



# Roses and Murder (A Song of Bastards #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I love my mom, but I'm not sure I can do what my father asks to save her life.

I can hold my own in a fight. Always have. This isn't the kind of fight I'm used to. I can brawl with my fists or wits, but this is serial killers. I have to work with my childhood friend turned mortal enemy, Neco Argent. He used to avoid looking at me and now he's staring. I'd hit him, but he's apparently one of the serial killers we were supposed to be catching.

How is this my life?

**Total Pages (Source):** 57

# Page 1

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This wasn't happening. It wasn't how it was supposed to work.

I signed up for the guard and Mom got the cure.

If Mom had time for a completely inexperienced tavern owner to catch a serial killer, I wouldn't have even come here because Basselt would have had time to harvest the herbs and make the cure.

I never would have betrayed Mom and come to this pretentious house to get insulted by my father because I wasn't manly enough for him. I wasn't even a man. Folcard probably had rudimentary sword training, but he sent other men to fight for him. And he'd never fought Guttertown style.

So, yeah, he might think I was a fop, but I could utterly destroy his arse in the brawl.

"My mother collapsed with blood pouring out of her mouth. She doesn't have time for me to do what your inspectors can't even do."

"Then you should have planned better and come sooner."

I took a step forward because I really was going to hit him. I'd get punished, but it would just be so satisfying to break his nose. Neco grabbed the back of my trousers and yanked me back. Why did he even give a shit? We were mortal enemies.

"I think we can come to a better arrangement than that," Neco said.

"You need someone dead in a way that doesn't blow back on you.

If you had someone who could have done that, you wouldn't be blackmailing your sons.

I'm not copping to a damned thing and I never will, but if the choice is some rich asshole, I probably hate and my momma, I'll have it done before the end of the night.

It takes a village and Caitrin is like a second mother to me. ”

“You seem to misunderstand how this works,” Folcard sneered.

“Oh, I understand just fine. You changed the rules. We expected to come here, join your army, and get treatment for our moms. You changed the rules and you're putting both of us in a lot more danger than if we were just joining your guard.

Not only that, our moms could die while we fix your little problem. ”

What the fuck? Yeah, all the Argent kids hated our fathers. I think we all dreamed of mouthing off to them or getting some kind of revenge, but frankly, the scales were never in our favor. Neco could ruin this for both of us.

I got what he was trying to do, but he was gambling with Mom's life. He might be really secure in his serial killer skills, but if he got Mom killed, I was actually going to murder him.

His father hadn't exactly said much, and I didn't think he would. The Barons were supposed to be equal, but we all knew the Folcards ran the show. Even if he disagreed with what was going on or wanted to give us a break, he'd never say anything.

Folcard was grinning like a psychopath. I didn't know if he was pissed and about to tell us we could go home and watch our mothers die or demand more payment from

us.

“Are you two together? My son has that look about him.”

This time, it was me who grabbed the back of Neco’s trousers to stop him from assaulting our fathers.

I mean, I knew what I looked like as a guy, but literally no one gave a shit about that in Guttertown.

And Neco was hot, but I’d really rather break his nose than be with him like that. And he thought I was a boy.

“I don’t actually care,” Folcard said. “I don’t need heirs from a bastard. Especially not one who looks like that. If you expect to mooch off each other for payment, then I’ll allow it, just not how you think. Neither of you gets the cure unless you both complete your tasks.”

Neco Argent was a serial killer, and I was going to find a way to fucking murder him. He just puffed up like some idiot men with giant egos did.

“Done. You might have sired us, but we are loyal to our mothers. This doesn’t work if they die.”

What game was Neco playing? You didn’t negotiate with these men.

We had nothing to negotiate with. I mean, Neco was clearly a very good serial killer if the rumors were true, but did the Barons even need that?

If they wanted someone dead, they could make up literally anything and have them executed.

We needed them much more than they needed Neco.

“If you’re as sure as you say you are, then you should be able to handle this in a fortnight.

I don’t like your mouth or disrespect. Your mothers will get a diluted tonic that will keep them alive by your new deadline.

If one of you completes your task, but the other doesn’t, then that’s it.

Your mothers can die for all I care and our doors are closed to you forever. ”

If it wouldn’t make things worse, I would have outright brawled with Neco in the middle of this pretentious room and probably gotten my arse beat. Especially since I knew that look on Neco’s face because we’d been so close when we were younger.

The big, surly fucker was actually pleased at how this all turned out.

## Page 2

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That went better than expected. I mean, I was pretty sure Lance was going to knife me in the gut when I wasn't looking, but I got everything I wanted.

The Barons had their fancy education, but I just outsmarted them.

And Lance wasn't my brother, so I wasn't some kind of deviant, so I was in a pretty damned good mood.

Until we stepped out of that obscenely wealthy room and Lance punched me in the face.

I felt my nose break. Damn. Lance didn't look like he could hit that hard, but the kids always did used to underestimate him at school.

I mean, I guess I owed him since I broke his nose once, even though he deserved it.

"If you want to play with Theda's life, then that's on you, but leave mine out of it," he hissed.

"Not here," I said, grabbing his elbow and hauling him out of here.

Lance and I had a lot of unresolved issues and some of them might require our fists to solve, but we couldn't do that here. And I had a plan. I always had a plan. If it was the lives of people I couldn't stand on the line instead of women I loved, I had a plan.

That was the beauty of apprenticing with a Jagged Key Isles assassin.

I learned how to adapt. Lance was madder than a wet cat and I couldn't exactly explain outside of Guttertown.

I also needed to keep Lance with me. I intended to keep him in the loop since Caitrin was just as important to him as Momma was to me, but Lance wouldn't be doing either of these tasks.

I had every intention of killing the Ghoul and Folcard and my father just made it loads easier.

I now had permission to move about Nestrán and to insert myself into Trevils's investigation. I needed to keep an eye on Lance because I could allow myself to be around him now that I knew he wasn't my brother. I had to make it right.

Lance hit me and now I just had to stop him from storming back home.

We had permission to be here now, but I didn't trust these people.

Lance was beautiful in an androgynous way and we celebrated that kind of beauty in Guttertown, but the rest of Nestrán might try to start something with him because they thought he was into guys.

Which was also a complication. Lance might not be my brother, but I was also pretty sure he wasn't into men.

He was a fucking legend at the brothel, but he'd never gone back.

I mean, I guess he wouldn't need to pay for it if he was good at it.

I'd just never seen him with a girl on his arm, either.

It was just another part of the mystery that was Lance Argent.

I was trying to inconspicuously haul him to the tavern where Trevils would be eating lunch. He didn't know who I was, but Old Man Aimes told us enough stories when we were kids that I knew he'd be my downfall if I got careless. So, I made it a point to learn his schedule so I could avoid him.

Talking to Lance used to be easy. We snuck into each other's bedroom at night and stayed up late talking. Sometimes, we'd fall asleep and sneak back home before our mothers woke up. But then shit happened and the only talking we did was to scream at each other.

If I could get him to the tavern without being punched in the nuts, I could just show him.

Lance was smart, and he'd figure it out.

Lance wasn't trained by anyone from the Jagged Key Isles, but he was a Guttertown brat, so he could sneak a ball punch in the fancy part of town without all the rich people noticing.

Arsehole.

"I have a plan. If you'd just shut up and follow me, you'll see," I growled.

"Fuck your stupid plan. You should have left my mother out of it," he hissed.

I tossed him into an alley and caged him between my arms so he didn't bolt.

Fuck, I wanted to kiss him now that I knew he wasn't my brother, but he looked about two seconds away from head-butting me, which wasn't my favorite.



I had all my teeth and really didn't want to lose any because Lance fought dirty.

"I don't want you involved in this. I was planning on taking the Ghoul out, anyway.

I manipulated those arseholes so that we both get the cure when the tasks are done.

They did it that way because they expected one or both of us to fail.

It was just them being cruel. I fixed it where everyone gets what they want. "

Yeah, he head-butted me. He didn't get my mouth, just my nose that he broke earlier. My eyes watered, but I let him go before he kicked me in the balls. That wasn't my favorite, either.

"I'm still mad, so I suggest you do whatever you were planning when you were dragging me through the fancy part of town before I kick your nuts out of your mouth."

Yeah, Lance always did have a temper. He just got a little less violent about it when everyone hit their growth spurt. Which meant he was really pissed at me because after I hit mine, I was probably one of the biggest men in Guttertown outside of Autar.

"Follow me. Am I going to have to drag you?"

"First of all, fuck you. Secondly, touch me again and I'll throw you through that rich ponce's fancy window."

"Right this way."

I was trying not to chuckle. I was a giant, trained assassin, but Lance had been tossing

drunks since they were a kid. He probably could throw me through that pretentious window.

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I really hadn't maimed Neco Argent enough to feel better, but at some point, he was going to hit me back and I'd get my arse laid out in the fancy part of Nestrán.

I honestly didn't know why he hadn't hit me back so far.

So, I wasn't going to take a third shot at his broken nose because my mother didn't raise an idiot.

Plus, I'd just found out he was a serial killer, so I'd probably shouldn't have broken it in the first place.

That was pretty much the only reason I was even humoring him and following him.

My first instinct was to stomp back to Guttertown and ask Basselt if two weeks was enough time for what he needed to bloom so he could make the cure.

I could tell my father to get fucked and I wouldn't need to pull off some impossible task I wasn't remotely qualified for, so Mom didn't die.

I was still going to do that, but right now I was doing whatever the fuck we were doing right now.

Neco decided we were going to a rich person's tavern, which was just insulting.

Yeah, it was fancier than mine and they were probably serving food we didn't have access to, but our recipes were better.

“You’d better have a damned good reason for bringing me here,” I hissed.

“This place charges way more than you do, but the drinks are inferior, and they water it down. They can also buy meat at the market instead of hunting it, but the stew is more barley than meat.”

“Telling me you gave money to another tavern isn’t doing much for my desire to hit you again.”

“You make it sound like I was cheating.”

“You are!”

“Relax. I come here on business and that’s why we’re here.”

What kind of serial killer business was he getting up to that he needed to cheat on the Whispering Raven with watered down booze?

He took us straight to some grizzled old man who looked like he might actually survive a Guttertown brawl.

He also looked like he was ready to throw down with both of us for disturbing his lunch.

“Lance, meet Inspector Trevils.”

Neco Argent was actually insane. He was one of the kids Aimes looked after, so he would have heard about the legendary exploits of Inspector Trevils. If I was gutting people in my spare time, I’d steer clear of that man, even if the Barons just gave me a free pass.

“Do I know you and why are you interrupting my lunch?” he grumped.

Ollie said he was super polite and pretty decent at the tavern, but he also wasn’t working right now.

Ollie was one of the most easy-going people I knew, but if someone bothered him on his breaks, he got pretty cranky about it.

And Neco was a full-on psycho because he took a seat at his table like he’d been invited to join.

“We’re Argent kids,” Neco announced, like that made sense to either of us.

“Congrats?” Trevils said.

I’d known Neco since we were babies, so even though his face was stone, I knew he was annoyed Trevils didn’t magically know why we crashed his lunch, so I decided to help out.

“Our moms are sick. Our fathers changed the rules, and the only way we can get the remedy is catching your serial killers,” I explained. “I run a tavern, so if you want to get shit faced, I can help you, but I’m completely unqualified for this.”

“I’ve been meaning to stop there to check out your new drink and entertainment. I adore my wife, so I’ve got no reason to visit the brothel. The men who visit are raving about your tavern. Everyone is scrambling to recreate what you’re doing and the results are terrible, even the singing.”

“Lance is the genius behind all that,” Neco bragged.

