not miss this opportunity. I couldn't.

Before she could refute further, I pushed on the latch, shoved her through the door and flipped the lock straight after. Turning, I switched my earpiece on and ventured further into the depths of Forbidden Garden.

Spencer's high cackling came through immediately. "Did you see that finale? I swear, that's one of my best performances yet."

Emerson's distinct huff shortly followed.

Although we had state-of-the-art earpieces installed, we only used them in dire circumstances. We'd learnt early on that Spencer would use the open communication as a form of therapy, compromising more than one mission in the past.

I interrupted their taunts by announcing my link in. "Tell me you're at the point?"

As soon as they confirmed, I spoke over them, their voices drowned out by my command. "I've sent Ava to you. I want you to take her back to the Temple and keep her safe."

"Why? What will you be doing?" Spencer asked.

"I'm following another lead."

I didn't tend to keep things from my sisters. In fact, I never kept anything from my sisters. Secrets were a non-issue in our family, our trust unwavering. I now smothered that hopeless sentimentality beneath my resolve to protect them...and lied.

"It's nothing significant, just something I have to check out."

"We don't deviate from the plan, Micah," Emerson said.

"What plan? Most of it was improvised with glitter and smoke," I snarked while blindly navigating the bustling hallways, trusting in my Variant to lead the way, scoping for that same familiar aura.

"Ah, exactly," Spencer's voice high-pitched in my ear. "My epic P-L-A-N. Per usual, it fucking worked."

Car tyres screeched and slamming doors could be heard in the background. "The infantry have arrived, Micah," Emerson said. "The place will be crawling with more

Ludus soon. Get your ass moving now.”

Spencer huffed. “Bloody hell, we’re over here, woman. Can you not see my hand waving at you?”

“She can’t see you, her back’s turned to us,” Emerson replied.

“Can you see Ava?” I asked. My answer was a muffled scream that punctured down the earpiece.

Then Emerson’s laugh carried over. “Let her go, Spence, before she screams the place down. Then none of us are getting home.”

Stifled movements followed, then Spencer breathed. “I like your dress.”

“You can’t have it,” I heard Ava reply from a distance.

“Hide it,” said Emerson, and my mouth curved into a smile.

“Is that Eden’s dog?” Ava asked.

My smile dropped as fast as it appeared. “What dog?”

A sharp bark came through the speaker, followed by a low growl.

“Where the hell did you have that hidden?” Emerson spat. “And who’d you steal a fucking dog off, Spence? Give it back.”

“Her name is Fran, not it. And she belongs with us. Her name rhymes with Tan.” Her voice was confident, as if that meant anything.

“She is actually he,” Ava enlightened. “As you can tell by his massive balls hitting the pavement. Fran is short for Frankenstein.”

“Don’t give me that face, Meek. I’m not giving him back. Fran wanted to come with me. His previous owner was a downright cunt.”

“Well, you’re not wrong there,” Ava replied.

Right on cue, Eden scurried past me on her hands and knees, hysterically screaming for her lost Fran. Spencer chuckled with mirth in the background.

As I turned the next corner, my Variant flared to life.

“Take Ava. If I’m not back in time, get Psycho out of Oakview. Don’t wait for me.”

Simultaneously, my sisters’ berated shrieks echoed through the intercom. I removed the grain-sized gadget from my ear and crushed it beneath my high heel.

The music gradually diffused as I tracked Oscar’s aura further into the building. I’d passed countless passageways and descended multiple sets of stairs, the pink mist well and truly gone.

My steps slowed, movements wary as voices grew louder with my approach. Oscar’s undeniably gruff tone could be heard through the wooden door in front of me, clearly unimpressed. “What the fuck happened up there? You know my boss puts confidentiality above all else. We don’t like surprises.” I couldn’t hear the reply, except placating undertones.

All fell silent, as if they had disappeared. I hadn’t come this far not to follow through.

My hand idled on the door handle when a solid weight slammed into my side,



pushing my back against the adjoining wall, a steady palm held firmly against my mouth.

Surprise flickered through my system in clear warning. I didn't feel his approach, couldn't read his attack. He had fully invaded my space undetected.

Unheard of.

My expression cleared as his cold, dark brown eyes engulfed my own. I wasn't the only one slinking round this joint, the pristine black-haired male making his own exploration. And unlike his brother, he was dead sober.

I caught his hand as he retracted from my face, my fingers intentionally digging into the same brand raised on his inner wrist. He didn't stop me, didn't attempt to contradict my find.

The same blazing fury simmered in my veins at the confirmation. A high-ranked member of the Treasury, identified by the design of his brand alone: a coin with a dancing dragon in the centre, permanently engraved into his flesh.

My mouth curved into a scowl and I hissed. I pulled him closer and raised my knee to connect with his balls. He easily deflected the assault with a flick of his wrist and stepped out of range.

He was unnerving. Nil aura, nil emotion, nil inner being. He may as well have been dead inside, or not existed at all. My Variant wavered in my chest, as if trying to catch smoke with my bare hands.

“What the fuck did you do to my brother?” he snarled under his breath.

I folded my arms to stop my fingers from wrapping around his clean-shaven throat. I

had to remain calm, before we were found. “He saw a ghost.”

He caught the movement, eyes homing in on the centre of my chest, features stalling as he registered the golden crown tattoo of the Sovereign.

His lips hardly moved as he said, “Who are you?”

“I’m your fucking conscience, in living form.”

His stare glazed over before he shook his head, as if to dispel past memories. He retreated backward, one careful step at a time. “Do not follow them down there. The Caverns are too vast and elaborate. It won’t end well for you.”

Why did it sound like he was concerned? Like he was warning me?

I had two options: pursue him, or pursue Oscar. The result wasn’t even a conscious decision. Ever since I’d seen my father’s old friend and enforcer alive, the need to enact revenge and gain answers had consumed my every waking moment.

Betrayal. The sole answer I could easily identify. So, with my Variant practically dying, cinders in my bones, I pushed away every cell in my body that screamed to stay, fight and interrogate the male in front of me.

I ignored his whispered warning and pushed down on the door handle. When I lifted my head, I saw a glimpse of respect flicker in the depths of his frigid gaze.

He dug in his inner suit pocket to flick something in my direction. On instinct, I caught the golden coin in the palm of my hand, the Treasury dragon emblem engraved on one side and a date and address on the other.

I pocketed the offer by slipping the coin beneath my breast, hoping the flimsy lingerie

would hold.

““Till we meet again,” I promised.

“King,” he acknowledged, earring dangling as he tilted his head in farewell. His silent steps retreated down the corridor, disappearing like an eclipsed mirage, as if he was never there to begin with.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

The cell enclosed tighter, compressing on my lungs.

She should have come for me by now.

With each minute that transpired over our allocated meeting time, feelings of doubt threatened to slither forward and corrupt my stronghold image of her.

Have I been played? Has she left me here to rot?

No matter how her vision played out in my head, I couldn't bring myself to believe she had abandoned me. What we had went beyond reason, beyond comprehension.

Why has she not come for me?

A clicking at my door alerted me in time to slink into the darkened corner of my room. A savage smile dominated my face as my fingers tightened around the shank I stole from Walter.

In the minimal glow of moonlight, I could make out a toned, muscular, dark-skinned male meander into the room, trailed by a petite blonde, both in biker gear. As the door clicked shut behind them, my corporeal system ticked over into predator mode. They were strange, even with the barrier in place. Especially him—warning vibes ran off him like a steady stream.

I was waiting for my golden girl, but this would have to do.

My muscles tensed for the inevitable onslaught when the male's head pivoted my

way, his smoky brown stare fastened on my hidden position. I was drenched in shadow, hardly visible, but his gaze held mine and never wavered, boring straight into my brain as if to pick apart the pieces he found worthy of examining.

He was shorter than me by a mere couple of inches. Accompanied with his pretty boy features, he emanated a certain allure and magnetism that screamed equal parts power and danger.

My type of guy. Finally, a worthy opponent, my mouth watering from the challenge.

Action now, questions later.

He lifted a brow and I launched towards him when my body was hit off-balance from the side. All my focus was on the pretty boy before me, my brain blocking out the tiny blonde as a non-threat—which I paid for.

Before I could even register her movement, she'd released a high kick that hit directly into my ribs with an echoing crack. My knees buckled to the ground, shallow gasps escaping my throat.

I narrowed my lids at her approach. The little kitten had claws, and judging by her deadly expression, she was ready to deliver. The metallic twang of blood rolled over my tongue. I coughed up the remainder and spat at her feet, the gauntlet well and truly laid.

“Don’t underestimate me,” she said, her sing-song voice chiming like bells.

“An oversight on my part. One I won’t make again.” Jolting to my feet, I rolled my shoulders back in preparation. I’ll snap Pixie Face in half, then dispose of her companion, pop some of those porcelain teeth straight out of his smug mouth (which hadn’t lost its smirk since I was knocked to the ground).

Pretty Boy gripped her shoulder. “We aren’t here to fight, Meek. We’re here to break him out.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I growled.

Pixie Face sneered and shook off his hand. “We’re wasting time. We should cut our losses and search ourselves.”

“We would waste more time if we got lost down there.” His tone was impatient, as if he was restraining himself from rolling his eyes. “We can’t kill him. Micah wouldn’t be pleased.”

Golden Girl?

“Where is Micah?” I demanded.

I watched the fight filter from Pixie’s striking blue eyes, her next words resounding through my skull. “That’s the problem. We don’t know.”

“What does that mean?”

They shared a weighted glance and my patience evaporated into the atmosphere—gone, adrift in the fucking ether. I stepped up to bodycheck her, despite being twice her size. Undeniably an asshole move, but my girl was missing, and no one was getting in my way. Fucking no one.

“You better spit it the fuck out, little one.”

She raised an eyebrow, not the least bit intimidated, when I was shoved back by a firm male hand. “Back the fuck up. We’re Micah’s family, and she’s missing. We don’t have time for this.” Before I could charge forward, his eyes narrowed. “She

wanted to come here herself.”

“Then why didn’t she?”

His jaw clenched as his condemning eyes narrowed on Pixie Face. He was fucking livid—at her.

Her features slackened under his scrutiny. “The mission got pushed forward and...she stayed.” Her voice turned harsh. “We don’t know why, but she stayed behind without us.”

A strong impression of foreboding tingled down my spine. “Mission? Ava? What happened?! You were supposed to get me first.”

The two women that ruled my life...their fates intertwined into one, causing my heart to plummet into overdrive at the possibility of either of them being hurt.

“Ava is safe. Micah wouldn’t have it otherwise. While your sister is secure, my own sister is now missing.” Her tone was sharp, but not quite accusing. “She entered the underground via Forbidden Garden. That was her last known location. We don’t know the Caverns well enough. We’re out of our depth. We need you. She needs you.”

Half a breath. Bittersweet. Relief for Ava’s safety was quickly overpowered by concern for Micah. “That’s all I need to know. Get me out of here and I’ll find her.”

“We will find her.”

“I work alone.”

“Not with this, you don’t. She’s ours first and foremost, so get that into your dick

brain right now.”

Dick brain?She advanced and dug a finger into my chest. “We work together, that’s how we operate. Don’t fuck with our system. Don’t fuck with her.” We weren’t exactly talking about the mission anymore. She was concerned for Micah, and would protect her against everything. Including me.

I raised my hands in surrender and plastered a cocky smirk on my face. “I’ll help you. But once I find her, she’s going to be punished so fucking hard for breaking her promise to me.”

They both groaned in unison, equal expressions of disgust written on their faces.

The male surrendered a knife to me with a heavy stare, weighing me for judgement. He let me take it, which was a surprising gesture in itself.

“Don’t take this for granted,” he said, and I nodded.

As we ventured down the deserted hallway, more light filtered through the barred glass panels. My eyes roamed over their features, their mannerisms. They appeared different, yet moved scarily similar to my golden girl. It was uncanny.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

“Just wondering how Micah got all the good genes.”

The brown-eyed male huffed, then looked over his shoulder to flick a finger between he and Pixie Face. “Tanner and Emerson King. Finally we get to meet the Psycho. Let’s hope you live up to your reputation.”

They wouldn’t have to wait long. I was more than willing to deliver.



We rounded familiar corridors, my escape inevitable. I'd thought I'd be elated, exhilarated by my release. However, I couldn't concentrate on anything except Micah. My freedom would amount to nothing if she wasn't beside me. Imprisoned and trapped in a wholly different way. I refused to settle, refused to even consider that future a possibility.

The duo led me past the harrowing grey basement door and my gut churned. "What's today?" They halted by my side. They didn't have to answer, the hairs on my arms rose on end as I pushed against the lever. "Do you have access?" I'd relinquished Fern's swipe to Micah after I got in trouble.

Emerson shook her head. "There's no time."

"For this, I'll make time. Micah would want me to." I wasn't lying. She'd be disappointed if I left without retribution.

Tanner examined my resolve and offered a swipe from his pocket. "Make it quick."

I disappeared through the archway and retraced the map from my shotty memory. With the lingering smell of bleach, my previous state of helplessness and vulnerability burned through my circulatory system, saturating each nerve ending in twelve months' worth of fury and wrath.

I crept into the office adjacent to the operating theatre, Burner's head bowed over an ostentatious desk. Before he could process my intrusion, I'd already lifted his bulk, slamming his back against the hard desk's surface, his head tilted backward over the side, hanging mid-air, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Burner dared not move in my presence, his eyes crazed with panic. My favourite look.

I retrieved a cigarette from my pocket, lit the tip and let the ashes fall over his sternum. “I wish I wasn’t on a deadline.”

His words blurred into a convoluted mess. “Psycho. The lobotomy wasn’t my idea. It wasn’t up to me. I was against it.”

I cackled. “You think I give a fuck about that? You’re a dirty excuse for a manager of Oakview. You don’t know the meaning of the word recovery.”

“I’m s-sorry.”

“If only that would save you.”

“Hold on, we can work something out. I’ll bring in Dr Chaser.” Wrong move, asshole.

I tilted my chin at Tanner. “Give me a hand.”

He followed my instruction, his arm muscles bulging as he restrained Burner to the desk. When he was situated, I placed one hand on Burner’s forehead, the other grasping his chin.

Burner tried to talk through my restrained grip. “Plea—”

“Not another word from that serpent fucking tongue. My only regret is my shortage of time, so this will have to do.” He struggled beneath me and Tanner as I shoved a hand into his mouth, his stretched throat battling for air, gurgling from the invasion. With a final grunt of effort, I ripped his lower jaw clean off his face.

I examined my work...not the smoothest extraction. I hadn’t intended to kill him instantaneously, I at least wanted him to bleed out for a bit. But due to my rush, I

nicked an artery along the way, his carotid now severed and spurting an intermittent fountain of red all over the floor.

Three down, one to go. Then the Terror Squad will be eradicated.

As I turned for the exit, Tanner and Emerson crowded the open archway, assessing my handy work with clinical precision.

Tanner swept a clean hand through his wavy hair. “A bit too messy for my liking.” I didn’t know how he’d remained so clean. I was a fucking mess.

I flicked the butt of my cigarette on top of Burner’s cooling corpse. “I’ll admit, I’m a bit rusty.” I hitched a thumb towards the operating room next door. “Only practice will help with that.”

“I like it,” Emerson said, giving a one-shouldered shrug. “Can we help? We need to hurry this along.” My eyes widened. Her words were in disparity with her pixie-petite appearance and soft-spoken voice.

I shook my head at the conflicting image and spared a wink. “Who would I be not to include my in-laws in the fun?”

Tanner rolled his eyes and Emerson groaned.

I entered the operating theatre with pizzazz, opening my arms wide. “Let me introduce you to Dr Mudlark, otherwise known as the mad scientist!” The man in question stood on the opposite side of the room, a drill contraption loose between his hands. His mask dropped and absolute terror coloured his face as he processed my blood-drenched clothes.

I glanced at the patient gagged and strapped to the trolley, recognition flaring at the

sunshine man. Dead flowers still wove through his matted hair, his eyes begging for rescue.

Disgust laced my taste buds from the fresh remainder of my most recent capture. I lit another cigarette to expel the taste. “You depraved fuck,” I spat at the doctor.

“What is this?” Emerson asked, stalling at the threshold.

Tanner rounded the gurney with intentional strides. The atmosphere pitched below freezing, waveforms of pure threatening menace radiating off his flesh. I practically got high off the potent fumes. It was fascinating to watch the rapid transition from a stoic waveless shore to an inevitable soul-destroying tsunami.

Dr Mudlark stood frozen, his pallor transitioning into a dusky green. Tanner removed the drill from his stiff fingers and examined the instrument. “You weren’t even going to knock him out?” His frigid tone added to the pressured ambience.

My mouth curved into a shit-eating grin, unrestrained delight tickling my insides. Pretty Boy had been holding out on me.

I released the gag from Sunshine Boy’s mouth and pulled on the buckles restraining his limbs. At his victim’s release, Dr Mudlark miraculously found his balls and launched for the door.

Emerson tsked, preventing his exit by a swift kick to his legs, his old bones ricocheting off the tiled floor.

“The goddess provides...the goddess provides,” Sunshine Man repeated, his deranged gaze bouncing over the doctor’s body.

Tanner palmed the drill over to me and assisted Emerson with replacing Sunshine on

the trolley with the good doctor, his gurgled screams cut short as a gag was shoved between his teeth.

While they applied the restraints to his bucking form, I laid a loose arm over Sunshine's shoulders, guiding him to the head. "Your devotion has not gone unnoticed, and the Sun Goddess has decided to reward her most faithful subject."

He vigorously nodded, muttering praised nonsense. I turned the switch on and the pointed drill tip began to spin on its axis. I placed the vibrating, humming hunk of metal into his bony hand, his gaze raising to mine with the undeniable glimmer of hunger.

In the depths of his orbs, I saw the same excessive thirst that all us crazy motherfuckers were afflicted with. I got the impression this hadn't been his first visit with Dr Mudlark, and he had most likely fallen victim to numerous questionable experimentations in the past. He needed this more than me.

No further words were required.

With Dr Mudlark strapped tightly to the trolley, we left Sunshine Man alone with his tormentor.

Emerson hummed next to me. "Spence is going to be so pissed she missed out." She sounded pleased.

"Who's Spence?"

"Your new favourite person," Tanner chuckled in front of us, his previous death persona nowhere to be seen, washed away by a silent tide.

Who the fuck are these people?

My steps lightened as we trailed towards the exit. Satisfaction hummed in my chest, accompanied with the irrefutable echo of steel grinding against bone.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

We arrived at the staff side entrance and Emerson laid a hand on Tanner's shoulder. They both spared me an expectant glance, gesturing for me to do the same. I lifted a brow in question.

Tanner tsked. "Grab onto me, fool."

As soon as my fingers wrapped around his arm, he led us through the open doorway. The security barrier whirred with energy, my skin tingling with mini barbs of static, attempting to hold me captive. Tanner's muscles tensed, a weightless void pushing against the barrier, releasing us from its hold.

For the first time in one year, I was released from Oakview Asylum.

Relief was short-lived as my Variant remained inaccessible, despite escaping my prison. I was an empty shell, a phantom of my former self, staring down at my trembling hands as my brain filtered through the shock. The barrier had no effect on me anymore. Instead, that endless space of nothingness grew stagnant in the air surrounding Tanner. A vortex of fathomless oblivion.

He smirked at my panic. "Humbled?"

"What are you?"

He winked before disappearing around a sharp corner, his words resonating after him. "I make you human." Whatever the fuck that means.

"How boring, right?" Emerson snickered before following after him.

I rounded the bend to find an auburn-haired female leaning against one of three motorbikes. She turned down her nose, piercing green eyes lasered over my frame, all while chewing on bright pink bubblegum.

She was all sharp angles with the attentiveness to match, her keen gaze never wavering. Man-eater. That's the term that came to mind. Not in a sexual sense. More the literal sense, like she'd eat you alive and pick your flesh from her teeth with your own bones.

She popped a huge bubble with her gum. "From the way Micah went on about him, I was expecting something...more."

Tanner geared for the bike next to hers, releasing a snort. "He killed two people on the way out. Is that the 'more' you were looking for, Spencer?"

Her smile turned serpentine and Tanner straddled his ride. "Let's go before they find the bodie—" His words were cut off by a high, screeching alarm.

Emerson followed suit, revving the engine of her bike, the vibrations lost in the echoing alarm and police sirens in the distance. She beckoned me forward with an impatient wave. Before I could reach her or process what happened, I was bodychecked by the redhead. I found myself staring down the barrel of her gun, aimed directly between my eyes.

"Hold it there, Goliath. You're going to tell us where to find our sister. Now."

I arched a sarcastic brow in reply, which definitely pissed her off. Her green eyes ignited with the challenge, as if she was trying to restrain herself from pulling the trigger. "Now listen here, Psycho. I know your pea-sized brain rattles around in that oversized head of yours." She lurched forward, the pistol digging into my skin. "But let me explain this real simple for you, okay? You. Will. Tell. U—"



“Cut the shit, Spence,” Emerson interjected. “He’s already had the talk, and we’ll sort it out back at the Temple. We’ve got to get out of here,” she finished, shoving a helmet to my chest. “You ride with me.”

I turned to Tanner with raised brows. Are these girls for real? Throwing out commands as if I’ll automatically obey? He shook his head and chuckled before slipping on his helmet. “Emerson’s the best rider. If anyone can get you out, it’s her.”

Blue and red lights glowed brighter and a crowd was beginning to swarm the surrounding streets. The motorbike dipped under my weight as I grabbed onto Emerson’s hips.