Who the fuck body snatched Neco? He left if I was working the house, but I knew he

was there eating and drinking when I wasn't.

He'd never once complimented me. He'd been corrected numerous times by Mom and Ollie when he gave one of them credit for one of my recipes.

He just grunted and pretended like he never heard them.

He'd never complimented me for anything good that came out of the Whispering Raven.

"Anyway, Aimes was our babysitter. He comes by the tavern and we give him food and drink in exchange for stories. We don't have storybooks in Guttertown.

Someone has to have the time to tell them to you.

Aimes always has the best stories and our favorite when we were younger were the exploits of the legendary Inspector Trevils," I said.

"You don't have to kiss my arse. The bloody Barons are my bosses, even though we have a king. Aimes probably didn't tell you I caught a lot of bad guys who didn't get the noose because of their fancy title."

Neco actually laughed with me. Yeah, something had taken Neco over. We didn't talk much aside from screaming at each other for the past ten years, but he'd never laughed that easily.

"Shit-talking rich people is our favorite pastime. No books, remember? You're the exception," Neco said.

"Well, I'm not as bad off as Guttertown, but I live in Lower Cutwart because they pay me shit. I loathe discussing any theories before I have a firm idea. In this case, a

fresh set of eyes might help.”

Clearly, because one of the killers he was looking for interrupted his lunch.

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They were gone way longer than they should have been. I was worried, but Ollie was losing his damned mind. Ollie tended to get dramatic about people he loved, but Lucy was smart. And Neco might hate Lance, but he hated the Barons more. He hated everyone in that part of town.

If some arseholes tried to jump Lucy because they thought she was a gay man, she could handle it. If she was outnumbered, Neco would step in, right?

“Should we invade the fancy part of town and save our woman?” Ollie asked, bouncing around like he’d eaten too many sweets.

“That’s romantic, right?” Ronan said. “Women like that kind of thing.”

“Lucy isn’t most women. She’d beat your arse and then ban you both from being her taste tester.”

“She’s just forced to be Lance all the time. Lance would kick our arses, but maybe Lucy is into it,” Ollie said.

“Lance is Lucy, and they’d both break our faces,” I pointed out.

“She might need our help,” Ronan said.

“Lucy isn’t just scrappy in a fight, she’s brilliant. She’s been helping manage the tavern on all fronts since she was thirteen. She knows how to toss drunks without offending them. She could probably talk her way out of any situation.”



“She’s perfect, isn’t she?” Ollie sighed.

She really was. And her idiot father had his hands on her.

We’d been around her all the time since we were babies and we never guessed her secret.

The Baron guard didn’t provide barrack housing.

They all had to get up whenever they needed to so that they could make the long walk to work if they couldn’t afford a horse.

Lucy only had a donkey she didn’t get along with. Petunia hated everyone but Ollie, and she was getting too old to make that kind of journey. Lucy and Neco would have to leave in the middle of the night to get there on time, which meant Lucy wouldn’t have much time to work in the tavern.

And I hated that. Not a lot of people in Guttertown got to do what they loved for a living and Lucy had that. The walk from where the Barons lived to Guttertown was pretty far, but they should have been back by now.

Most of the Argent kids were dedicated to their moms. It had always been like that. When your father was a deadbeat whose only use for you was how he could profit off you, you tended to latch onto the parent who stayed.

All they needed to do was sign their name to the roster and they would have been given whatever cure they needed from the Baron’s stores to give to whoever needed it. Neither of them would have delayed once they had it. They wouldn’t have taken that risk with their moms.

Yeah, maybe I was starting to panic. I was worried about Neco, too. Neco would

utterly lose his mind if something happened to Theda. I cared about both of those people. I didn't want anything bad to happen to them or their mothers.

Yeah, it was officially time to panic. We were going to the rich people part of town, just in case.

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Neco Argent was the most infuriating man I'd ever met. Yeah, if I was going to do this, I probably needed intel from Inspector Trevils. I wasn't skulking around murdering people, so I didn't really keep tabs on the man like a serial killer would.

I was also planning on murdering Ollie. Ollie didn't lie because he agreed with what The Blight was doing. He lied because it was fucking Neco. It used to be like that with us. If things hadn't gone down the way they did, I would have lied for him, too.

Inspector Trevils gave us all the information he had on the Ghoul and promised to work with us.

I would have preferred just working with a Guttertown legend.

We didn't particularly respect the law, but Trevils was fair.

He didn't care where you were from. He cared if you were guilty.

It was the Barons that took his findings and made them not fair.

Mom's life was on the line. If I wanted to catch a killer, then I needed to understand a killer. My nemesis just so happened to be one, so I had to find a way to make peace with Neco for now.

It was late, and we were on our way back. Much later than I would have wanted because my stupid father had to get his alchemist to whip up something that would keep our mothers alive, but not cure them until we'd finished our little blackmail task.

They gave Neco a piece of parchment, seriously asked him if he could read, and then made him burn it after he read what was on it.

I was guessing it was the man they wanted dead.

I hated Neco, but he'd never been a bad person.

I could even respect how he looked after Rowena, Theda, and the girls at the brothel.

I wasn't sure how I felt about this side of him.

But I'd actually had enough of him for today. I was ready to go home. Mom was going to be pissed. When she got the tonic and was feeling better, she was going to rip me a new asshole. She wasn't even going to be less angry that my payment was a one off. We promised not to do this to each other.

I stomped off to go home and Neco chased after me. What was up with that? We were never in the same vicinity if we could help it. He only came in the tavern to drink if I was in the basement. If I was in the brothel to see Beck, I avoided him. He was sticking to me like we were friends.

"Can I help you?"

"This isn't Guttertown. It's toxic as fuck here and you're a stranger.

If a man looked like you, he'd never shave, even if his beard was pathetic.

He'd also make a big show with the ladies, so he'd never be accused of being into men.

That doesn't fly here. They will beat it out of you.

Your father already thinks you're gay and gave you a pretty hard task.

Plus, you're a bastard. He's not going to give a shit if you get killed. "

I just grunted. Yeah, that was fair, but since when did he give a shit? His whole schtick was protecting women and children, and he thought I was Lance. Neco hated Lance. Neco broke Lance's nose. I'd walk with him, but fuck Neco Argent.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

Ugh. We were chatting. Neco wasn't a talker.

The only time he unloaded was when we were kids, alone, and he was upset about something.

He didn't do small talk. Everyone in Guttertown knew better.

He'd listen, but unless he was close to or gave a shit, he'd just stare at you like a psychopath until you left him alone.

"Feel better about what? That my father gave me an impossible task and the only way to complete it is to pick the brain of my mortal enemy that my boyfriend had to lie for because of his extracurricular activities?"

"Boyfriend?"

What the fuck? Neco practically purred that. It was sexy as fuck, but that was a no from me. I just lifted my chin and glared at him.

"Ollie and me are together. I'm with Beck and Ronan, too."

Neco looked intrigued, but then he hid it.

“Several girls at the brothel are going to be disappointed. I meant breaking my nose and then head-butting it.”

“Oh, yeah. That was immensely satisfying. I wouldn’t mind hitting you again.”

“I gave you two freebies. You won’t get a third.”

“Dick,” I muttered.

Neco opened his mouth, and he looked like he was about to tell me why he gave me two freebies. Because I was pretty sure that meant he wasn’t going to sneak into the tavern while I was sleeping and slit my throat, since that was a thing he did.

Beck, Ronan, and Ollie found us and they were definitely drunk. Ollie knew better because Mom drilled into both of us that we could work or we could drink, but we couldn’t do both. Ollie should technically still be at the tavern, working.

They were all messy drunk. Like, I would have kept my eye on them in case I needed to toss them. And they were all over me. And then they were all over Neco.

“This is assault,” Neco growled, pushing them away.

Yeah, Neco had never been much of a hugger.

I think he understood me breaking his nose better than the three of them hugging him.

I understood them hugging me most of the time.

We were together, and they liked touching.

I just didn't know why they got drunk, left Guttertown, and were hugging us both now.

"Mom had better not be working the tavern alone or I'm taking away your taste tester privileges and no sex."

"We closed after you left. No one is working the tavern," Ollie slurred.

"You closed the Whispering Raven all day? What the fuck, Ollie?"

Ollie grabbed me and crushed me to his chest. I could barely breathe.

"We were so scared after we found out you left to meet your father. And then you didn't come back when you were supposed to with the cure. You wouldn't have been gone that long unless something bad happened."

Yeah, I got why they were scared, but they were also raising a big red flag around my mortal enemy. I didn't need Neco Argent looking into why they panicked so hard.

Then again, I was keeping a pretty big secret for him, too. I still didn't want him finding out I was a girl.

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Lucy would be pissed I shut the tavern down all day. Like angrier than the drunks who were pounding on the door all day because we were drinking and we wouldn't let them in. Probably madder than Petunia if you tried to hitch her to the cart without bribing her first.

Lucy could probably hit harder than that donkey could kick.

Petunia never kicked me, but I'd brawled with Lucy before when I thought I was settling something man to man.

If she took five minutes to understand we were all legitimately terrified, she might not beat our arses in the fancy part of town.

Neco was watching this go down like those fancy plays they did in this part of town.

I always wanted to see one, but the most entertainment I got was when horny old Edna decided her husband wasn't giving it up enough, so she tried her hand at the tavern and then he showed up drunk to fight off anyone who might be desperate enough to take her up on it.

Shit. Lucy didn't want Neco to know. Neco was always observant even before he started getting away with murder.

And something was up with Neco. When he cut someone out, he fully cut them out.

He didn't talk to them and he didn't even look at them.



He mostly avoided Lucy, but even when they were yelling at each other, he barely looked at her.

He was looking now. He was staring right at her, and that was just something he didn't do. He didn't look at Ronan either until he drew for Rowena's birthday. Something happened. Neco's nose was broken and both his eyes were turning black.

Lucy had a mean right hook, but Neco had been trained by Panas and thought she was a man.

Lucy could kick my arse, but she wouldn't have landed a blow on Neco or Beck unless they let her.

They were better trained than the Nestrans military, but the Barons looked down on the Jagged Key Isles people, so they thought their culture was inferior.

The Jagged Key Isles folks thought the Barons were rich ponces, so they probably wouldn't have trained their people on anything.

Ronan noticed, too, and the asshole poked me because he was also drunk. Ronan wanted gossip, and that was my job. Lucy would tell us what happened while she was gone, but only Neco could tell us why he was looking at Lucy now.

Beck told me what happened last time he tried to get Neco to talk about Lucy and yeah, that wouldn't work with me. Neco might be stabbing people, but he wasn't really violent, and he'd never been a bully. He never started anything with anyone, but he'd step in to finish it if needed.

Neco wouldn't spar with me like he did with Beck because it wasn't a fair fight. I could handle most drunken fights and tossing people, but I couldn't handle anyone with Jagged Key Isle training.

So, yeah, I was the silver tongue of the group, but Beck spoke Neco's language, so I was nominating him for that. I was pretty sure my girlfriend was also going to kick my arse for closing the tavern.

No point in also getting it kicked by Neco.

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I honestly just wanted to go home, give Mom this half remedy, and deal with her utter disappointment at what I did.

I had three very drunk boyfriends to deal with.

And I couldn't even get that angry with them when I saw how terrified they were.

If I hadn't been so scared about losing Mom, I might have been more concerned about my own safety.

Because it finally hit me—the reason they were so terrified. It wasn't against the law to pretend to be a different gender, even outside of Guttertown. It was looked down on outside Guttertown. They'd try to beat it out of you, but there was no law against it.

But no one had ever tried to get out of the Baron's blackmail by doing that and the Barons overstepped the king all the time.