“Cop a feel, big man, and you’ll find yourself without fingers.”

I grunted. “There’s only one woman I willingly want to touch, and trust me little one, that isn’t you.”

“Maybe his brain isn’t so small after all,” she said, humour lacing her words.

I barely had time to slip on my own helmet before she hit the throttle. Shooting out at high speed, my ass nearly fell off the back with the sudden shock.

All three Kings split ways, Tanner and Spencer disappearing into the distance as Emerson rode through the main street, gaining the attention of the police force.

“What the fuck?” I gasped.

Emerson’s voice echoed round my head. “I don’t want them to follow Tan and Spence. I’ll lead them away,” I started, realising that our helmets were linked.

Sure enough, a couple of cops took the bait. The chase was on.

I was pleasantly surprised by Emerson's skills. She weaved effortlessly through traffic, correcting to my added weight without a care. The bike swerved at impossible angles, whipping through the back streets and alleys of Junction City, losing our assailants along the way.

Emerson slowed, turning at a leisurely pace, when out of nowhere two cops came barrelling towards us. A girlish giggle sounded through my helmet speaker, and I swear I'd never heard a more evil sound.

Emerson accelerated at top speed, heading directly for them. They hesitated at the last second, splitting directions and creating a free path through the centre.

She's fucking mad.

As we shot off into the night, adrenaline spiked my system and my pulse increased, triggering my Variant. Environmental noise became deafening, smells repugnant and the bright neon glow of city lights blinding.

I am free.

Emerson raced along Florian River, the long stretch of road clogged with traffic, all awaiting passage over Hangman's Bridge—a double-leafed, movable overpass that was currently raising to accommodate a large boat passing beneath.

"Go over the bridge," I said.

Emerson snickered. "Are you insane? Actually, don't answer that."

"I'm serious, we'll make it." My eyesight was adapting to the darkness, gaze sharpening on the trajectory of the moving bridge. My hands lined either side of hers on the handlebars, and she flinched. "I wouldn't do anything to risk your safety—her

safety. First: Micah would fucking kill me. Second: who will get her back if something happens to me? There is no way I'll leave this world without knowing she's safe. Ever."

Emerson relinquished her hold, my body curling over her tiny form (which wasn't difficult). Blasting the ignition, I turned for the rising bridge.

"Fuck! Why did I let you talk me into this?" Emerson gasped as we raced over the edge, bike hurtling forward, completely airborne.

The wind whipped at our clothes, threatening to drag us down to the watery depths below. I flipped a middle finger high in the air, making sure it was the last thing those motherfuckers saw before my climactic fucking departure.

Tyres screamed from the jolting impact as we landed on the other side, engine gearing down to come to an abrupt stop.

"What's funny?" Emerson puffed. I hadn't realised I was laughing.

"Nothing," I replied. "Let's speed this along, little one. My golden girl's waiting."

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

We arrived in an underground makeshift garage filled with luxurious motorbikes lining the walls. Fuck yeah.

Spencer and Tanner were already parked, helmets removed. As soon as I jumped off the bike, a heavy weight ricocheted into me, a hard thump rebounding off my chest. I couldn't believe it when my eyes processed the midnight blue hair itching against my chin, the trembling arms that circled my waist. Tears saturated my shirt and heaving sobs reached my ears.

“Ava? Is it really you? Fuck, Ava?” My words were jumbled, spilling over one another, my brain desperate for answers that were right in front of me. I embraced her with enough force to let me know she was real, that she was well and truly there.

Then she tilted her head back and gave me those endless grey eyes, shimmering with tears. I buried my face in her hair, bathing in her familiar scent.

“As happy as I am to see this cute reunion unfold, I also want to be reunited with my sister.”

My gaze flicked to Spencer. She was the only one remaining in the garage, leaning back against her bike and perusing her nails. This bitch was starting to grate against my last nerve, but she was right. As much as I wanted to hold onto my sister, we had no time to spare.

Ava relented her crushing hold and latched onto my hand, not quite willing to break contact yet. “They saved me. Micah saved me. We have to get her back.”

“There’s no question, Ava. I’m going to get my girl back, don’t worry.”

Her lips tilted upward, face shining at my words, the outright claiming of the woman I love. Damn right. I fucking love her.

Spencer tilted her head with a sceptical look. “Your girl, huh?”

“Yeah, my fucking girl. Now let’s hurry this posturing along, killer. We got shit to do.”

Her gaze tracked over my features, searching for any deceit. She wouldn’t find any. Micah fucking owned me and I didn’t give two shits who knew. I’d claim that ass any day of the week. Not simply for what she’d done for me—for Ava—but for what she made me feel. Besides Ava, she was the only one to see me for who I truly was, the one to accept me wholeheartedly for who I am. I couldn’t let her go, would never let her go.

“Spence, come and get this bloody mutt before I skin him alive!” I heard Tanner distantly yell, followed by a sharp, animalistic yelp.

Spencer rushed up the concrete steps, following the muscular grunts and high-pitched barks. “That’s no way to speak to your namesake, Tan. He’s just a baby,” she said in a soothing tone.

I turned to Ava with raised eyebrows. She was still attached to my side, her warm palm settled in mine. She gave a light chuckle before leading me through the doors into Micah’s home, the Temple.

As soon as I stepped over the threshold, a small, tawny-coloured ball shot towards me. I could barely process its beady devil eyes and sharp gaping teeth before they were rooted into my upper thigh. I roared from the sudden incision, ready to swat the

small fiend to the ground. Ava blocked my hands, managing to unlatch its jaw from my leg and gathering the dog in her arms.

The dog was as tiny as it was ugly, barely reaching my knee. He didn't even have any fur, bearing a striking resemblance to a wrinkly, loose-skinned ball sack. I involuntarily shuddered seeing my sister cuddle up to the demon chihuahua, who was still eyeing me off for another bite.

Emerson snickered into a glass of dark liquor and Tanner looked pissed, swiping blood away from his own bite, gashed across his neck.

Spencer reared up to Ava, cooing alongside her while stroking the mutt's back. "Good boy, Franny. You were so close that time."

I groaned. "Close to what? Please don't say my dick."

Spencer huffed. "Your femoral artery. If he aimed for your dick, Psycho, it wouldn't still be attached. And I don't think my sister would forgive me if our boy Fran here bit off your manhood," she finished, arching a brow.

My gaze tracked to Ava, eyes widened in disbelief as if to say, 'Where the fuck are we?'

Ava tilted a wide smile my way, her gaze shining back with a one-word answer in her eyes: Home.

Blueprint diagrams splayed over the kitchen island and each of us had a tumbler with some sort of liquor. The welcome burn of high-shelf whiskey soothed the lining of my throat.

"These plans are virtually useless, a hoax map to throw people off. People like you.

There is no written map of the Caverns. Not one person knows the full layout.”

Spencer grumbled and popped another candy into her mouth. The girl was addicted to sugar. “What the fuck are you doing here, then?”

My eyes narrowed. “Except maybe Maximus...and myself.”

Tanner refilled his tumbler. “After we find Micah, can you lead us to Maximus?”

I stared at him, aghast. “Lead you to him?” I asked with difficulty, then swallowed. “The Caverns are a complex maze, made of interconnecting spirals and circles. Each offshoot has its own function, and to get through each ring, you have to pass a security checkpoint. You want to know where Maximus is in all of that?”

They gazed back, unrelenting, as if I was spouting straight garbage. I pointed a finger at the centre of the map. “Right there, right in the middle. That’s where you will find Maximus.”

All three shared a loaded look, which I didn’t fucking like. “Nah, this isn’t happening. We get Micah. That’s the mission.”

Emerson rolled her eyes impatiently and I dragged a palm down my face. “I know you want Maximus. So do I. But tonight is not the night for a side mission. The Gladiator Games are on. No one will make it inside his quarters tonight. No one.”

Tanner grimaced, eyes roaming over his sisters before bouncing back to mine. “We will try.”

I lit another cigarette (chain-smoking at this point, nicotine the single leash on my dwindling patience). Every cell in my body called for Micah, the need to have her safely in my arms. The Caverns were vast, with numerous hidden recesses and

possibilities. I had to work smart and plan ahead, because once I entered, there was no way I was leaving the underground without her.

We'd finally come up with a plan and geared up to infiltrate the Caverns. I was deposited in Micah's room, cleaned and changed into black designer clothes supplied by Tanner, the fabric stretched tightly over my bulkier build. Her room was rudimentary and crudely carved, giving a cave-like exterior, filled with the essentials. Yet it still felt strange being in her space without her.

Ava approached from behind. I'd recognise her light footsteps anywhere. Without turning, I said, "I don't care how many times you ask. You're not coming."

She huffed before offering another gun, which I secured in my chest holster. "You'll get her back, August."

My eyes lifted to hers, the reservation clear in my expression. She was direct evidence of one of my greatest failures. I wasn't able to protect her for twelve straight fucking months. My own baby sister.

I lifted a hand to pat the top of her head, still mesmerised that she was in front of me. "How was it?" I asked. It would kill me to know everything she went through, but the least I could do was hear her experience if she had to live through it.

She extracted my hand and squeezed my hand between her palms, warmth saturating into my skin. "I was not harmed. Though I was a prisoner, I was mostly alone, and well protected. Maximus fears you, afraid of your capabilities. Why do you think he took me as a hostage? My abduction was the only thing he could do to keep you from hunting him down."

"He should've killed me."



Her head tilted. “I think he loved you, in his own twisted way. In the end, his fear overruled his fondness for you.”

“He’s right to fear me. As soon as Micah is safe, I will show him every reason why he shouldn’t have turned on me.”

Ava pulled back as her fingers trailed down my cheek. “He’ll be frantic, on high alert, knowing both of us are missing. Please be careful. I just got you back.”

I opened my arms, gesturing to all my strapped weapons. “I’m not going anywhere, lil sis.” I glanced through the doorway, not one King in sight. “Have you spoken to G?”

“I have spoken with him, albeit not much. You were both looking for me. I...I refused to give him my location.” Ava’s cheeks reddened, fingers twisting in front of her. “I’d already lost you. I couldn’t lose someone else. I’m sorry, August. I was alone. I couldn’t...I couldn’t risk him.”

I pulled her into a crushing hug. “Stop. I’m here now. You did the right thing. Is his line still active?”

She nodded. “He’s sent me messages, asking where I am.” My arms tensed. “I haven’t replied. He’s your best friend. You can trust him, August.”

“Give me your phone. I’m going to find out.”

We exited the room. Tanner sat on the couch, his legs outstretched before him, ankles crossed, drink in hand. Emerson lifted something small between two fingers before flicking it at me.

“An earpiece,” she said.

I managed to snag the tiny piece of plastic mid-air. “How does this even work?”