They could make it a law by taking my head for the deception.

They liked to pretend they were the smartest men in the realm and they didn't take kindly to people making them look like fools.

Even though technically forcing me out of a business I owned and was good at, to work at the brothel while giving them most of my earnings made them look much worse.

Fuck.

Neco was being weird, and he had been watching everything. And I knew that look on his stupid face. There was no reason for them to shut down the tavern and get that drunk over me joining the army.

We weren't at war. The shifters didn't seem to want another one. At most, I'd be cracking heads when the Barons wanted to bully someone or collect their stupid taxes. I got why they were scared, but if Neco hadn't been lurking, he never would have seen it.

"Come on. You're sleeping at my place tonight, so I can sober you up. You owe me, so you get to be my buffer when Mom tries to murder me for going to my father."

Neco was staring, and he cocked an eyebrow at me.

Fuck me. He was going to start digging and I couldn't avoid him like I usually did.

I needed his help to catch the Ghoul. He'd helped by dragging me with him to Trevils so I could find out about the crime scenes, but if I really wanted to understand it, I needed to talk to another killer.

And I hated Neco Argent, but I also missed him. He hated me, too, and there wasn't much I could do about that.

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I had so many questions for my old friends. And now that I knew Lance wasn't my half-brother, I wanted back in. I didn't feel left out before because it was my choice to walk away. I had a mission, and I didn't want to put them in danger.

Keeva said an assassin was a paid job back on the Jagged Key Isles. They passed the training down so it wasn't lost, but no one was making money off of it. She said she got paid work from the Madame exactly once, but refused to tell me a damned thing about the job.

Since it was the Barons, the wages were going to be shit. Better than what they were paying their soldiers, but nowhere near what either of us should have been paid. Especially the soldiers.

Some of them were basically poor kids whose parents couldn't pay taxes and had extra sons.

They were better suited to any other trade but the military.

We weren't at war and hadn't been for hundreds of years, but sometimes, shit happened when someone didn't want to or couldn't pay taxes or they sent the army to arrest someone.

But yeah, I could kill whoever I wanted now. They couldn't say anything because I was killing for them. And they were going to pay me. Lance wasn't my half-brother and despite his legendary performance at the brothel when he was sixteen, he was into guys.

I'd have to find a way back in because Lance was really mad about the nose thing. And I didn't think letting him maim mine twice was going to fix it because Lance could hold grudges just as much as I could.

I left them and went home. Something was up and I'd figure that out later.

There was no reason for them to get that drunk or scared over going to see his father.

They wouldn't have known it was Folcard anymore than I did because the Argent kids didn't talk about that.

Saying their name was like invoking a curse.

Plus, I was worried about my family. Momma was in a bad place and Rowena was probably being violent about it. The Madame had tricks, and she cared about her girls, so she'd be dealing with it until I got back. She wasn't a healer, but she knew enough to keep her stable.

When I walked into our flat, The Madame was sitting by Momma's bed. Rowena flew at me and punched me right in the dick. Yeah, it hurt like hell, but I was proud my kid sister could punch that hard.

"Took you long enough," she said, glaring at me with her hands on her hips. "Who the fuck hit you?"

Momma didn't like it when Rowena cursed, but this was Guttertown, so I wasn't going to correct her. There was no point in talking fancy here. And I wasn't telling Rowena it was Lance that fucked up my face because Rowena would avenge me.

"Our father is an asshole. You never met him, but I have. There was some extra extortion involved, and this isn't the cure. It'll just keep her alive until I do what they

want.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” the Madame said.

“And when you get a chance, you might want to walk over to the tavern and do something nice for Caitrin. I’m not sure where Lance found their new cook, but he whipped up some kind of soup and tea for Caitrin and made enough for Theda since he heard someone here was sick.

“He said he can cure them both when a certain plant is ready to harvest and he’s planning on teaching Athan and Tarja.

There are also several things he can teach them that might prevent future Argent kids from needing to do what you and Lance just did.

He seemed like he thought it was his fault he couldn’t rush nature.

Theda hasn’t coughed up anymore blood and has been peacefully sleeping.

He said it’s a bandage and they can’t really wait for his herbs to bloom. ”

I was trying not to be suspicious since this man helped Momma.

I knew everyone in Guttertown. I made it a point to.

I also knew everyone who came sniffing around.

They’d only banished someone here once, and that was only because they were hoping if they threw Leodos here, he’d change his mind on experimenting on shifters. Everyone else they just killed.

I looked into the healers outside of Guttertown, too, because I was very good at breaking and entering. I was considering just stealing the remedy, but I was smart enough to know that I didn't know which one to steal and didn't want to grab the wrong one.

I wasn't going to kill this man because he didn't fit my code and he'd helped when he didn't have to, but I was going to vet him. Who was he and why was he in Guttertown?

I had a lot to do and hurting this man wasn't on my agenda. I was just going to get a measure of him when I thanked him. The brothel had flats for the girls. Some of them had kids, and some lost their parents and brought their younger siblings. The lodgings prepared for that.

We were given a three bedroom, so we weren't sharing. I had my own room, but I never slept in there. I slept on the couch by the door just in case some pervert saw my sister and tried to break in later. Momma didn't like it, but she got it.

So, I knew damned well she wasn't sleeping well. She was fine once she could fall asleep, but she was coughing too much to get there easily. She was not only peacefully resting, but there was slightly more color in her cheeks.

I hated to wake her. This might not be the full cure, but it would make it better until I could get it.

I knew the name they gave me to kill and the only reason I hadn't slit his throat was that he wasn't a customer at the brothel.

Yeah, he didn't technically fit my code, but I heard he'd been doing some Baron-level contracts with the people of Guttertown and screwing them over, so I had been thinking about it as a side project.



That was also probably why the Barons wanted me to kill him.

Killing him was going to be child's play. Catching the Ghoul and convincing Lance to stay out of it in the time frame I was given was going to be hard.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

One of the smartest decisions I'd made was taking a chance on hiring a Theran because while my boyfriends were getting sloppy drunk, he'd been upstairs caring for Mom. He'd explained what he'd done and that he'd walked some over to Theda.

Basselt also told me that since she needed to be resting, he told her where I was and gave her a few hard truths. The fluid in her lungs would build to the point it would be like drowning. Dying would be slow and painful and I'd have to watch it, knowing I could have fixed it by going to my father.

Mom would have thumped my head if I said that, but hearing it from someone who could literally scent she was dying made it sink in. She was probably going to get worked up over the task I was given, but if I could do it, it would be a one and done as far as I could tell.

The contract I signed said nothing about the military. I was pretty sure he didn't want me because he thought I was a gay man. He didn't think I was going to pull this off, anyway. So, really, if I caught a murderous psychopath, I'd come out on top with my freedom.

"You don't really have to do this," Basselt said. "I can scent what they used in this remedy and recreate it until my herbs are ready to harvest."

"That's sweet, but I do. They teach us the basics of reading contracts in school, but Mom and the Madame gave us extra lessons.

The contract I signed works in my favor if I pull it off.

No military service or anything. I do this and I'm paid up.

I can't bring attention to myself trying to stick it to them by reneging on the contract.

If he doesn't try to take the tavern, he could find out I'm not Lance and try to make an example of me. ”

“Are you allowed help?”

“Nothing in the contract said I can't. I've spoken to Inspector Trevils, and he said it's no problem if I want to visit the other crime scenes. I guess I'll have to suck it up and work with Neco a little.”

“You know Theran can do more than just scent illnesses and your secret, right? I can smell who lived there and who wasn't supposed to be there.

Killing someone is messy. No one is just going to let you kill them.

They fight back. A human wouldn't be able to tell you if all the blood belonged to the victims, but I can tell you if some of it was the killer's.

I'm a wolf, Lucy. Once I have their scent, I can tell you who they are. ”

Fuck me. It could be that easy and that hard at the same time. I knew he wanted to help because I helped him. I got vibes there was a connection between Basselt and Mom. He was looking out for me and that felt good because my birth father was such a deadbeat dick.

“We can't,” I said, gently. “Guttertown is for outcasts. No one would give a shit if they found out you were Theran. It's not the same if you cross the town line.

They aren't kidnapping you and torturing you anymore because Leodos burned the diaries and refused.

But if they see a random Theran walking about, they could snatch you to figure out how to wipe you out for good. ”

Basselt just smirked at me.

“I'm a wolf, little one. I've been banned from my lands for a long time.

I'm only seen when I want to be. Tarja and Athan met me because I let them.

Theran are different kinds of animals and we all have different jobs.

It was decided I would be a warrior and a guard to the kings when I was ten.

I might have failed at guarding the prince, but humans can't tell most of us from you if we are wearing your clothes. ”

“No, I can't risk you. You've been so much help in more ways than one. It's not just the healing stuff. We've had more meat since we hired you and you're an amazing cook. And my mom thinks you're sexy, so I'm rooting for you.”

Oh, damn. I was pretty sure I just embarrassed the giant wolf.

I guess I forgot that just because he was living in Guttertown now, he wasn't Guttertown bred like I was.

Everything he'd told me about their culture seemed amazing, but maybe they weren't as direct as someone who grew up playing in a brothel.

“Baby steps,” Basselt groaned, mopping his face with his hands.

“Hey, can I ask you something? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want.”

“You just suggested I sleep with your mother, so nothing should surprise me at this point.”

“She hasn’t gotten laid since she had me, so you’d be doing her a favor. Anyway, what we’ve done to all of you was so bad, Leodos burned all of it and was willing to die to stop it. Why haven’t you tried to wipe out the Barons?”

“You’re pretending to be a boy because it’s standard in Guttertown for the Barons to come here, force women to be with them, and meddle with their herbs to give them a child they can exploit because you barely have anything here.

Why hasn’t Guttertown tried to wipe out the Barons?

You could probably convince Lower Cutwart and any merchants who aren’t licking their boots to join you.

“We won’t fight because of the Idric rock.

They know it makes us powerless. They’ve stockpiled it and make their arrow tips out of it.

The Tempris being mostly wiped out also puts us at a disadvantage because they can kill them out long range.

We are waiting for our god to return. She will fix this. ”

“Your god is a woman? I like the sound of that.”

“Yours is a man?” he asked. “How does that work? Men can’t give birth.”

I just shrugged.

“We’re not much into religion here in Guttertown. If God is real, then he’s been shitting on us for the longest. For what it’s worth, I hope your god is real. I hope she comes back and fixes shit for everyone. If she comes by my tavern, drinks are on the house.”

“Honestly? We pray for her because she’s supposed to bring peace, but we don’t know how or even what she was like.

If she comes back during my lifetime, I hope she’s the type to visit a tavern in Guttertown, but not let you serve her for free.

You need to wake your mom and give her the remedy and then you should probably get some sleep.

You’re going to want to be at full capacity to catch a killer. ”

Yeah, that.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Neco was everywhere. That man avoided me for ten years and I was totally fine with that.

Unless we couldn't avoid each other, we left or went the other way.

He was waiting when I unlocked the tavern and he didn't leave when he saw it was me that unlocked the door.

Fuck me. I needed to talk to him but I just wasn't in the mood to get into a screaming fight.

"First of all, fuck you. I suppose you'd better come in."

"Is your cook here?"

Yeah, no. I wasn't letting Neco anywhere near Basselt.

I didn't think Neco would give a shit he was Theran, but his entire thing was killing people who hurt women and children.

I didn't blame Basselt for the Theran prince.

I think most people wouldn't. The Theran king did because he was grieving and I was pretty sure everyone went along with it because they didn't want to get banished.

Neco always saw things in black and white and he never half-assed anything. I didn't know if Neco would remember all the times we were kids and ditched our parents to

do something that could have gotten us killed or he was going to blame Basselt and come after him while he was sleeping.

Plus, Neco was smart. He wasn't the kind of smart I was, but he was observant and good at putting things together.

He'd inserted himself as Guttertown's protector so he would have made it a point to know everyone in Guttertown.

Most of us did anyway. Basselt wasn't a common name, so Neco would want to vet him.

"No. Basselt is under my protection. If you want to get stabby, go kill someone who deserves it."

"Basselt is under my protection. He helped my family. I wanted to thank him."

"Sorry, no. I'm not stupid and I have no reason to trust you."

"You did once."

"And I haven't done that for a long time. Look, I need to pick your brain to catch the Ghoul, so can you just not be you while I do that?"

"You aren't going anywhere near the Ghoul. I don't even want you leaving Guttertown."

"Neco, I can't even tell you the things I've done to avoid the father who sired me. Mom and I had done just fine on our own. You aren't my father and you don't get to tell me what to do."



Seriously, men usually only did that to women and Neco definitely didn't know my secret.

There was no way he could know. But then again, he'd been sneaking into houses and killing people without leaving a trace.

Fuck me. Did Neco creep in my flat with the intention of gutting me, see my tits, and decide to call it off?

"All the Argent kids do what they have to so they can avoid their fathers. I'll do what I need to so that I can keep Rowena away from it.

They aren't like us there. They don't know everyone and, in most cases, if you mimic their accent and don't make a scene, no one bothers you.

You are a scene. Can you even grow a beard?

It would help some. They think facial hair is manly. "

Okay, so Neco Argent definitely hadn't seen my tits. What a relief. I had to keep them strapped down, but I had really nice tits. Neco didn't deserve to see them.

"I'm a Guttertown brat, Neco. I can handle myself if the fancy folks want to fight."

"Don't be stupid. No, you can't. If it's a Baron's legitimate son, who do you think they will side with if you fight back? The merchants' sons will jump you in a group. Just stay away and let me do this."

"Dick face, if you do this, they are going to find a way to not give my mom the cure. They'll say I violated my contract by having you do it and they may try to take the tavern. I have to do this. So, help me or get out of my way. You're a serial killer.

Help me get in his head.”

Oh, great. Now there was an offended serial killer at my table. I never really got the idiot part of pretending to be a man. He wasn’t mad I called him a dick face and didn’t want to follow his plan. No, the giant idiot was mad I called him a serial killer.

“Okay, I’m an assassin. There’s a difference,” he sulked.

“Did someone ask you to kill those men and pay you money? Because that’s an assassin.”

Neco ground his teeth. Yeah, pushing his buttons was my favorite thing.

“I paid myself from their hidden cash and passed the rest of it onto their victims. If I’d advertised my services, people would have hired me. I’m going to get paid now. I can work with immunity and I have a plan if someone doesn’t deserve to die.”

“What the fuck happened to you, Neco?”

Because seriously, the best friend I used to talk to every night wasn’t violent.

He was intense, but he got into the least amount of brawls than any of us.

We’d been enemies for the longest time, but there was a reason I didn’t suspect him when I realized The Blight had connections to the brothel.

Yeah, he broke my nose, and I was still mad about that, but he never came at me with his fists again, even when we couldn’t avoid each other and got into a screaming match.

Neco still thought I was a man. He should have had no problem thumping me if he

thought I had it coming.

“Some asshole rich fuck was fine with Momma having a miscarriage because he wanted to fuck her when she was that far along. I didn’t just lose my eye.

The only reason they didn’t kill a kid for that was that the Madame sent my father a letter that I was protecting his offspring.

Nothing happened to him. He was still rich as fuck when I killed him.

He was the first. We get punished for fighting back if they hurt us. It’s pest control.”

“I get it but why do you have to do it?”

“Because no one else will.”

“I’m serious. I need your help to get into the Ghoul’s head.”

“And I can’t help you. I’m not a serial killer, I’m an assassin.”

I just rolled my eyes. He seemed hung up on that and I wasn’t sure there was much of a difference. His idiot plan was going to get Mom dead and my tavern seized. He probably didn’t want me involved because he wanted to catch the Ghoul himself.

“Well, I’m not letting you meet Basselt. If you aren’t going to help, then buy something or get the fuck out,” I snapped.

“Fine. And I don’t want to see you outside of Guttertown.”

Arsehole. Trevils told us where the crime scenes were and gave us permission to check them out. I guess I was doing that without the giant fucker.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Lance Argent was the most infuriating man I'd ever met and now that I knew he wasn't related to me, I just really wanted to kiss him.

I'd never do that without his permission, but the Madame had literally just reset my nose and my eyes were nearly swollen shut because of Lance.

I wasn't going to let him hit me again unless I earned it and kissing him without his consent definitely deserved it.

I wasn't telling him what to do. He didn't get it.

Lance wasn't just androgynous. He was beautiful.

In Guttertown, that just meant more people were going to ask him to their bed.

Outside of Guttertown, it was different.

Everyone was going to find him beautiful, too, and some people were going to think it was his fault how he was born for confusing them because he didn't do stupid shit like growing facial hair.

It was stupid. If they were confused, it wasn't anyone else's fault. Beck oozed masculinity, but he didn't need it after Panas taught us both to shave. He had this amazing, long hair on the top of his head, but the rest of his body was hairless.

Lance was under my protection whether he wanted to be or not.

I just had to be sneaky about it because he had a mean right hook and he was faster than me.

I left when he asked me to because Lance always did have a temper.

Ronan and Beck stumbled out after me and they were both extremely hungover.

Yeah, something was going on. There was no reason for someone who wasn't an Argent kid to get pissed over our fathers.

We were all headed back to the brothel. Beck needed to check in, Ronan had his murals, and I needed to get what I needed to stalk my prey. This name, I had no problem killing, but I wasn't going to be careless about it. And now that I had a free pass, I needed to check out the Ghoul's kill rooms.

Still, I was trying to make my way back to my friends now that I knew Lance wasn't my brother and it wouldn't come back on anyone if I slipped up. I could help them get home, even if the brothel was next door.

"You both look like you're going to puke," I said.

"Lance figured out a hangover remedy. It doesn't kick in until you get a really good belch and that doesn't happen right away," Ronan groaned.

Yeah, Lance had always been smart like that.

"The Madame will fire you and ban you from the brothel if you let out a nasty drunk burp in her presence," I said.

Momma raised me so I wasn't rude like that.

I went to school with this moron named Aldo who did what most of Guttertown did and hit up the brothel when they got their first chin hair.

You could just walk up to a girl and ask if she wanted to go to bed with you, but Aldo decided to march straight up to the Madame and demand her best girl right before he let out this vile belch right in her face.

Panas had been training Beck and me for about three years, so when the Madame tossed him a look, he let Beck and I get our first experience tossing someone since Aldo was our age. The Madame could hold a grudge, so he'd never been allowed back.

“Mom is also going to kick our arses if she sees us this hungover, so we're sneaking in the back to my room until Lance's cure kicks in. Want to come?”

Beck had the same look on his face that he always did when he invited me anywhere it was going to be more than just him.

He asked because he really wanted me to come, but he was prepared for me to say no.

I never got annoyed with him for asking, but I guess today was the day that persistence paid off.

“Sure.”

Weird. Beck had been asking for the last ten years like he wanted me to say yes, but he sure seemed shocked when I did. A man was allowed to grow and change his mind when he had more information.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

What was happening right now? Lance was really Lucy and my girlfriend now, the Barons were changing everything, and something was going on with Neco.

We all hid when Lucy opened the door and he didn't immediately storm off.

And yeah, we totally eavesdropped because everyone wanted Neco back.

Lucy wanted him back, too, she just couldn't see it because she was so hurt he left in the first place.

And yeah, Neco was right. Mom would be mad if she saw us hungover, but she would tear us new arseholes if we were rude in her presence.

Mom was elegant and all about manners. If she didn't have dark skin and come from the Jagged Key Isles, she'd be living it up in the fancy part of town with a title.

Except she hated those people, so even if they asked, she'd tell them to get fucked, so she had her little slice of life in the brothel.

I grew up here, so I knew exactly how to sneak in and out without getting caught. I checked the hall and told Neco and Ronan it was clear.

"It's cute you think the Madame doesn't know every single time you come and go when you think you're being sneaky," Neco chuckled.

"He's pretty much got you," Ronan said as I unlocked my door.

“You can’t be a traitor if you’re going to be belching in my flat.”

“I didn’t know the three of you were with Lance, but why did you get so drunk he went to see his father? You had no idea they were going to change the rules. His father is an ass. He was more likely to send Lance away because he thought he doesn’t know how to throw a punch.”

I fell out laughing.

“I get Lance getting the jump on you once because he’s fast, but he completely fucked your face up.”

“Shut up,” Neco growled. “I let him hit me since I broke his nose and then he came back with a head butt.”

And Lucy probably didn’t follow it up by completely maiming his nuts because Neco thought she was Lance, so he’d have no problem throwing her through a wall.

She had to be crazy breaking his nose in the first place.

I was pretty sure she hadn’t thus far because Neco got giant and trained with my uncle.

“Lance has been wanting to break your nose since you broke his, but it’s pretty obvious why he hasn’t,” I said.

“Lance also has a temper, so what did you do that he picked a fight with you?” Ronan asked.

“I tried to help him when I realized he wasn’t my brother.”



Neco could be the most confusing man sometimes. Lucy and Autar knew each other, but they were a few years apart, so they weren't all that close. Well, they were now that they found out they shared a father. Argent kids usually bonded over hating their father, especially if they shared one.

Neco was insanely protective of Rowena and some of that wasn't just because she was a girl.

Neco taught her how to protect herself and he took care of it when she couldn't, like when their father was involved.

I could see Neco forgiving Lucy and wanting to help her if they were siblings, but not why he'd stick his neck out after finding out they weren't.

"Oh!" Ronan said. "I get it now."

"I don't. Tell me."

"No way. Neco kills people. I'm not spilling his secrets."

"Neco has a code. He's not going to slit your throat for telling me."

"Neco is sitting right here," Neco said dryly. "It was complicated before and now it's not."

Oh! I got it now, too. A whole bunch of stuff was just fine in Guttertown, but not that.

It was kind of fucked up. Guttertown was fine with most things sexually as long as everyone consented, but family was off limits.

The fancy people outside of Guttertown would jump me if they saw me holding

hands with Ollie or Ronan, but they thought marrying family was more acceptable than marrying a poor person.

Gross.

“Why did you turn it into this whole feud instead of just asking?”

“It was easier,” Neco grunted.

On behalf of all men, we were really stupid sometimes.

It was not easier on either of them. And Neco wasn't going to have an easy time with Lucy, either, because she was stubborn.

If he'd spoken to her right after their fight, they could have both apologized.

She could have told him they weren't siblings and our whole group wouldn't have been fractured.

“Have you met Lance Argent, Neco? You broke his nose and completely cut him out of your life. You got into screaming fights any time you were in the same room. That wasn't easy on either of you. And if you think getting back into his life is going to be easy, then you don't know Lance Argent.”

“I do know Lance. That's why I let him fuck up my face.”

Ronan and I looked at Neco like he was insane. I mean, yeah, he was killing people, so probably part of him was. He had no way of knowing Lucy's secret, but it didn't work like that with guys, either. Maybe your mates if you were drunk, but not men you had feelings for.

“No offense, since you can sneak in my room and kill me, but you’re a fucking moron,” Ronan said.

“I can’t worry about any of that. You’re all with Lance. Keep him out of the Ghoul task since he won’t listen to me.”

I didn’t think it was possible to look at Neco like he’d lost his mind even harder, but I think we all did.