She rolled her eyes, strapping the rest of her knives to the waist of her biker pants. “Place it on the inside of your ear. It uses bone conduction to transmit sound vibrations.”

I followed her instructions. “For people that are supposed to be dead, you sure have a lot of shit.” My arms waved to encompass the room. “A hidden lair, expensive gear, copious resources. Again, who the fuck are you people?”

Tanner downed the remainder of his drink and flicked a finger to the bottom of his chin. “Micah told us you know she’s Ultraviolet. What she didn’t tell you is we all are. That’s where most of our funding and resources come from.”

My mouth literally fell open at the straightforward answer, as if he didn’t drop the biggest fucking bomb into my lap. The Ultraviolet were elusive beings, complete phantoms. Not true earth dwelling creatures, but more the epitome of death itself. To know I was in love with one and working alongside three others was frankly jaw-dropping.

Emerson failed to hide a chuckle and Tanner smirked. “Not what you were expecting?”

I snapped my jaw closed and swallowed through the lump in my throat. “I’m more surprised at how open you are, that you trust me with that information.”

“Micah trusts you, and we trust her. Which makes anything we think or feel null and void. She’s never wrong about anyone.” He approached with forced ease to halt in front of me. “And now you know each one of us is more than equipped to deal with you if you happen to prove her wrong.”

“I’ll bow down to death before that ever happens,” I admitted honestly.

“Get her back for us.” He offered his hand, which I accepted in a tight grasp of my own.

Tanner released me, then veered for the door. “Let’s go hunting, Meek.”

Spencer announced her arrival in the common area by loading a gun. My eyebrows raised to the roof, hand gesturing to her attire. “Why are you in a ball gown? You do realise we’re going to the Caverns...the fighting pits?”

Emerson and Tanner loitered in the exit, both their faces identically amused. Ava sat at the kitchen island stroking Fran, trying and failing to hide a laugh.

Spencer smoothed over her dress as if I’d personally offended her. We wouldn’t get two steps in without being spotted with that orange monstrosity. I directed a glare to the King duo that remained in the doorway. “She should go with you.”

“Don’t be like that, lil bro.” Spencer had to extend to her tiptoes to place a loose arm over my shoulders.

“Can you watch where you point that fucking gun?” I screeched, the barrel of her pistol carelessly digging into my side.

I detached from her grasp and, ignoring Fran’s growls, placed a kiss to Ava’s hair in farewell. I was over waiting.

Shouldering through the shit-stirring Kings, I descended the stairs to the garage.

“Ultraviolet my fucking ass,” I mumbled under my breath.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

“Of course the meeting is cancelled, you idiot,” Oscar’s voice boomed. “Why would my boss enter this fucking shitshow? The Ludus promised discretion, and the brothel we were supposed to enter was blown the fuck up in pink smoke.”

A lowly Ludus pleb stuttered under Oscar’s aggressive ministration. My former uncle was an intimidating man, especially with his attention placed solely on you. “I’m sorry, sir. Boss apologises for the inconvenience, and has personally requested your presence at the Gladiator Games tonight to amend the oversight.”

The sound of smashing glass could be heard ricocheting through the rounded office. Eight large pillars surrounded the circular conference table, with arched doorways on either side. My back was plastered to one of those concrete cylinders, listening to these dim-witted men play their power games.

“I don’t give a fuck what Maximus has ordered me to do. I don’t answer to him. He answers to fucking me and mine, and he better remember that before he ends up in his own death match.” Oscar’s tone dropped deathly quiet. “And I’ll give you a tip: my money isn’t on him.”

Now, what the fuck was Mayor Oakview’s bodyguard doing shouting commands at an underground kingpin? Many people had been killed for less, and I should know.

“Now go and scurry off to your master. And tell him that his quota better be on time.”

“We are ready for our next distribution of Amp—” His words were cut off by a choking screech.

“I wasn’t talking about Amp.” I risked a peek. Oscar had the thin man shoved against the wall, his large hand constricting his oesophagus. “I’m not waiting for Maximus. We expect a thorough update before our meeting with Vice in two weeks. Ensure you don’t fuck up again.”

Oscar released him, his victim lurching from the ground to make his escape. Then Oscar turned for the exit—the one right beside me.

Inhaling a deep breath, I blocked the door.

His step faltered, sparing half a glance. “Move. I’ve no interest in your services.”

I snickered. “Do you ever, Uncle?”

Oscar looked at me then, truly looked at me. His gaze climbed my body—not in a lustful way, more cataloguing every inch to make sense of my presence. He flinched, catching the tattoo on my chest, his eyes finally clashing with my amber orbs, the exact shade of my father’s.

The air charged between us before he took a hesitant step forward, his features lined with affection. “Micah? Kin—”

“Don’t say my name. Don’t speak our name.” I stepped back.

His expression stilted at my retreat, clocking my aggressive stance.

I didn’t realise that deep fucking down, I was hoping I was wrong. That when we came in contact, he would assuage my doubts with some fantastical story about why he was alive, why he hadn’t searched for us.

Nevertheless, I was not built for misplaced sentimentality. My Variant had never

steered me wrong—not once in my life. Now flaring in my chest as bright as a strobe light, the atmosphere thickened in wild hostility. With weighed judgement, my heavy heart strained in regret.

Oscar cackled, his concerned mask shattering. “You always were the smartest of your sisters. Where are they?”

My face remained impassive. “You should know, since you killed them.”

He clucked. “Now, young Micah. I’m not solely responsible.”

“Then tell me who is and I’ll deal with them, too.”

“Too?” His stance grew predatory. “So you’re going to deal with me, are you?” He made a show, perusing my lack of attire. “In what way, may I ask? Well, you being a whore and all.”

I am really getting sick of that fucking word.

Oscar was a phenomenal fighter. He was one of our trainers from an early age. However, I wasn’t a little girl anymore. Nil fear or apprehension registered, just the desperate need to see the lifeforce drain from his one remaining eye.

I rocked on the balls of my feet, muscles tightening from prolonged tension. I didn’t have a weapon, not even a measly knife to stick into his flesh, but I’d take my chances.

We began to circle each other, the single round table the lone barrier between us. I scoped his movements as he assessed mine in return, actions purposeful and transient.

“Tell me, Uncle. Do you still have that golden crown tattooed over your chest? Do

you mourn the loss of your family?”

“I have a new family.”

I clucked. “Cold-hearted as ever.”

Oscar halted across from me. “It’s what I taught you, no?”

“Indeed.”

I launched over the table, careening off the edge and smacking his hard, bulky form off-balance. When he rebounded off the wall, my foot was waiting, a swift kick pounding into his rib cage.

Oscar released a breathless laugh and I retreated. In the onslaught, his shirt had ripped down the middle, my question answered without a word from him.

In the centre of his chest lay a white scar and overtop was the stark black outline of a ram’s skull, horns and all, replacing his allegiance to the Sovereign.

I blinked, attention zoned in on the image. “I may have sold my soul for vengeance, and I guess that does make me a whore in some respects. But I have never met a cheaper whore than you, Uncle.”

Oscar blanched, my statement affecting him more than I’d expected. I spoke with honesty.

I reinforced my fighting stance, instincts heightened, assessing his upcoming assault. “Who do you work for?”

He mirrored my position. “You will get nothing out of me, not even if you torture me

within an inch of my life. I will answer none of your questions,” he smirked, cocking his head in a predatory fashion. “Cute that you think you”d be able to, though.”

“What about this upcoming meeting with Vice? Will someone talk there?”

Recognition sparked in his gaze, the realisation that I’d overheard his previous statement. Oscar’s features transitioned, unhinged and bestial, finishing with a hiss. “She may not know you survived, but she will destroy you in the end.”

“Let her try,” I replied. He realised his fuck up too late, his emotions overriding his reason, unintentionally handing over valuable intel.

I sneered at his expense and he attacked.

Oscar landed shots over my open flesh, the impact ricocheting into my bones. I delivered the same in kind, his surprised grunts providing the sustenance I craved. We presented a coordinated dance, my Uncle and I, postures never wavering. I’d go on forever if I had to.

Oscar panted. “Now that I think on it, this is a special month, right?” His statement rocked me, my guard crashing for the split second it took my brain to process his words. It was enough. He slammed my skull against the tabletop, the impact vibrating with a monstrous crack. My legs buckled as I slumped to the ground, head buzzing and mind in disarray as I tried to recollect my composure.

Although my vision was blurred, I could make out his silhouette as he circled my collapsed form, his outward hatred flowing like an inescapable shadow.

“A shame Chase didn’t quite reach her seventeenth birthday,” Oscar snickered unkindly. “A day for celebration, turned into a day of disaster. You lost your father, your sisters.”



Each one of his taunting words tore at my insides, and my body trembled from their harsh delivery.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” I managed to roar, the brutal cadence painfully ripping into my fractured mind.

“You still haven’t conquered your emotions, youngMicah, haven’t conquered your Variant. Your father would be disappointed. You’ll say hello to him for me, won’t you?”

My jaw flexed and adrenaline spiked my bloodstream. “I’ll let you do the honours. I’ll send you to him myself.” I lunged with all my last remaining strength, toppling his bulk to the ground. My knees dug heavily into his chest as my hands raised to bracket his head, repeatedly smashing his skull into the stone floor.

He fought with intensity, fists pummelling into my sides, nails parting my flesh—and still I did not relent.

A desperate shriek ripped from my lungs, one primal need clawing from my brain.

Destroy. Destroy. Destroy.

“Who is she? Who do you work for?” I repeated, undeniably lost.

I didn’t know what I was doing, didn’t know it was a possibility as I poured my Variant into him. All my hate. All my despair. All my hopelessness.

I gave it all over to saturate his very core, his entire fucking being.

I screamed. He screamed. We screamed together until his trembling form stilled beneath my hands, his features permanently fixated in a mask of horror and pain,

perfecting the expression forever ingrained on my soul.

He was true to his word. He never gave me an answer.

A relentless ringing sounded in my ears, my head thrumming against the continuous beat. My fingers scraped against the rough textured walls, wavering legs dragging me down endless tunnels.

“I’ve found a stray!” sounded a male voice from afar. I refused to turn. Instead I bolted.

I didn’t get far, instincts and senses lost within a thick foggy haze. I was tackled to the ground.

“Her last patron was a rough one,” the stranger sniggered. “Let’s put her with the rest.”

My body was dragged upright, the abrupt motion churning my stomach. I immediately vomited, then sweet oblivion engulfed me whole.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Covered in stale champagne, darkening bruises and whining battle scars, my mind thumped with each small movement, a minor fog still lingering from the depths of my concussion.

I refused to think about Oscar. Refused to think about my Variant. Refused to think about August, my sisters and their homicidal tendencies. All my energy was needed to escape this fucking dungeon.

I'd awoken hours before, sweet, soft breaths fanning my face as my head was cushioned in the bust of my newfound friend, Lily. We now sat shoulder to shoulder, our backs leaning against the far wall, perusing the underground warehouse that had been converted into a makeshift gym.

A large group of Forbidden Garden flower girls huddled amongst the state-of-the-art fitness equipment. Some of them, like me, had their wrists bound by cheap rope.

There were ten guards in total—all lowly foot soldiers in the Ludus, from what I could gather. I'd pinpointed the one who tackled me to the ground. He was in charge, his stern voice distinctive amid the rest. A scar stretched over his lips, lifting every time he sneered (which was often). They called him Scarface. Truly original.

Lingering moans of pleasure snapped me out of my stupor. Down a short corridor, the guards escorted willing flower girls to a separate back room, where they'd provide services in exchange for food (not that I'd call crumbed stale chips or tasteless protein bars 'food', but who was I to judge?).

Besides our current company, the surrounding Caverns were deserted. Distant

rumbles intermittently vibrated through the underground, the contagious cheers of a sizable crowd escalating louder.

The Gladiator Games were fully underway, and the further time elapsed, our guards grew more restless. Their desire to join the entertainment transitioned into frustration, aimed towards us.

Two of the younger guards attempted to slip away, only for Scarface to slap them around the heads among an earful of insults.

“I can’t believe we have to fucking babysit,” one of them whined, rubbing his head. “Why can’t we go and watch?”

Scarface growled. “You know why.”

The other turned to us with a feral snarl. “Which one of you bitches helped the bartender escape?” He yanked the hair of the flower girl closest to him. “Fucking spit it out.”

Scarface whacked him again. “Boss wants to interrogate them himself.”

“And when will that be?”

His features stalled. “After the games.”

The second-in-command snaked between us women, perusing as if we were a herd of cows ready for auction. His copper hair gleamed unnaturally in the artificial light. “Must be important, if Boss is coming himself,” he said. “We’ve been given our orders, boys, but since we’re stuck here, I’m sure the girls will compensate us in some way.”

My attention piqued. It was impossible to reach Maximus on a regular day. Even if you did make the journey down here like I did, you'd be cast out before you could even reach the inner ring and get a glimpse of his holiness.

Another opportunity presented itself and the decision took weight in my gut. I'd stay right there until I met the elusive Maximus in person.

"You don't look scared," Lily whispered.

"What makes you say that?"

"People that are scared don't have that expression on their face."

I regarded her. "Expression?"

"Like you're contemplating every single way you can make them suffer." Her chin tilted to the guards.

The side of my mouth lifted ever so slightly. "Your face doesn't exactly scream 'scared little girl' either."

"I know what it is to be scared...and they aren't it."

I pitched a brow. "Thankfully, none of those reasons are here."

Her swirling purple eyes shone with understanding. She had someone she loved, someone she would protect above all others.

I tipped my head back. "Once my skull stops splitting open, I'm going to get out of here. Want to come?"

Lily gave a nervous laugh, but didn't say no.

We sat in companionable silence, her presence surprisingly soothing, my Variant content to soak in her calm aura.

The Ludus had nothing to fear. Not right now, anyway.

Unfortunately for them, the unpredictable denominator wasn't me—it was my sisters.

I simply hoped their patience held off long enough for my stay to be beneficial.

Who am I kidding?

For the utmost time, my stomach rumbled aggressively.

Scarface grinned, leaning back on the leg press. "I'll give you something to eat anytime, pretty Rose. You know the price, you just have to eat me first."

With a glare of pure disgust, I spat at his feet. "I'd rather starve."

Mocking laughs erupted through the room, his scar stretching in a grotesque grimace.

I was tired, hungry and uncomfortable. He didn't want to fuck with me right now.

The guards were huddled in a loose circle at the entrance, when suddenly some cheered in glee and others groaned.

"Pay up, Scarface. Your man fucking lost. He didn't even last two minutes against The Beast," the copper-haired subordinate jeered.

Scarface bristled at the news. "Shut up, Cole. If only Psycho were still here. He

would fucking annihilate all these amateurs.”

“Including you,” I scoffed. I couldn’t help it.

Scarface snapped his head in my direction. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why would my own friend Psycho come after me?”

“Because he’s mine.”

He laughed. A raucous, full-bellied laugh. “You sluts are delusional. One quick fuck doesn’t make him yours.”

Ignoring me, he returned to his group, reassuring them that he had the funds to pay for his loss (which he definitely didn’t, based on his underlying desperation).

I lapped up his anguish with a lick of my lips, the perfect nourishment I was more than willing to feast on.

A soft chuckle managed to escape my mouth and Scarface’s gaze sharpened on Lily. He stomped over to us, twisted her hair in his fist and dragged her towards the corridor. Lily screamed and fought against his hold, her nails scraping down his forearms. Losing his patience, he kicked her abdomen, her form instinctively curling over to protect itself. His fellow guards watched on in wonder, the violence and aggression causing lust to flare in their veins.

Willing participants weren’t going to cut it anymore. These soldiers craved something darker, more sinister than what any of the flower girls were willing to provide.

I gave a disappointed sigh. Again, against my better judgement, I decided to spare her. “Easy to be tough when you rape a bound, helpless female, huh, Scarface?”

He stilled, the atmosphere charged with electrified tension. His shark eyes flicked over his shoulder to narrow on my relaxed posture.

“She’s a hooker. It isn’t rape.”

I smirked. “And how will you pay for her? In pennies? It’s not her fault you can’t get a girl on your own. She shouldn’t be punished because no one would choose you of their own free will.”

Suppressed snickers came from all directions. He shoved her to the floor and towered over me, his sadistic smile gleaming with fury.

“I don’t have to fucking pay when I can fucking take it.”

He grabbed onto the rope binding my hands and hauled me towards the back room instead. Lily brought her knees to her chest, purple eyes boring into mine, her aura both equally thankful and terrified for me. To ease her worry, I winked as I was yanked past, her mouth dropping open at my jovial gesture.

Before we turned the corner, Scarface called out to his second-in-command. “Come and join me, Cole. Let this be an initial down payment for what I owe you.”

Cole shifted his dick in his pants. It was already hard at the display. With one man holding my wrists and the other holding my ankles, I swung between them as they carried me to their doom.

They bound my hands high to a pull-up bar that lined the far wall of a dingy office. My stiletto heels were long gone, my toes swinging loose several inches above the ground, muscles screaming from the unnatural position.

Scarface sat on the edge of a basic wooden desk that was on the opposite side, his full



attention on my hanging frame. “The perfect view. Hurry the fuck up, Cole. She’s a fighter, this one, and I can’t wait to get my hands on her.”

A piercing scream vibrated through the walls and the two guards laughed. “Looks like we’re not the only ones having fun,” Cole said as he approached me with unadulterated lust gleaming in his beady eyes.

My face remained impassive as he halted before me. Dropping his pants to the floor, he palmed his short, fat cock in slow, purposeful strokes. This asshole had the audacity to smirk, as if it was something to brag about.

His movements stalled when a deafening roar shook the foundations.

My name. August had screamed my name.

Scarface bounced from the desk with a frustrated grunt. “I’ll check it out. You better be finished by the time I get back.”

Cole was too far gone to even notice or care as Scarface left the room, his hand beating faster as his eyes roamed over my body. As soon as the door was closed, I kicked out my leg, my foot whipping clean across his face.

I chuckled. “Put that sad excuse of a dick away and run for your life...while you still have one.”

He growled, holding the red mark that was already staining his cheek. “You fucking bitch!” Discarding his weapons on the desk, he shook out his arms, as if preparing for a boxing match. “My friends like the feel of a blade, how it slices into the skin, the give of a woman’s flesh parting under their knife’s edge.” He repeatedly flexed and unflexed his fists. “Me? I like breaking them in with my hands, moulding a body to my own desires. I can’t wait to mould you, my little doll.”

He swung a right hook, but before his fist could connect I pushed off the wall at my back and swung in a twisted formation. His punch went wide as my thighs locked around the back of his head, tightening and constricting his neck. Cole thrashed with the ire of a caged lion, his hands digging into my legs as they choked the air from his lungs, attempting to separate my feet as they crossed at the ankles, digging into his chest. My wrists chafed raw above my head, taking the brunt of our weight. I welcomed the pain, welcomed the ache.

His movements eventually slowed, his actions laboured. Not long now.

Our soundless suffering battle had us both facing the closed door as it smashed open, denting the wall into which it slammed.

Love glowed from every pore in my body as August and Spencer crowded the threshold. One looked like the devil himself, the other a faultless saint. No matter their appearance, both were sent straight from the pits of hell to save me.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I drove into the rundown gas station, which housed a secret entrance into the Caverns. Limited on time, we'd hijacked a generic hatchback from a random side street.

Memory served me well as I pulled into the car wash out back, entered the elaborate code into the keypad and wound my driver's window shut.

Spencer seized the passenger seat next to me, post an epic tantrum. Tanner and Emerson huddled in the back, the former kissing his knees, the latter squished tightly to the side.

I smirked in the rear-view mirror, where Emerson glared and lifted a middle finger, her lips moving. I couldn't catch the words, but I'm sure she was cussing me out.

Tanner shifted, his knee pressing through the cheap upholstery, digging into my spine. "Oops, sorry. No room back here, you know," he said, his tone filled with mirth. Fucking bastard.

Lighting a cigarette, my knee bounced as the car wash started up.

"Can't you crack the fucking window?" Emerson piped. I pointed to the water jet that lowered in front of the windscreen, which preceded to douse the car exterior.

"What's the red tattoo on your cheek for?" I asked her. "Why do they call you Meek?" She definitely looked it, until she opened that foul mouth. Spencer laughed, but didn't say anything.

Before Emerson could answer, Tanner raised a hand to stop her and chuckled. "I want

him to find out on his own.”

Ash fell from the tip of my smoke onto the overlay of Spencer’s dress that lapsed over the centre console.

She shrieked, arms flapping like mad. “This is vintage!”

I waved a hand, smoke drifting to the roof. “I’m adding to the aesthetic.” Her eyes narrowed into slits, a snake coiled ready to strike, until I revealed a packet of liquorice I spied in the side-door compartment. Her whole demeanour laxed as she snatched it from my hands, shoving the end down her gob.

“That shit’s going to kill you one day,” I said. She scoffed, pointedly eyeing the cigarette hanging from my own mouth. “Why the outfit?”

She smoothed a hand over the puffy bottom. “Beautiful, right?”

I coughed. “It’s...bright. What if someone sees you?”

“I’ll kill them,” she said matter-of-factly.

We jolted as the hoist lowered our vehicle. The gigantic car wash bristles continued churning, disguising our descent into the hidden entrance of the underground. As the car came to a halt, we ditched the confined space and I immediately led them through the complex maze.

“Why is it empty?” Tanner asked, hands casually in his damn pockets.

His answer came in the form of a mighty rumble that shook the structured tunnels, dust mites dancing in the air.