“Caitrin is the only person who can tell Lance what to do and if it comes down to protecting Caitrin, then Lance isn’t going to listen,” I said.

“Lance was like that when we were kids,” Ronan pointed out. “He didn’t grow out of it. Caitrin would have rather died than have Lance go to his father, and he went anyway because he wouldn’t allow it.”

I couldn’t smack Ronan without giving it away to Neco that he was saying things that could give away her secret. The only reason Neco wasn’t fishing more about why we shut down the tavern and got drunk was because he was trying to figure out how to keep Lucy out of danger.

“Well, yeah. His father is Folcard. He’s the worst of them.

He said terrible things to Lance because he doesn’t ooze masculinity.

If he hadn’t changed the rules, he would have just let Caitrin die because he thought Lance couldn’t handle the military.

The two of you don’t know what it’s like. It’s not safe for him.”

“Um, I work outside of Guttertown all the time,” Ronan said. “It’s the only way to

get paid work. Lance knows how to keep his head down and mind his business. If you're that worried, work with him instead of excluding him. You're going to have to do some serious groveling and this could help."

Neco threw up his hands and started pacing.

"I can't catch a serial killer while an angry man who wants to maim my nuts is with me. That's how mistakes get made."

"You're going to have to because if anything happens and Caitrin dies, he's going to blame you. And you'd do the same if you were in his shoes," Ronan said.

Neco just grunted, but it was the best idea. Neco and Lucy might be explosive together, but Folcard would find any loophole to screw her over. She couldn't sit out and let Neco do it for her.

And I trusted Neco to have her back the best.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

I made Ollie swear not to drink again and then I made Basselt swear to look after Mom and thump Ollie in the head if he so much as looked at the booze. They were both unhappy with me and I got it. Even I thought it was stupid not to bring Basselt with me.

It would be so easy to use him and let his nose figure it out.

I wasn't that person. I liked Basselt, and no one deserved what the Barons would do to him if they found out a Theran was banished and living among them.

I was also thinking long term. His wife had been a healer, and he gave enough of a shit to pay attention to her work.

The shifters might have remedies that didn't need copper. If Basselt taught them to Athan and Tarja, then Ilyn could stock things in his shop. Future Argent kids could avoid selling themselves if their moms got sick. There'd be other reasons, but in Guttertown, illness was the most common reason.

Ollie pulled me into a bear hug.

"If you won't take Basselt, why can't you go with Neco?" he sighed.

"Because he's being weird and he'll fight back if I hit him again."

"He showed up, and you had a whole conversation without screaming."

"He was just trying to sniff out Basselt because it's someone he doesn't know," I

sulked.

“No, he wasn’t. If he was just here for Basselt, he would have left when you told him he couldn’t see him.”

“Were all of you eavesdropping?” I demanded.

“We had to. If you hit him again, he would fight back and the two of you would break the tavern. We were doing you a favor.”

“I hate you when you behave badly and explain it in a way that I can’t be mad at you.”

“It’s why you love me, too, and why you’d never fuck up my pretty face like you did Neco.”

“I wouldn’t hit any of you like that, even if I was mad. That’s not how you solve anything when you’re in a relationship. Neco isn’t my boyfriend. Neco will never be my boyfriend. I owed him a broken nose.”

“And the head butt you went for after?”

I just shrugged.

“He was in my personal space.”

He was in my personal space doing the ‘psycho growly’ thing and I liked it a bit too much considering I hated him. I didn’t want him to do that again, so I head butted him so he understood that.

“Doesn’t Caitrin tell you to count to ten and use your words instead of violence?”

Yeah, she did all the time when I was younger. I was much more careful with that now, but never when Neco was involved.

“I need to go if I’m going to look at the crime scene in Lower Cutwart and get back in time to help with the night rush.”

I was going to start there since it was the closest and the Ghoul changed his hunting ground for some reason. I thought that was important, even though stupid Neco refused to help me get into the mind of a killer.

I still had no idea what I was looking for, but I had a feeling I was going to find it in Lower Cutwart.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Lucy was a smart, capable woman and she could definitely kick my arse. I wouldn't usually worry about her leaving Guttertown alone, but not with the Ghoul out there. He wouldn't want to get caught and now my girlfriend was hunting for him.

Basselt came down after checking on Caitrin.

I really liked that guy. I got to sleep a little later now that he'd taken over hunting.

He was an amazing cook and the Theran remedies he was going to bring to Guttertown would save lives.

And there were some idiot humans that would hurt him just for being Theran.

Arseholes.

"I'm going to need your help," Basselt said.

"Anything."

"I listen about as well as Lucy does when people are in danger. The Theran have worn your clothes and gone undercover among you to try to figure out how to break our people out of your prisons. I can blend and I'm also a wolf.

I'm not seen unless I want to be. You get me the location of those crime scenes and I'll help her. "

"Thank you. She'll be grateful right after she's done murdering us both."



“She’s just like her mother,” Basselt muttered.

“Just a thing if you’re going to work here.

Lucy is completely Caitrin’s daughter. She got nothing from her father.

They don’t just look alike. They think alike.

You never want both of them mad at you at the same time.

Lucy will be furious, but you’re going to go up loads in Caitrin’s eyes for looking out for her kid. ”

“It’s just not right. We have our problems and there are a lot of things in our culture that I don’t agree with, but we don’t withhold medical treatment from people and we don’t use our children like that. We also don’t treat our women the way you do.”

“Not me! I’ll be the first to tell you there are several women in Guttertown I’m not going to fuck with under any circumstance. Caitrin and the Madame practically raised me and they are terrifying. ”

“Get me the locations and I’ll help Lucy find your Ghoul.”

“Just don’t get caught. I really like you and you could change a lot of shit for Guttertown.”

“Wolf, remember? You’d better not get drunk or I’m going to have to stop you. I’ve already had one of the women of the Whispering Raven angry at me and I don’t intend to piss off the second unless I can immediately make it up to her.”

I shuddered.

“I’m not getting drunk like that again for a very long time.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

I hated going to Lower Cutwart and tried to avoid it whenever I could.

They were probably worse than Guttertown, but they shat on us worse than the other areas.

They were landlocked with only one river and not a lot of wells.

It was a lot harder to bathe in Lower Cutwart than it was in Guttertown, so a lot of them put it off as long as they could.

I could always tell if someone from Lower Cutwart visited the brothel and then stopped by my tavern for a drink because I had to open a window so people didn't leave. My food and booze were top shelf, but the stench was downright offensive.

And I didn't know how they lived this close to each other.

We shared a courtyard and garden with the brothel, but we didn't share walls.

If someone was a screamer and they all were because the men liked that, I didn't have to hear a damned thing when I was working or sleeping.

Everyone had to hear everyone's business in Lower Cutwart.

Which meant it didn't make any sense for the Ghoul to kill here.

I guess I could understand Neco since he got in without anyone noticing, took out his target, and got out without alerting the whole house.

The Ghoul took out entire families. Someone would have screamed.

Someone would have tried to run. Someone would have heard something.

I wasn't Inspector Trevils and my accent was going to give me away as a Guttertown brat right away. These people had no reason to respect me and I didn't need them to. I just needed them to get their heads out of their arses and realize my mom's life was on the line and name drop the Barons.

I found the house. The family must have been wealthy by Lower Cutwart standards. They didn't share walls with any neighbors and they were close to a well. They were still close enough to their neighbors that someone should have heard the entire family getting slaughtered.

So, before I traumatized myself and walked into a crime scene, I decided to talk to the neighbors. Except I took a step and ran straight into a giant. I stepped back and hissed at him.

"Fuck, Neco. Make some noise."

Seriously, where did he even come from? He was the biggest man in Guttertown outside of Autar and Autar was loud as fuck. I hadn't even noticed him sneak up on me and I made it a point to notice my surroundings at all times. The asshole just smirked at me and I really wanted to hit him again.

"It occurred to me that you were going to ignore my very valid suggestion to stay out of this and let me handle it, so I decided to tag along."

I grit my teeth because I knew I needed him.

I just really wanted to kick his nuts out of his mouth because I couldn't figure him

out.

Neco had never been heartless, and he had personal experience with Argent kids and their moms. He wouldn't just let Mom die, but it was like he was trying to be friendly with me.

And that was the weird part because two days ago, we were mortal enemies who couldn't be in the same room. I didn't know what changed with him that he was being nice to me now.

"I meant helping me understand the Ghoul's motivation not tagging along."

Neco just shrugged.

"You're thinking about it all wrong. We aren't the same."

"That's debatable," I muttered, stomping towards the neighbors'.

Neco caught up with me and I was just so pissed he was that tall because his legs were longer than mine and it was harder to ditch him.

"Beck and I already interviewed some of these people."

"Why are you dragging my boyfriend into your shenanigans?"

"Because if he's moved to Lower Cutwart, then Guttertown might be next and then no one but us will give a shit."

"The Madame is perfectly fine and is going to live forever out of spite. My mother is the one who is sick. I can't believe you involved Beck and keep trying to force me to sit out."

“It’s different with Beck.”

“Let me guess. Because you think he’s more manly than me?”

I couldn’t believe I was even having this argument because one of the things I loved about Beck was that he oozed masculinity on the surface, but he was also just so sensitive and gentle.

He always seemed to know if you just needed to rant while he nodded and agreed with you or you wanted his advice.

It was a rare skill, but Beck definitely had it.

“What? No. Beck was trained by Panas and you weren’t. This isn’t Guttertown and they fight in packs when they want to beat someone they look down on. Beck and I know how to handle that with our fists or our words. Your dumb arse is going to fly off and get beaten to death.”

That was logical. And actually, a fair assessment sometimes. Most of the time, I avoided fights, so I didn’t get exposed, but other times, I just craved violence and snapped. It was different outside of Guttertown.

“Fine, but don’t get in my way.”

“I’m helping, Lance. The contract didn’t say anything about help. Despite what happened, I don’t want you to lose your mom.”

Ugh. That was the Neco whose room I used to sneak into at night and stay up for hours just talking. I missed that Neco and I had a feeling when this was all over, he was going to go back to being a dick to me.

And I wasn't sure I could handle it again.

## Page 16

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I decided to hit up the neighbors that shared a courtyard with the crime scene.

They had to know something. The Madame had all these secret entrances if the fancy people didn't want Guttertown to know they paid for sex.

I shared a courtyard with the brothel, so I tended to know who was slinking in and out and trying not to be seen.

Ollie also overheard someone yelling at one of the girls in the shared courtyard and bolted over there before it got violent. Beck, Panas, and Neco couldn't be everywhere at once and sometimes, they were putting out one fire when another started. And Ollie could hear it even in a very loud tavern.

I regretted it at soon as we knocked. Lower Cutwart and Guttertown were the poorest areas of Nestran, but some people were better off. The tavern and the brothel did well, so my family and Beck's were considered wealthy by Guttertown standards.

We didn't put on airs, though. Not like this woman who opened the door and immediately sneered at me as soon as she heard my accent. Yes, she was better off than her neighbors, but if you went left when you exited Lower Cutwart, they'd consider her poor trash.

"Ma'am, the Barons have tasked us with taking the Ghoul off the streets. If he hit Lower Cutwart once, he'll probably hit it again. Could you answer some questions about your neighbors?" Neco said.

Damn. I guess I did need Neco. He was polite, respectful, and this woman might be



old enough to be his mother, but I guess the tall, dark, and dangerous thing did it for her. She batted her eyelashes and invited us inside.

I was pretty much invisible as she offered only Neco some wine and practically sat on his lap.

I was trying not to sit there gaping like a fish.

Neco never liked it when strangers touched him.