“All Ludus Maximus’ will be utilised tonight. Each will have their specific role to ensure everything goes smoothly.”

“The Gladiator Games are that revered?” Emerson asked after another bout of thunderous cheers.

“It’s the most prestigious event of the country—better yet, the world. Expensive and particularly exclusive, everyone who’s anyone will do just about anything to gain an invitation.”

I’d never brooded over it. Sure, I was an integral part. An undefeated Gladiator was no title to scoff at. Nevertheless, none of that mattered. If that status gave my sister immunity from the absolute shit in this world, I was willing to fight anyone, kill anyone.

“You must have been popular,” Spencer sneered. I didn’t like the type of popularity she was insinuating.

I scoffed. “No one ever got close enough. The fucking pompous elite of this city. I swear, worse than bloodsucking leeches. The general public would be horrified to know their leaders, influencers and people they worshiped so freely thirsted for a touch of sin. It gave them the illusion of entitlement, that they themselves had some type of authority, a modicum of power over death. They’d eventually learn, like every other. No one outruns the devil.”

“All must bow before death,” Tanner vowed, his voice airy as all fuck, like he was the grim fucking reaper himself.

Spencer chuckled. “Can you show me that move where you ripped that guy’s jaw out? Meek told m—”

“Whatever she asks, don’t teach her,” Emerson cut in. “She already doesn’t clean up after herself.”

Spencer pouted and I snickered. “You wouldn’t have enough power anyway.”

Her face turned feral, but before she could attack me to prove a point, I veered down the corridor. If she wanted to stick with me, she’d better hurry up.

My steps unintentionally slowed as we reached the Ludus dorms, an area specifically for high-ranking members.

I’d told Micah my background, but the rest of the Kings were still new to me. Even so, they had accepted Ava and I into the fold with hardly any dissension. They already spoke freely in my presence, giving up valuable information that would be detrimental in any other’s hands, the love and trust for their sister outweighing anything else.

I also have no doubt that I will be dead if they consider me a legitimate threat.

If I wanted Micah to stay in my life—and there was no other fucking option—they would also undoubtedly be a part of it. So, with every reservation screaming at me to hold back, I decided to trust in them, weaving through the man-made tunnels.

I gave a quick rap on the door. It flew open, displaying Docture, lead trainer of the Ludus Maximus gladiators—and my best friend.

I extended my forearm and he gripped it tightly. Pulling him to my chest, I pounded his back, his ribcage vibrating from the laughter he couldn’t contain.

We shuffled into his underground apartment, the space clean, regimented and distinctly organised. The Kings followed, perusing the space with mild curiosity.

“You’re getting a little grey around the edges there, G,” I sneered. “I haven’t been away for that long, have I?” I was all shit. His buzz cut remained as dark as my heart. G fit the honourable title well. He was a fucking beast, his arms even bigger than when I last saw him.

G was twelve years my senior, his fighting skills unmatched (except maybe by me). We’d never seriously fought one another. If we did, we’d both probably end up dead.

“Too long, brother,” he replied. “Way too fucking long.”

His turquoise gaze scanned the three at my back. “How’s Ava? I haven’t heard from her. Is she okay?” His voice was level, tinged with something I couldn’t recognise.

“She’s safe. But that’s not who I’m here for. I need to know where they’re keeping the staff from Forbidden Garden. I know the Ludus has them locked up somewhere.”

He crossed his arms, veins popping out of his muscular forearms. “They’re in the Outer Ring Gymnasium. I can take you there, but we have to rush. They’ll notice my absence if I’m gone much longer.”

I shook my head. “Actually, I want you to take these two with you. Try and get them to the Inner Ring...to Maximus.”

He arched a brow. “And they are?”

I laid an arm over his shoulders and pointed to the tagalongs. “G, meet the in-laws. In-laws, this is Gannicus.”

Tanner and Emerson appeared bored, while Spencer’s predatory eyes appraised his frame. Cringe.

We made a rough plan as Spencer shamelessly flirted with G, who blatantly ignored her advances. She wasn't perturbed. If anything, it spurred her on.

As the Kings filtered out the door, I halted on the threshold and placed a hand on G's shoulder. "I don't know how to repay what you've done for me this past year, and even now." My fingers dug into his flesh. "I owe you. Whatever you need, I've fucking got you."

His rough features softened, if only for a second. "Just don't get taken again, alright? Stay safe. More importantly, keep your sister safe. Ava doesn't belong in this world, Psycho." I nodded, letting my hand drop to my side. I'd never agreed with anything more.

"In-laws, aye?" he chuckled. "Can't wait to meet your Mrs, then. If she's anything like the rest of the family, I'm sure she's impressive."

I gave a genuine smile and he snickered further. "Never thought I'd fucking see the day."

We reached the corridor, splitting into our groups.

I turned to him one last time. "When you're ready to leave this fucking place, come find me. Better yet, when you're ready to overthrow Maximus, I'll come and find you." A dangerous thing to say. A death warrant if anyone heard. G had more reason than anyone to rip this place apart at the fucking seams.

I thumped my left fist to the Ludus tattoo permanently stamped over my right pectoral. The respectful salute for G, an acknowledgement solely for the worthy.

His brow furrowed. "For the Ludus?"



I walked backwards, away from him. “Fuck the Ludus. For you, brother.” I swear his eyes glimmered before I turned and walked the opposite way.

We parted ways with Emerson and Tanner, my innate compass leading me through the maze-like structure without issue. Without Tanner’s presence, my breath came easy, access to my Variant filtering through my circulation once more.

Despite her high stilettos, Spencer shadowed my every step, never faltering or falling behind. She could have easily disappeared into the background if it wasn’t for her bright orange gown, or the incessant popping of the gum she got from god knows where.

The sound of a sizable group was approaching at speed. We deviated, hiding in the nearest available room. I’d give them a couple of minutes to pass, but I’d kill them all if I had to.

I flicked a glance to my companion and stilled, eyes widening, ensuring my sight wasn’t deceiving me.

Spencer was a hairbreadth away, her auburn strands and green orbs both mid-transition into a burnt orange hue to match her dress. Her facial features were also changing, bone structure elongated, skin stretching to finally display a completely different woman.

I was fucking gobsmacked. For the first time in my life, I didn’t know what to think, let alone how to react.

The new face, with the same voice, sneered. “You’re staring.”

“How can I not? I wouldn’t have believed it if I didn’t just watch you change your face before my goddamned eyes.”

“It’s like you’ve never seen a Variant in action before.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Most are barely anything to brag about. 90% can be used for household chores at best.”

She popped another bubble. “What can I say? I’m lucky to be a part of the remaining 10%.”

My brain strayed to the rest of the Kings and I shook my head. “That isn’t luck.”

“Amateur.”

“I’m for real,” I said seriously. “All of you are...gifted. I’ve never met one, let alone a group of people, that had such established and powerful Variants.”

After a second of contemplation, Spencer responded. “You’re right. There’s no luck involved. It was all premeditated.”

I scoffed. “What, your Variant?”

“Yes. Our father...he was batshit fucking crazy. And also a damn genius.”

It was common knowledge that Variants were hereditary, filtered through genetic makeup and biological relations. A part of evolution, human beings procreating to make future generations more equipped for survival. Besides that, scientists couldn’t establish better findings, the experiments volatile and results unpredictable. Through years of trial and error, only two components were infallible: a Variant was never guaranteed, and no Variant was ever the same. My test subject days as a kid provided all the education I required on the subject.

What does she mean, her father premeditated their Variants?

“Were you all adopted? Scouted for your ability by your father?”

When she started laughing, I realised how ridiculous it was to suggest. Although each King sister had diverse features and characteristics, when they were together, there was no denying their genetic relation, the tiny similarities that highlighted their affiliation.

Spencer shook her head in mirth. “We have the same father, all different biological mothers.”

“Where are they now? Your mothers?”

“Fucked if I know,” Spencer shrugged. “If I had to gather a guess, either dead or living the rich and lavish lifestyle off the pay out my dad gave them.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

Her brow furrowed in genuine confusion. “Why would I be? We could have been made in a lab, for all I know. Well, except for Chase...either way, I don’t have a mother, nor do I need one.” Her gaze flicked up, affection sparking in her burnt orange irises. “Micah does the job well enough.”

The statement was accurate, though also a little confusing. Tanner was the eldest—and the only one that looked nothing like them.

“What about Tanner?”

Her eyes searched mine, realising I wasn’t as dim-witted as she thought. Glad I could surprise the one that generally caused all the surprises. “He’s not biologically related, no. His father was my father’s adoptive brother, not that it matters. Tanner’s our brother, in every meaning of the word,” she hummed. “Didn’t Micah tell you all

this?”

“With the limited time we had together, she told me about you all. Just never the intricate details of your genetics,” I shrugged. “It didn’t matter to me. Still doesn’t.”

“Sureeeee,” Spencer said in exaggeration. “No need to feel inadequate. Some of you have to rely on basic brains or, in your case, brawn.” She tapped me on the shoulder with fake reassurance. “We can’t all be a part of the 10%.”

I lifted a brow. Micah hadn’t told them about my Variant. It wasn’t a secret by any means, but to know that she kept my personal information to herself made my fondness for her grow impossibly higher.

We relinquished our hideout and returned to our tracking when a high-pitched scream vibrated through the air, followed by the muffled sounds of combat directly from Micah’s supposed location. I spared a glance at the stranger’s face beside me. “Who said I wasn’t?” I blurted as I thundered towards the noise.

I’ll show her 10%.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I stormed into the gymnasium and stilled in the entryway, processing the scene before me. Eight Ludus guards were beating down on fragile women, all wearing flower designed lingerie—exactly what Micah was last seen wearing.

Bubbling heat spurred from my chest to ricochet to every cell in my body, the burst of energy barely subsiding when I couldn't find my golden girl amongst them.

All heads lifted at my entry, having hardly enough time to process my presence before an animalistic roar tore from my throat. "MICAHHHHH!!"

The guards shook off their initial shock and charged, their previous victims left trembling in the corner.

I growled as the first guard lifted his fist to land a blow to my ribs. I dodged it easily, using his momentum against him and grabbing his outstretched arm in two places, snapping it clean in half. Two more barrelled forward without hesitation. I parried and dodged round the room, trying to locate Micah while fending off the encroaching Ludus guards.

"Stop, or she dies!" a rough voice shouted. My immediate opponents ceased their onslaught, bathing in their perceived glory at the scene.

My head snapped to the man who dared speak, who dared make commands. The ugly fucker's crooked smile was lopsided, his scar discoloured from his reddening face. He held one of the girls up to his chest, a knife digging into her side. "Now here's what's going to happen. You're going to get on your fucking knees with your hands raised. Got it?" Like I gave a fuck about some random bitch. Still, I bristled at his

tone. The brazen disrespect.

I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't even feel myself breathing, my Variant pounding in my bloodstream, overflowing with violent intent.