He used to say it made him feel weird. The only people he'd allow without removing their hands and snapping at them were people who were closest to him.

I could tell he hated this because he was my best friend once, but he wasn't stopping her. He was actually flirting with her. And I didn't hate him enough that I was gloating about this. Neco was doing this to help me.

"Did you hear anything the night of the murder?"

"No one did. Our son was getting married, so everyone who was invited was at the wedding and the reception after."

So, there was some neighbor drama. I couldn't believe I was saying this, but a lot of people found me a very attractive man in Guttertown.

Just a different kind of attractive than Neco.

I didn't think about it much because I wasn't a man and I couldn't believe I was thinking this now, but I wished this woman found me attractive so I could flirt some answers out of her.

I was probably much better at that than Neco.

Except I was wrong. I was seeing an entirely different side of my former best friend. Neco gave her a sympathetic nod.

“And they weren’t invited I’m guessing. Did they have a lot of enemies?”

“Oh, gods no. They were good people. Our sons just loved their daughter a little too much, and she was always going to marry out of Lower Cutwart. It was a mutual agreement that they didn’t attend any weddings.

We didn’t want any of our boys doing something stupid to their brides and we didn’t want to give her any reason to stay here.

Elsbeth hated it and they fought a lot. That, we could hear. ”

“I talked to a few of Elsbeth’s friends. They said she had several merchants and Baron’s sons interested in her. You strike me as a very perceptive woman. Do you think it was one of them?”

I was going to go for a little horny and kind of a gossip over perspective, but I guess it was good Neco decided to tag along.

“No. Elsbeth was a catch. She was beautiful and well mannered. She would have fit in with the merchants or the Barons. She has five brothers and good hips, she’d have many sons. She wasn’t hiding she was accepting courting from all of them.

“Elsbeth was also pretty smart. She might be from Lower Cutwart, but she knew what she brought to the table. She didn’t want to marry just to get out.

She didn’t want someone who married her for her looks, either, so she hadn’t made

up her mind yet.

Those boys were more likely to start killing their competition than hurting her. ”

I tried to hold in my snort because that was insanely na?ve.

I’d been pretending to be a man my entire life and my playground was a brothel.

It was entirely possible for some entitled rich boy who never had to face a consequence put Elsbeth on the spot to pick and gotten violent because she was the first person to tell him no.

Neco subtly poked the shit out of me not to react. Yeah, Neco got that better than anyone. If someone tried that around him, they ended up dead.

“How long was the wedding?”

“Lower Cutwart weddings are from sundown to sun up. When we got back, their front door was kicked in, so my husband went in to check. He came out vomiting and said it was terrible.”

“Thank you. Be safe until we can take care of the Ghoul.”

“I’ll feel much safer with a big, strapping lad like you protecting us.”

Gross. Someone died.

Neco grabbed my elbow and practically yanked me out of this house. If he didn’t want me to fuck up his face again, he was going to need to not manhandle me.

I really didn’t want to look at a crime scene, especially not when I knew how brutal it

was going to be, but I guess I was doing this.

## Page 17

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I had a lot of respect for the girls at the brothel.

Keeva told me if I wanted to do this and get away with it, I was going to have to use my looks and let strangers touch me.

My first instinct was to throw someone through a wall if they touched me and I didn't know them.

I'd been doing this for years now to figure out how to get close to someone and I still wasn't used to it.

It never didn't feel like bugs were crawling on my skin.

I got what we needed and got us out of there. And Lance looked like he wanted to punch me in the face again and I didn't know why this time. I punched him in the face and I let him hit me back twice. We should be square and there should be no more face punching.

“First of all, fuck you. Secondly, don't manhandle me.”

“Shit, sorry. I just needed to get out of there. The woman who trained me to do this tried to help with the whole ‘strangers touching me’ thing, but I still hate it. The women always do it. I try to get what I need and get out of there as fast as I can.”

At least he looked like he got it instead of wanting to maim my face again.

“Yeah, you've always been like that. Maybe the next one will think I'm sexier than

you and I can deal with it. Let's go look at the crime scene."

I didn't know why any of these women found me attractive. I was missing an eye and when this woman met me, Lance had mangled my face. Panas reset my nose, but that and my eyes were purple and swollen. She still zeroed in on me instead of Lance, who shouldn't be allowed to be that beautiful.

I lived with women and I was going to marry one someday, but I really didn't understand them at all. Maybe that was why everyone I had marrying feelings towards were men, even if Lance Argent hated me and confused the shit out of me.

At least he didn't look like he wanted to head butt me again.

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Ronan risked his life and came to the tavern for lunch to tell me Neco's big secret. Yeah, I made no excuses for him. We were all stupid when it came to Lucy and Lucy was keeping secrets, too.

Lucy didn't know she was keeping a secret when everything went down with Neco.

She found out at the same time when her period started.

If Neco had gotten his head out of his arse and apologized for hitting her, she would have apologized again for what she said and the giant moron could have just asked her if she knew who her father was.

Lucy probably wouldn't have told him it was Folcard because the man was an utter shite and I wouldn't name drop him either and risk a curse. She would have told Neco they weren't related if he named his.

The Barons thought they were superior to women for some reason, but we were idiots sometimes.

Anyway, this called for one of my brilliant plans. One that Caitrin and the Madame weren't going to thump me in the head over because we ended up in the cells again. We all wanted Neco back. Neco wanted Neco back now that he knew he wasn't lusting after his half-sibling.

We just needed to wear our girlfriend down. Our stubborn, beautiful woman could hold a grudge better than Petunia. I'd never betray her and tell Neco she wasn't Lance, but Neco was never going to grovel like she needed while he thought he just

punched Lance in the face.

I suggested Lucy take Neco and Beck and Ronan told Neco to help her instead of getting in her way. Ronan snitched and said Neco set off for Lower Cutwart to find Lucy. Lucy was stubborn, but she wasn't stupid. Neco might have trouble walking after she dick punched him, but she'd accept his help.

Right? Lucy was really mad at Neco.

But this is why we were so good together as a group. I had that kind of face where people spilled their deepest secrets to me. Lucy and Neco were holdouts, but I knew theirs now.

I needed to get all of us together. I could get them talking and Beck could walk them through processing their shit.

Ronan could toss in some nuggets about how anger rotted your gut and maybe suggest some mutual revenge they could get on each other so they felt better since Ronan was a sneaky shit who didn't get angry, he got revenge.

Lucy promised to be back by the time we got busy, which was in two hours. Lucy was always punctual, and she always kept her word.

So, I waltzed into the kitchen and roped Basselt into my plan because if Neco came back with her, I needed a reason for him to stay so this worked.



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The bodies were gone, but the house was still graphically violent. There was blood spatter everywhere, but the Ghoul had also painted things on the wall with the blood. It was disturbing, and I wasn't with someone I could go to for comfort.

Neco might be used to this, but I wasn't. Neco got what he needed and got out of the neighbor's house. I needed to do the same and then I could go home to people who could comfort me.

"Are you getting anything from this?" I asked.

"Loads."

"You going to share, asshole?"

"Not here. No one needs to see this."

"Even you?" I demanded.

Neco mopped his hand over his face and kind of looked like he wanted to hit me.

"I don't do this, Lance. Someone acts up in Guttertown and I do my due diligence.

Most of the men who were hurting people in Guttertown were hurting their family behind closed doors.

I find out how to get into their houses without alerting their families so I don't have to worry about witnesses. I'm careful.

“Listen to me. I have never killed an innocent person and if Nestran’s justice system actually worked, I wouldn’t be killing anyone.

I don’t know how the Ghoul is picking his victims, but he enjoys killing.

Unless we work together and stop him, he’s going to escalate, and this is going to happen in more houses.

This is putting me in a rotten mood and I need a drink.

Let’s get back to the Whispering Raven.”

Ugh. Neco figured something out, but he decided to go all ‘strong and silent’-type while we were making the walk back to Guttertown.

“You’re really going to make me wait until we get back to my tavern to talk to me?”

“We can talk about anything except what we just saw. You never know who is listening in public, Lance. Sometimes, it’s me and I have a code.

It might be someone who doesn’t. The Ghoul hasn’t gone after Trevils because he’s mostly protected by the Barons but I’m betting he’d have no problem getting rid of two Guttertown brats who were looking into him. ”

“Fuck, Neco. Way to be terrifying.”

“I meant to be. I get you’re scared for your mom, but you aren’t scared enough about the Ghoul. I know things went to shit, but if you’re going to do this, I want you to do it with me.”

I just grunted because it made sense. I should be scared. The tavern was deliberately

hard to break into because desperate people were motivated. We shuttered the windows at night and it was much harder to kick our door in than it was the house I just left.

The tavern was also in a high traffic area of Guttertown and right next door to the brothel, where someone was always coming and going. It would be very hard to get to me, but we'd also only looked at one crime scene.

As far as I knew, Neco wasn't kicking doors in because no one in the house knew he was there. The Ghoul kicked in the door of that house, but he might have found another way in at other houses like Neco was doing.

Thanks, Neco, I was going to sleep super well tonight.

We didn't talk for the entire walk back. If you left Ollie alone and there wasn't a ton of work to do, he was usually plotting something. I think I would have preferred ending up in the cells again because he had a meal and tankards set out for three people like we were having a meal with Neco.

"Thanks, I'm famished and could use a drink," Neco said, strolling over to take a seat.

Did Petunia kick me in the head and I was dreaming all of this?

The Barons switching things up so that if I did this, I'd be free and clear and could live my life slinging drinks the way I wanted was one thing.

Neco letting me hit him twice and being civil to me?

Nah, I was having donkey-related hallucination dreams.

“It’s safe to talk now and you haven’t eaten all day,” Neco said.

Maybe Neco was the one who had been kicked in the head by a donkey.

Because I could get him wanting to keep Mom alive because that was just who he was, but he was almost acting like he used to when we were best friends.

That Neco paid attention if I got wrapped up in something and forgot to eat.

He brought it up more often than Mom did when we were kids.

I really didn’t want Neco to act like how he did when I used to love him and then go back to hating me when this was over. I couldn’t go through that again.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Ollie had a plan because Lucy left him with no supervision and not a ton of work to do because Basselt was handling a lot of it.

This was actually a good one that wasn't going to piss off my mother because we ended up in the cells again.

This one might actually reunite the little makeshift family we formed when we were kids.

We knew Neco wanted it. We just needed to be a buffer so Lucy didn't fly off and assault him and we needed to coax it out the big guy that he was such a dick to her because he thought he was lusting after his half-brother. Then, we needed to find a way for Lucy to tell Neco her secret.

Of course, the more minds involved catching the Ghoul, the sooner this was over.

And we all brought different things to the table.

They were already eating when Ronan and I got to the tavern and I wasn't faulting anyone for that.

Lucy and Neco both tended to get engrossed in something and forgot to eat.

Ollie wasn't stupid. He wasn't going to keep them there without offering them food and he wasn't going to get between them and food while waiting for us to get there. Lucy might bite him and Neco killed people. I loved my friends, but I wasn't doing that for them, either.

They'd barely gotten started when we got there and Lucy was already looking like she might want to stab Neco with the butter knife. Ollie was smart enough to sit between them, but Lucy looked like she might want to stab him, too.

Ronan and I rushed to grab a bowl and serve ourselves before someone started bleeding. Lucy pointed her spoon at Neco and I didn't think she could stab him with that.

"Talk," she demanded.

"Eat," Neco grunted.

Oh, we were doing this again. Neco usually got wrapped up in caring for other people in his own way and Lucy got wrapped up in feeding them or getting them drunk.

When we were kids, they both called each other on forgetting to eat and refused to let them do anything until they put something in their mouth.

Lucy knew and remembered because she got this pained look on her face before she hid it. I was about to say something to get everyone's mind on something more civilized, when Lucy shoved a massive piece of bread in her mouth and started chewing like she'd been raised in a barn.

"Oh, fine. I'll tell you so you don't choke to death being a brat. The Ghoul is a Baron or one of their kids. They either don't know or they are bringing us in to pin it on someone else."

"I thought you were just going to the house in Lower Cutwart," Ronan asked.

"We did," Lucy said. "I don't know how he figured that out, either."

“Because seven people died in that house. Two were women and one was a kid. If someone kicks your door in and you haven’t broken the law and expect someone to kick your door in, then you’re going to get the women and kids out while the men take care of the interloper.

The rest of the people in the house were sons who were either of marrying age or close, according to Trevils.

“The father and the sons would have protected their domicile and their family. It’s human nature, and they’d be within their right to in most cases. They’d also outnumber the Ghoul, so unless the Ghoul is more than one person, the Ghoul would be dead instead of that entire family.

“There was also no sign a fight went down like you’d expect.

It looked like someone kicked the door down, they came out ready to fight and then just didn’t.

They didn’t run, either. It was like they sat there and let him kill them.

I’m guessing he promised to spare the rest of the family and just lied.

“He has to be a Baron or connected to them because if anyone else kicked their door in, they’d believed this person broke in to kill them.

If they didn’t kill the Ghoul, he’d be believed no matter what he said and if they did, the Barons would just make up a story he was innocent.

They’d make an example out of that entire family.

The men had to have thought they were sacrificing themselves for their family. ”

Fuck. I didn't doubt Neco at all. He'd always been observant and Aunt Keeva finally admitted she didn't just bake cakes. She also said Neco hadn't asked her to teach him how to get away with crime in Nestran, he was pretty well suited at a job solving them should he choose.

Most of my friends didn't know my aunt trained Neco, and I was keeping that to myself because I didn't really want to piss the women in my family off before I knew Keeva was an assassin. You didn't want to piss off most women from the Jagged Key Isles. I knew better.

"Shit, this is bad," Lucy said.

Lucy wasn't fighting Neco because it wasn't the time.

Folcard was expecting Lucy to bring him a name so he could decide what to do with it.

If the Ghoul was one of them, they'd pick someone they had a problem with, pin it on him, leave his family destitute, and just tell the Ghoul to make his mess where no one would care.

That meant Guttertown. That also meant Neco couldn't kill him like he wanted.

"So, we just need to come up with a really good plan then," Ollie said.

We all just stared at Ollie. His plans usually landed us in the cells.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Fuck me. I wasn't exactly sure how I saw all of this going down, but after seeing that crime scene, I guess I had this idea of Neco doing his thing, presenting my father with the body, and demanding the cure since we technically got rid of the Ghoul.

It felt good having the five of us together again, but it wouldn't last. Neco never changed his mind once he set it on something. It would go back to avoiding each other or screaming matches when this was over. So, I was letting him help and not reading too much into it.

We needed a plan, and it needed to be good or the Ghoul would be moving to Guttertown and there would be nothing we could do about it.

"Honestly, I'd prefer if you'd all just let me handle it. I didn't just start killing bad people one day. I was trained by the best. You're all smart and amazing at what you do. I can't do most of it. I can do this," Neco said.

Hold the fuck up. Someone taught Neco how to kill people? Neco not only knew a killer in Guttertown, but when he walked up to them and asked to apprentice like it was a job like a blacksmith, they said yes?

What was happening right now?

"No," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't know who is offering serial killer apprenticeships in Guttertown, but nothing

is fucking normal right now.

Use your brain. They might not want their own personal serial killer.

They could have given you that name because they know the Ghoul is one of them and they are planning on pinning all of it on you once that name is dead. ”

“Shit, this is why you need us,” Ollie said. “You totally would have killed that guy and now you know you need to wait. You didn’t already kill him, did you?”

“No. Fuck! I don’t just pick a target and kill them.

There’s an art to it. I have to get a measure of them.

I have to figure out their schedule and how to get into their houses with no witnesses.

I learn their families’ schedules so they don’t catch me.

I haven’t had time because I’ve been chasing Lance. ”

Dick.

“ You’re welcome,” I drawled.

“We need to work as a team,” Ronan said. “I don’t know what excuse you give when you’re outside of Guttertown, but everyone knows I’m an artist. I can give Lance some smaller paintings and that can be his cover. It’ll keep the Ghoul and arseholes off him.”

“I can handle arseholes.”

They all glared at me like I was a fucking idiot.

“What? I’ve been tossing drunks since I was thirteen.”

“Different kind of asshole. These aren’t drunk, they’re just mad you’re beautiful and they like it,” Neco grunted.

I just ignored the fuck out of that because Neco had been weird since we ended up getting our tasks together. Also, if Ronan also said that was true, then I was more likely to believe it.

“So, you know the Ghoul is related to the Barons. What else do you know?” Beck asked.

I let Neco take this one since this was his domain and sometimes, getting him to talk was like pulling teeth. I was pretty sure he hadn’t shared everything he’d refused to tell me on the walk home.

“I have to visit other crime scenes and talk to more people. Everyone talked about Elsbeth and there’s a rumor there was a girl her age among the victims, but that might not mean anything.

We know he used a wedding in Lower Cutwart to avoid getting caught.

It’s amateur, but I can see the logic in it if you’re a psychopath.

I need to see what he did in the Merchant District. ”

“Explain,” Beck said.

“People have lots of kids and they keep trying until they have several sons.

Sometimes, it's to help run the family business and sometimes, it's for marriage alliances. Sometimes, there's a house on the property for the kids, but sometimes, they all live under the same roof.

"It's possible to get in and take out your target without alerting the whole house, but it's a skill you have to learn.

The Ghoul enjoys killing. He might just be picking his victims by whoever didn't attend some big event.

They wanted to keep Elsbeth away from the groom, but there's always someone who isn't there.

Someone is feuding and didn't get invited, the kids are in a bad mood, or someone is sick. "

Neco was actually really good at this. I might actually be able to pull this off with his help.

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Ollie talked his uncle into lending us horses for the frequent trips we'd be taking to the Merchant District while we sorted this. Ollie's uncle had always been family, so he would have said yes, but he was apparently all in when he heard Neco was involved.

"What's going on with you and Ollie's uncle?"

I mean, we could talk about that, right? It had nothing to do with the Ghoul. He wasn't going to be a dick and ignore me the whole ride just because he could.

"Rowena. She's got some puppy love going with Ollie's cousin and she's been offered an apprenticeship with their horses."

"Seriously? I'm happy for her. Your sister hates my guts and has assaulted me more than once, but I like her."

Neco puffed out his chest and grinned proudly.

"She's only supposed to finish it if someone starts it, but she's also protective of me."

I looked at him like he was utterly insane.

"I'm guessing she doesn't know what you do at night, but she does have eyes. The only person in Guttertown bigger than you is Autar, and he's a giant marshmallow, so he doesn't count."

"You know the Madame was nice to him once, and he asked her to marry him?"

I laughed so hard, I nearly fell off my horse. I was going to drag Autar so hard for that the next time he came to the tavern and told me I knew nothing about women. The Madame thought marriage was an unfair legal arrangement that only benefitted men.

“Did she hit him? Or ask Panas to hit him?”

Neco just snorted.

“That woman can destroy a man without laying a finger on him. But no, she was nice to him. The Madame told Autar he couldn’t handle her, and she’d eat him alive. He looked like he might tell her he was into that, but he opted not to say it.”

“I keep telling him one of those women is going to castrate him one day, and he keeps telling me I don’t understand women.”

“Autar isn’t one of your lovers, too, right?”

“Gross. I’m not spilling his secrets, but it would be wrong for us to be together. And Autar is so into women, I don’t know why you think he’d give me a second look.”

Even if Autar ever found out my secret, we were probably related and even if we weren’t, I wasn’t his type. If I grew out my hair and started wearing dresses, I still wouldn’t be his type.

Neco just grunted and decided he was done talking to me. I didn’t know what set him off this time, but I was enjoying talking to him again. There were just as many interesting stories if you worked in the brothel as there were if you worked in the tavern.

We didn’t have to talk about us or what went wrong. We didn’t have to say a damned

thing about what would happen after this, even though I was dying to know. We could just share funny stories like my half-brother asking the Madame to marry him and Neco decided he didn't want to do that anymore.

Neco didn't want to make friends or make up. He was doing this for Mom and nothing else.

Message received.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

I t didn't use to be this hard talking to Lance. I didn't assume anything about anyone after spending so much time in a brothel. I saw so many people put on one face on the streets and a totally different one in the brothel where they knew their secrets weren't going to get out.

The Madame ran a discreet service. No one whispered about who or what someone was into and if you didn't want to be seen going in, you just slipped a note to someone from the Jagged Key Isles and they got it to the Madame so she could sneak you in.

I didn't know Lance was into men until I found out he had boyfriends. Autar could have been, too, and maybe I was just a little jealous because even though women kept turning down his marriage proposals, everyone loved him. So, I just blurted it out and asked.

There was only ever one reason Guttertown found it wrong for people to be together and it had been the reason I'd been pushing him away for so long. I wasn't going to ask because it was Autar's secret, but Autar and Lance were related somehow.

Thus, I just shut up, so I didn't say anything else stupid and apparently, that was the wrong thing, too, because I could feel Lance glaring at my back. I didn't know what to say to him anymore, so I was just going to save his mom and go from there.

Getting from Guttertown to the Merchant District was much easier on horseback than walking. I didn't mind the walk because I usually didn't mind my own company. It just took a while. Going with Lance and wanting to talk, but not knowing what to say so I didn't make things worse was agonizing.



In hindsight, maybe Beck and Ronan were right, and I was a bit of an idiot for letting this go on until I knew for sure Lance and I weren't related. Lance might never forgive me, even though I let him break my nose.

Thankfully, we got to the Merchant District before the silence got too awkward.

We hitched the horses, but I didn't steer us to the first crime scene.

Trevils would be eating lunch now and I had some questions for the old fox.

He didn't tell us everything he knew last time, probably because he thought we'd be the Ghoul's next target.

"You again?" he grumped.

"If I figured out the Ghoul is a Baron or one of their kids and is possibly using weddings or name-day celebrations to avoid witnesses, then I know damned well you did, too."

Trevils looked shocked for a minute.

"Kid, I have no idea what your father has planned for you since you told me they changed the rules, but you'd make a hell of an apprentice if you wanted to learn to do what I do."

Lance just snorted because he knew Trevils was also trying to catch me, but Trevils also wasn't wrong because Keeva tried to convince me to do the same thing before she agreed to take me as her apprentice.

"Why didn't you share that with us?" Lance demanded. "My mom could die."

“Because I’ve been doing this since before you were born and know how this works.

You walk in there with proof it’s one of them and they will tell you that you failed your task.

I’m sorry to be harsh, but they will never save your mom if it’s one of them.

You give them a name and they are going to give the public one they have a problem with. ”

I already knew that and was trying to come up with a plan to expose the Ghoul in a way they couldn’t pin it on an innocent. I just hadn’t told Lance because he was already stressed and my plans usually worked.

“Do you think they know and are planning to pin this on Neco?” Lance asked.

That was his theory, and it was a good one. I was a little mad at myself for not considering it myself because I usually planned for everything.

“They didn’t like it when I told them there were two of them. I think they always have a fall guy prepared when I’m looking into something in case it’s one of them. They seemed put out that they were going to have to find two people this time. I haven’t said anything because I need a plan.