Of its own accord, my mouth lifted into a predatory grin, all my shining white teeth on display. In an eerily quiet voice that sounded the furthest from my own, I said, "Psycho only gets on his knees for one person...and that ain't you."

The space pitched with wired tension as soon as my name released from my lips, the guards suddenly hesitant on what to do or how to proceed. I soaked myself in their dwindling egos, as they slowly seeped into unadulterated panic.

Until the dumb one opened his mouth again. "I don't give a fuck if you're Psycho or fucking God himself. Who're you looking for? Your whore's missing, right? Brown hair, golden eyes, a killer fucking body." He licked his lips and my vision filtered over with red. "Well, guess what? I fucked her! I fucked her so hard, she couldn't take it. The dumb whore is dead. So, if you don't want to join her, get. On. Your. Knees."

The demand thrummed in my mind as if from far away, at the end of a darkened tunnel I couldn't reach.

A thick cloud of ominous peril suffocated the atmosphere as my vision transitioned from red to straight black, my beast finally unleashed.

My mind clicked into autopilot, nerves and muscles following through in perfect synchronisation.

Before he could even twitch, I removed and lifted my gun from its holster, firing a bullet straight through his shoulder. He collapsed to the ground in a dramatic flair,

clasping his weeping wound and releasing agonised whimpers.

The rest came out of their stupor, opting to fight for their survival. They swarmed, attempting to work as a single unit to take me down.

It wouldn't help them. No one could help them.

I used the gym equipment to my advantage, cutting off the group to alienate one or two on their own. Their muffled screams and pained grunts bled into my awareness, my beast growling in hunger, demanding more. Always demanding more.

Grasping a stray skipping rope hanging from the wall, I whipped it like a lasso, the metal handle hitting a guard in the face and smashing his nose inward. His knees hit the ground, blood pouring down his front.

A tall, lean guard managed to dodge the next whip, landing a solid blow to my temple. It was hard enough to blur my vision for half a second. I chuckled with mirth, the game more interesting now that there was a worthy opponent. Disturbed by my expressed delight, his step faltered. His ultimate downfall.

I kned him in the gut, causing him to keel over with a grunt. Looping the sturdy skipping rope tight around his throat, I grasped the two handles and pulled on each end with a sharp tug. His neck snapped, giving a resounding crack, head tilting at an obscure angle as I let his limp body fall to the ground at my feet.

A gruff yell called from behind. Turning, I flipped a barbell from the rack and twirled it around my body as if it were as light as a spear. I pushed all my strength into throwing the barbell directly into the incoming guard with innate force. Even with the blunt end, the hunk of metal tore straight through his abdomen, piercing out his back to stab into the wall behind him. The barbell vibrated violently from the impact. The guard looked down at the thick cylinder protruding from his gut, blood gushing from

his mouth, before his chin hung to his chest in eternal sleep.

The rest blurred together, my bloodlust salivating for more carnage, more violence, more surrender.

When I finally came to, I was shirtless, thick, warm blood stuck to every inch of my exposed chest, lungs heaving from exertion as sweat ran down my face.

One guard remained, his whimpers growing in volume as I stalked him like the prey he was. He remained on his back, shuffling for the exit and holding onto his injured shoulder. The bullet wasn't lethal. I didn't want him to have the easy way out.

I craved a hands-on death, lived for the close kill, hungered for the warmth of fresh blood slipping through my fingers. Only the worst of us recognised the desperate yearning for the slowing thumps of a dying heart. And like the others, I'd get that from him.

"Get on your knees," I commanded him, my voice raspy from misuse.

When he finally stumbled to a kneeled position, he looked up at me with all the fear in the world shining in his eyes. My heart lifted at the expression.

Without ceremony, I lifted a 10kg dumbbell and repeatedly concaved it into his skull, the resounding cracks of his thick bone harmonising with the screeching female screams that filled the air.

Everything eclipsed into the background when a slow, singular clap arose, tumbling into an enthusiastic applause. I lifted my gaze to Spencer, still in her disguise, leaning against the threshold with a mask of total glee. Not a single hair on her head was out of place and not a fleck of dirt marked her pristine orange gown.



She swaggered forward, no hesitation in her step whatsoever, releasing a low whistle.

I lifted a brow at her unblemished appearance. “Why does it look like you simply stood there and watched?”

Spencer chuckled. “As if you needed my help, Mr 10%.” She veered past me and crouched in front of the terrified cowering women in the corner, the stench of urine heavy, as potent as their fear. “Where is Rose?” Spencer asked gently.

When no one answered, Spencer bolted upright, the fast movement causing them all to flinch. “Like he said,” she pointed to the heap of mangled flesh that lay before me, completely unrecognisable. “Brown hair, golden eyes, a killer fucking body. She’s been here, so WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE?!” her shrill voice exploded.

One girl with a lily stitched over her front lifted her chin—the only one who wasn’t whimpering in fear—her eyes direct and clear. “She’s down the corridor in the end room. She was taken there and hasn’t returned.”

Spencer eyed her off and looked on the verge of shredding her to pieces. I pulled on her arm. “Let’s go.”

Spencer hit my hand off, a bright red handprint staining the fabric. Her eyes narrowed, orange irises transitioning ruby red to match. Literally.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

She didn’t reply, although from her expression, I realised this wouldn’t be the end.

Instead, we turned in unison and stormed towards the room in question, the door tearing from its hinges as we shoved through the tiny archway.

There was Micah, her wrists tied above her as her tight thighs constricted the neck of a guard. His face was purple, eyes bulging out of their sockets from the pressured chokehold. We were able to catch a glimpse of his last remaining seconds of life before she released her tense muscles and he flopped forward, dead.

Spencer pouted in annoyance. “We came to save you, Micah. At least act like a victim.”

“From the looks of it, you didn’t do much.” Her gaze bounced between us, eyeing our polar opposite appearances. “You came too early, I was waiting for Maximus.”

Spencer rolled her eyes and examined the weapons that laid atop a random desk. “Do you want us to leave?”

“No,” I said, finally finding my voice. Upon finding Micah I was rendered motionless, emotions cascading into a raging tornado as I clocked every inch of her. The bruised cheek, chafed wrists, grazed legs, her dishevelled state—all whilst wearing a piece of fucking string. She was hurt and I had just caught her with a man’s face between her fucking legs, his limp dick flapping like some dying fish. No matter the circumstances, I couldn’t fucking take it.

I kicked the corpse aggressively out of the way and raged towards my golden girl.

Coming up short, my face hovered inches above hers as my fingers traced her injured face. “You have a lot of explaining to do, baby.”

Unperturbed by my aggressive stance, her eyes filled with warmth as she wrapped her legs around my waist. “That I do.”

With her skin finally against mine, I wasn’t about to pull away. I wasn’t going to let her go. I ripped apart the ropes constricting her wrists, freeing her from the restraints,

her weight settling onto my hips as her arms wrapped around my neck. “My hero,” she teased as her lips came forward to brush against mine.

I didn’t want gentle, I didn’t want soft. Not then.

My fingers dug into her ass, then I devoured her mouth.

I heard a grumble of disgust before Spencer scurried out the door to leave us to our reunion.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

I didn't know how long we were wrapped up in each other, but my flesh hummed from his contact. A trail of heat ran from his fingers, directly warming my centre. My muscles tensed around his form ever tighter. Having him in my arms again, I was reluctant to let go, to put even an inch of space between us. Desperate for anything he was willing to give, my pussy pulsing for him to fill me, nails digging into his skin. I wanted to fucking consume him.

His urgency matched my own as his panted growls added gasoline to my ever-growing desire. August attempted to slow down and pull away, my fingers ripping into his hair to keep him right there with me. He tried again, grinding my bottom lip between his teeth.

“Behave, baby. We have to leave.”

I ignored his comment and shoved my tongue in his mouth. He groaned in retaliation, dropping his head backward, lips silently muttering words I couldn't hear.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Cursing you and this magical hold you have over me. I have to find the strength to stop and walk out of this fucking room.”

I smiled into the crook of his neck, sending shivers trembling over his body.

We eventually detangled and he reluctantly placed me back on the ground. He didn't let go completely, some part of him always in contact with my raw skin, whether a light touch or a gentle caress. His palm slipped into mine, leading me to the exit.

I stopped short as I saw the sheer massacre that awaited in the gymnasium. Scarlet red drenched every available surface, stray limbs and body parts littered all over the floor. It was as if a rabid beast was let loose to unfurl complete violent carnage in their wake, ripping and feasting on their prey until nothing but tattered carcasses remained.

Spencer leant against the archway. “Yep, your boyfriend went full blown psycho.” She almost sounded impressed.

Upon that statement, the flower girls in the corner gasped. My gaze caught on the ragged corpse of Scarface, his brain matter splattered around his fractured skull.

“Did you want that one for yourself?” August asked, misinterpreting my pause.

I shook my head. “Your hands may as well be mine, your actions an extension of my own. To know he suffered is enough. To know it was you who did it is everything.”

I caught my reflection in his black obsidian eyes and wasn’t surprised what I found on my face. Adoring love. I was so fucking in love with this man.

Spencer fake-gagged. “All this romance is making me sick. When you miss the mindless fucking and the countless males fawning at your feet, Micah, let me know.” Psycho flinched, his gaze narrowing on my sister, who had a suggestive smirk written on her stranger’s mask. “Who knew killing a room full of men would get you all hot and heavy, sister? I would have suggested it ages ago.”

August took a menacing step towards her. Spencer raised her hands immediately in surrender. He didn’t know it yet, but this was just the beginning, his reaction the perfect kindling to her menacing ways.

The flower girls remained wide-eyed and vacant, completely in shock. I crouched

before them. “Either follow us and live, or stay here and die.”

I spared Lily a glance, who met my stare head-on and gave a resolute nod. I undid the ropes still wrapping her wrists and turned for the exit, not bothering to check if they followed.

August led us through the Caverns, the boisterous rumbles of the distant crowd few and far between. The Gladiator death matches would soon come to an end, which meant our chance of escape with no witnesses was growing scarce.

We stopped at a random roller door—an exact replica of the countless others that lined the walls. August gave some elaborate directions, all while snapping the lock, wrenching the roller door upwards and instructing everyone through.

I stepped forward, August automatically pulling me into his side as I addressed the group.

“If you have nowhere to go, you can stay low at Hangman’s Clinic. We can help provide a new start for you, if that’s what you want. If not, you’re free to go your own way. Do whatever you want, go wherever you want. But know this: you saw nothing, you heard nothing. We never existed. If you decide to run your mouth, return to the brothel or sell information, keep one eye open. We will come for you, that I promise.”

Most of them blanched, their gazes bouncing to August as they scurried further through the door, no doubt reliving his slaughter of the Ludus Maximus guards. It didn’t help that the man in question was exhibiting a serial killer smile, his face and naked chest still covered in our enemies’ blood.

Lily was the last. Pausing on the threshold, she turned to me. “Now I know why you weren’t scared. You’re bat shit crazy.”

“You’re not wrong.”

She scanned August’s arm that laid atop my shoulders, then resolve settled in her purple eyes before she enveloped me in a crushing hug. “I’ll stay at Hangman’s Clinic.” Lily retreated after a few seconds, a light blush raised on her cheeks. “I hope to see you again. Rose?”

I shook my head. “I’ll tell you my name the next time we meet.” I wasn’t sure if we ever would, but I was surprised that I wasn’t totally opposed to the idea.

Her steps led backwards as she gave up a smile. “The next time we meet, you can call me Chai.”

My lips automatically lifted in return, her face disappearing as the roller door closed shut.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

The skies were gloomy with dark grey menace, the distant rumbles of thunder approaching closer. Goosebumps rose over my skin as a light breeze swept through my thin, short nightgown.

It was early in the morning as I stood at the top of Variant Sanctorum, overlooking Junction City with a sense of trepidation. Turns out, a simple vendetta for revenge was a convoluted mess of betrayal and duplicity, which didn't seem like such a quick fix anymore.

We had returned hours ago. Emerson had healed my wounds and, after a shower and food, we had a thorough group debrief.

Emerson and Tanner were unable to breach the Inner Ring of the Caverns, despite the added help from August's friend. They decided to abort and not jeopardise my rescue.

All of them were conflicted when I told them about Oscar. They felt betrayed, and rightfully so. I hadn't told them and let my emotions override my judgement by killing the asshole. Although they held reservations, they understood my reasoning, all retreating to their own forms of therapy.

Spencer went out partying to write herself off. Emerson entered another street race. Tanner went hunting to torture a few more people to find his own leads. I would have attempted to round them up, except that when I was wrapped up in August's presence, I fell asleep instantaneously.

August Mathers.



An anomaly I didn't see coming, a glitch in the system of our plan for revenge. Now such a visceral part of me, his aura I couldn't live without. Could I give him all of me, knowing I would willingly break myself apart, splinter my own fucking heart to pieces to get the retribution I so desperately craved? The revenge me and mine were owed?

I'd known for a long time. No matter how battered I'd become, I would freely offer up those fractured parts of me...as long as he was willing to take them.

That wasn't the issue.

Are all the broken pieces of me enough? Enough for him?

## PSYCHO

Micah's elbows leant forward over the railing, looking down on her city like a goddamned anointed queen. The storming clouds overhead broke apart for the moonlight to shine on her glowing brunette hair, the long tresses floating on the drifting wind. Her nipples puckered through her sheer cream nightgown, the colour perfectly complementing her bronzed skin.

I had woken with a start, the bed empty next to me. The last I remember was her head laid upon my chest, my hand rhythmically stroking her damp hair before I befell to slumber. I blindly traced the halls in a pair of grey sweats, my instincts leading me high. Always towards her. My aching legs and cold, exposed chest all faded into the background when I watched the phantom being in front of me.

Intuitively, my bare feet carried me forward to stand guard at her back. She straightened, the top of her head coming up to my chin. I heard her gasp as I fingered the slim strap of her nightgown, tracking it down her shoulder, my lips following the fabric with featherlight pressure.

Micah stopped my descent, placing a hand over my roaming fingers and turned full-bodied, giving me her face. That beautiful, bewitching, captivating face. My breath faltered, the city lights twinkling in the background, making her amber eyes blaze into my reality.

Her palm cupped my jaw, her thumb tracing over my lips as if she was mesmerised. She seemed scared, hesitant to utter whatever she was thinking into existence. My hands wrapped around her waist, imprisoning her in the cocoon of my arms.

“Talk to me, baby,” I whispered into the air.

“I know you care for me. That’s not in question,” she swallowed hard, her throat bobbing. “But I need you to know. The road I’m about to go down...it will be a long and turbulent one. I’ve lost so much. We all have. But by the time we are finished, I’m sure I will suffer many more losses. I want you to fully comprehend what’s at risk here. I may not come out the same Micah you have grown to know.”

“Care for you?” I practically choked on the acidic words. To diminish my affection to such an insignificant feeling. Nah, I don’t like the sound of that.

She leant backward as my arms tensed. With my whole front crowding in on her, I practically sneered in her face. “It’s too late for your warning, Micah. Your soul is mine to bare, and I will tear it back from the borders of hell if that’s what I have to do. I more than care for you, baby. I fucking love you.”

Drops of rain began to trickle from the sky, the added moisture adding to a wayward tear that escaped straight down her cheek. I caught it with my tongue, my lips finishing at her eyelid, where I pressed a kiss.

“I need you,” she said. Three simple words to ignite my dead, unfeeling soul.

My fingers skimmed under the hem of her nightgown as I slowly raised it up over her head. She wore nothing underneath, her full breasts scraping against my chest. I lifted the fabric above us and let the wind rip it from my grasp to float into the clouds, right before rain cascaded from the skies.

I knelt before her, my gaze stretching up over her naked body as water flowed down her luscious curves. Her eyes held undiluted power as I laced her fingers with mine and kissed the back of her hand.

“All must bow before death.”

“Is that what I am, August? Your death?”

I trailed my lips upward, nipping her wrist. I whispered my devotion through my actions. “My life.” Lick. “My death.” Bite. “Everything in between.” Suck. “It all belongs to you.”

She sighed when my tongue traced the red gladiolus tattoo on her upper thigh—her tattoo for me. Permanently imprinted on her fucking body, never to be wiped from her smooth, golden skin.

I was obsessed, completely fanatical.

Micah leant back against the metal railing, her hands tightening in my saturated hair. I lifted higher on my knees, teeth sinking into the underside of her breast before enveloping her nipple in my mouth.

Her soft pants clouded the air, mixing with the wet atmosphere. My lips chased stray raindrops that trailed down her toned abdomen, her muscles quivering beneath my roaming hands. I took my time, salivating in the pressure of her flesh, indulging in the increasing tremors of her body.

“I was put on this earth solely to worship you.” I lifted one of her legs and hooked it over my shoulder. I kissed along her inner thigh, avoiding her sweet spot when she shifted forward, blindly searching for my mouth.

“August, please.”

“Always so good with your manners, Golden Girl.” Relenting, I pitched forward, licking between her slick lips, dousing my tongue in her signature taste. I tormented her pussy, kissed her tantalised flesh, sucked on her clit until she gave me her first orgasm of the night.

I wasn’t finished, more than ready to keep going forever. Her bare foot shoved past the waistband of my wet sweats, toes curling over my hardened cock. It jerked in appreciation.

“Give me your mouth, August. Come to me,” Micah said, her hypnotising eyes coercing me upward like a spellbound fool.

I caressed up her body until I was standing upright, languishing in her soft whimpers, mixed with the regular rumblings of the ongoing storm in a deadly concoction. If I wasn’t inside her in five fucking seconds, I was going to rage.

I whipped her around and pressed my front up to her curved back, tightening my grasp on the rail either side of her.

“Lay your hands on mine, baby, and look down at your realm.” She followed my command, her fingers interlacing over mine.

“Our realm,” she said with conviction. Micah turned her head, eyes catching my gaze, filled with clear and all-consuming sincerity. “I love you, August Mathers. All of you.” Her words hit me like a lethal gunshot straight to my fucking heart. A mortal

wound I would willingly let fester, bleeding out at her feet.

“Show me how much,” I grunted before catching her lips. Lining my tip up to her wet entrance, I pushed in deep, burying myself up to the very hilt. No resistance, only pure acceptance.

The rain grew heavy and the storm worsened as I pushed inside her, as if the earth was sending shockwaves in warning, the gods themselves beating us down with rebuttal, reigning havoc on us mere mortals.

“Bring the fucking storm,” she panted.

“We’ll weather it together. Always.”

Lightning struck from the sky, the flare of illumination causing her tight pussy to pulsate around my cock. I pumped harder, a growl escaping my lips as I thrust deep and raw, her walls glistening and so fucking tender. When thunder boomed overhead, I drove in one final masterstroke and her release quaked through her whole body, squeezing and demanding my own in return. My fingers tightened on the rail, our screams catching in the wind, carrying them to all corners of the city.

Our city.

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:33 am*

Several months later

I braced my hands over my ears to prevent the piercing alarm from tearing my eardrums apart.

We were herded out of our cells to congregate in the communal hall, so everyone could be accounted for.

What the fuck could it be this time?

Since the massacre of the Terror Squad months ago, there had been a full overhaul of Oakview Asylum. The government trialled numerous tactics to improve the place, introducing new doctors, new treatments. Everything. The only problem was, nobody knew what the fuck they were doing.

Most were terrified from the previous unanswered murders. Me? I didn't give a fuck. I absolutely hated most of the people who were gone. I say they deserved it.

So, if anything, my time here had improved immensely.

It was the middle of the night, inmates trailing through the dimmed corridors like lifeless zombies.

Then the lights cut out.

I breathed a sigh, darkness settling my tired mind, my fingers deftly flicking my lighter open and closed.

Click. Click.

I turned a corner and there, plastered on the wall in clear, glowing letters was a message—LAY LOW—with an arrow pointing in the opposite direction.

I could count on one hand how many people understood those words, their significance. Hell, less than one hand. More like two fingers for the people living.

I followed the arrows down deserted passageways and came to a side exit, my palm hesitating over the handle. Could this be a test? Even if it was, I couldn't bring myself to care.

With a deep breath, I pushed the latch open and there waiting for me was a good-looking stranger who seemed bored. Without a word, the corner of his mouth twitched, engraving a slight dimple into his stubbled cheek before he extended a hand.

Grasping onto the offer, he pulled me through the archway. The suppressant barrier was uncomfortable, however not anywhere near as painful as I last remembered.

The man released me, hitched his chin to the end of the alley, then turned in the opposite direction, vanishing into the night.

I pitched around the sharp corner he indicated and came up short.

Psycho leant back against one of two motorbikes, his arms wrapped around the shoulders of a blindfolded Dr Chaser who, in turn, settled back against his chest.

Psycho held a finger to his lips and my gaze caught on his freshly tattooed knuckles. Eight digits, each finger with a letter, altogether spelling M-Y-G-O-L-D-E-N.

“Can I see my present now?” she crooned. I'd never seen her like this. Instead of a

professional suit and lab coat, she wore biker gear, tattoos peeking out over her skin.

Psycho nipped the flesh between her neck and shoulder. “Happy birthday, baby.”  
Then he ripped off the blindfold.

Dr Chaser scanned the surrounds, amber eyes climbing my frame before a wide, genuine smile dominated her face.

I robotically waved, unsure what the fuck to do. “Ah, happy birthday, Doc.”

She squeezed Psycho’s hand and tilted her head to the second motorbike. “Let’s go home, Ace.”

Thanks for reading the journey of August and Micah.