“If I catch both of them, I’m pretty sure I can convince them to pin it all on the Blight instead of an innocent person.

On the other hand, I’ve seen the bruises on the women and kids of the Blight’s victims. Even if they came to me for help, I can’t legally do anything about it because the Barons consider them property.

It's confusing the fuck out of me because I've devoted my life to catching murderers, but I also think abusive men should pay, too.

I don't have a plan at this point and I don't even know who did it. ”

Yeah, he'd never figure out I was the Blight and I'd be damned if I swung for the Ghoul's crimes.

I didn't think anyone else should, either.

The Ghoul fit my code and once I found out who he was, I could easily slit his throat, but he was too high profile.

They'd never pin it on me, but they'd hang someone for it.

Probably some poor idiot who stood up to them and hadn't done anything wrong.

We didn't just need to name the Ghoul. He'd just be relocated to Guttertown while either myself or some other poor sap hung for it.

We needed to expose him in a way the Barons could never cover this up.

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Trevils realized Neco was actually good at this, so he was being a lot more honest with us. If it had been just me, he would have thought I was some stupid kid who was going to lose their mom no matter what happened, so he was going to shut me out to keep me from being the Ghoul's next target.

Working with Neco was painful because the whole time I hated him, I also desperately missed him. I was grateful for it now, even though it was going to hurt like fuck when things went back to how they were when this was over.

Trevils was directing most of this at Neco and I wasn't even angry about it. Neco was good at this and he'd always been intelligent in ways I wasn't. I was seeing that even more now that he was an adult. I just had this feeling if anyone could get my mom the cure, it was going to be Neco.

"So, you're being wasted in whatever job your father is putting you in for payment, kid. I had a Baron pegged after the first scene because there was no sign of a struggle and that's just not natural, but it took two crime scenes to figure out no one saw anything because of weddings or name days."

Neco just shrugged.

"That was just a theory. I wasn't going to be sure until I talked to other neighbors."

"I already have and you were right."

"Do you know how he's picking them?" I asked. "In Lower Cutwart, everyone seemed to think Elsbeth was special because she was beautiful. The only reason they

were home was because they didn't want the groom to ditch the bride for her. Was it similar in the other cases?"

"No. They all had beautiful girls around that age, but they were home for different reasons. In one of the cases, the girl was beautiful on the outside and nasty on the inside and had burned a lot of bridges with her neighbors. No one wanted their family there.

"Another case people loved the kids, but found the parents insufferable so the kids got punished for it. The rest were because Devil's Pox is going around the Merchants District.

Not everyone is taking the quarantine period seriously.

People are still having wedding and name days, but if they suspect you have it, they won't invite you. "

I wouldn't, either. Devil's Pox wasn't fatal, it was just a nuisance. It was a lot of pus, mucous, and itching and it was highly contagious. You had to quarantine for a fortnight before you didn't give it to someone else.

There was no excuse in the Merchant District.

It was pretty miserable in Guttertown because we had no books and there weren't many free ways to entertain yourself.

Sometimes, people showed up at the tavern or brothel and we had to make them leave.

The Merchant District had books and art.

They could amuse themselves while they were forced to stay in their rooms.

So, great, now I had to deal with potentially getting Devil's Pox.

"So, we know how he's getting away with not being seen, but there has to be more to how he's picking them," Neco said. "If Devil's Pox is going around the Merchants District, then it would be easy picking for him when he wanted to kill. There was no reason for him to move to Lower Cutwart.

"The Barons and the merchants mostly just pass through it when they come to Guttertown for the brothel or they've found out our tavern is better than theirs.

A potential wife would be the only reason they were there, so that all leads back to Elsbeth, who her very horny neighbor was sure hadn't picked yet."

Trevils threw back his head and laughed. Probably because he didn't know Neco hated being touched by strangers and he was one of the killers he was hunting.

"Getting some of my answers used to be a lot easier when I was younger and more attractive as long as my wife knew it didn't mean anything and it was for the case.

But you're right. There was no reason to move to Lower Cutwart with Devil's Pox making its way through the Merchant's District unless we're dealing with a smart psychopath."

"What's a smart psychopath?" I asked.

"Well, the finger paintings on the wall could mean something in his twisted mind or he might just be pure evil and is leaving them to taunt me. Lower Cutwart doesn't make sense when he's been mostly using Devil's Pox in the Merchants District.

“Maybe it’s not supposed to. It could be he was one of Elsbeth’s suitors and that was how she was chosen. He could just be playing with me by switching things up. This could also just be because he was bored and wanted a challenge.”

“Sorry, but wouldn’t we just need to look at which Baron or their relatives have Devil’s Pox?

” I asked. “They rarely come to the Merchants District. They usually send one of their men or send for someone. If Devil’s Pox is going around, they wouldn’t do business with them until it dies down.

If someone is sneaking out, they would have caught it by now. ”

“Good point, kid. The Barons are particular about diseases their healers can’t cure.

They’ve got this salve for the pustules, but it only brings everything down a slight bit.

If one of them caught it after they gave the order to steer clear, they’d lock them in their dungeon until it was over because they also consider it embarrassing for one of them to be seen like that. ”

“Unless it was a head of house,” Neco said.

“Not all of them inherit the big title. They get lands and minor titles. But that would rule out being in Lower Cutwart for Elsbeth because they don’t get that until they are married.

The Barons tend to only care about the first-born son, so they wouldn’t check in on the spares much. ”

“That much is true,” Trevils said. “But also, it has to be one of them or they would

have fought back. At the same time, when word got out Devil's Pox was going around, I haven't seen any of them around."

"Are you fancy enough to know all of them?" I asked.

Because seriously, most people weren't. Leodos was the fanciest person I knew, and he didn't know a lot of the younger ones that didn't matter to their fathers. Leodos also hated those people, so he also didn't bother.

"I'm Lower Cutwart, born and bred. There's not a single thing fancy about me. I am, however, very observant and good at my job."

Neco just nodded.

"He can't arrest them, but it's good to know who they are and keep an eye on them just in case."

"That makes sense. And I'm sorry. That's probably miserable."

Trevils just shrugged.

"Most of the spares are less entitled than the heirs, but some are very ambitious. They'd do just about anything for their father's attention and to get their brother disinherited."

"'Rich people' drama is weird," Neco grunted. "I'd die for my sister. If my momma or sister ever need anything from my father again, I'll find a way to pay him back twice."

'Rich people' drama was weird, but I didn't want Neco chained to his father any more than he already was, even though he seemed happy with the arrangement he



was given.

“So, that’s all I have,” Trevils said. “You figured out a lot of it, but that’s where I’m stuck. I couldn’t tell you which Baron it is and I don’t know what I’m going to do when I figure it out. Someone is going to pay for his crimes with their life and it’s not going to be him.”

“You said I’m good at this, right?” Neco said. “I’m also not the law and I’m Guttertown born and bred. I’m going to come up with something and you might not want to be involved because they are going to be pissed. No need for you to lose your job.”

“If you kill him, even if you catch him in the act, they will pin all of it on you and hang you.”

Neco just grinned like a psychopath.

“I’m not going to lay a finger on him.”

Now that I knew a lot more of Neco Argent’s secrets, I had a feeling one of them was going to pay for their crimes for the first time ever.

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I loved painting, and this was probably the biggest commission of my life. It was also the most enjoyable. Most people wanted me to do portraits, and I was getting bored with those. Everyone wanted to be posed the same, and they always wanted me to make them look better than they did in real life.

I was just distracted today. Lucy and Neco could handle themselves. Now that I knew Neco's secret, I'd bet on him against any serial killer. It was their slimy fathers I didn't like. I didn't like their deal, either.

It was never a one and done with them. They used their kids until they couldn't anymore. Neco seemed happy with the arrangement because now it was totally clear he was an assassin instead of a serial killer. I didn't really see the difference, but he seemed sensitive about it.

Neco's deal I could understand. It was Lucy's I was worried about.

I knew they wanted the Ghoul gone, but Trevils was a legend among the Guttertown kids.

He was more qualified to catch a killer than any of us.

He might not have caught him yet, but he would.

Neco was some kind of murder savant, but Trevils would eventually catch him, too, and find out he had a free pass.

So, I didn't like this.

I hardly got any work done and then walked over to the tavern with Beck.

Everyone would just have time to eat and plan for whatever was learned in the Merchant District before they had to deal with their busy times at their respective jobs.

I would have gone back to painting, but I was too distracted.

Maybe I'd hear something that settled my mind.

I knew Basselt was a banished Theran who might be able to seriously help Guttertown with remedies, but right now, I appreciated him helping Lucy and Caitrin.

Ollie was waiting with food and he was up to something again.

He was good at not spreading people's business if he heard it at the tavern, but he was also rotten at keeping secrets with the people he loved.

Yeah, he exploded as soon as Beck and I sat down and admitted Basselt was on the case, even if Lucy told him not to. Damn. She was going to be furious.

"She's taking away your taste tester privileges, and she's probably banning you from sex until she calms down," I said.

Yeah, that was one thing about Lucy. She didn't like people going behind her back and thinking they knew better than her. Most of the time, we didn't, but sometimes, we did. She was stubborn sometimes if she thought she was protecting someone. She eventually calmed down and admitted she was wrong.

Lucy threatened to take away our taste testing privileges all the time, but she never did. It was almost a joke. This was just a high-stress situation.

I was a little shocked when Lucy and Neco walked in with Inspector Trevils, but I was also glad he was working with them. I just hoped he didn't look at Neco too hard.

"Ollie, can you get Trevils some stew and a Bloody Mary?"

"I'm excited," Trevils said. "A few people have come back with stories about the Bloody Mary and the taverns have been trying to recreate it. Their attempts are completely vile, but they are still selling them. They only take them off the menu and try again when someone who has actually had one tells them it's disgusting.

Like the rest of us had no taste buds when we told them. "

I liked Trevils. He was low key, and I was picking up a Lower Cutwart accent. Ollie brought out another bowl and a tankard. Trevils moaned, and I liked him a bit more. They served good food at the Whispering Raven, but Basselt was a pretty amazing cook. He kept up with Caitrin and Lucy just fine.

"This smells divine. I've heard talk of the Bloody Mary, but I'm a little scared to drink it."

"I'll tell you a little secret. They are never going to be able to recreate it outside the Whispering Raven unless I tell them how.

It has a new spirit I created in it. I'm working on other recipes with it and they aren't going to be able to steal those either unless I tell them how to make the spirit," Lucy said.

"No shit? I can safely say this here, but the Barons have more money and power than they do sense. I can think of much better options for the two of you than the ones your fathers gave you. Neco should be my apprentice and you should be learning

alchemy.”

Um, because he didn’t know Neco was the Blight. We were all looking at Trevils like he was a bit mental. Neco was good at looking at crime scenes because he caused them on the regular.

Lucy just shrugged.

“The Argent kids hate the Barons more than the rest of Nestran. They don’t swoop into Guttertown and woo our mothers with false promises.

Guttertown women aren’t dumb enough to fall for that.

They aren’t given a choice. If one of them sets their eyes on a woman, she doesn’t have the option to say no.

They also know damned well how to prevent a baby unless someone sabotages them. It’s rape.”

Trevils looked stunned.

“I never thought about it like that and I apologize.”

Yeah, I liked Trevils. He didn’t try to correct her about her lived experience like someone outside of Guttertown would. I had a feeling if he knew she wasn’t a man, he’d have the exact same reaction.

“So, what happened?” Ollie blurted out.

Because Ollie secretly loved gossip just as much as I did, especially when it didn’t come with some traumatizing mental images of Guttertown residents.

“We’re all going to be fucked over, but especially Mom, unless we can trick them,” Lucy snarled.

Yeah, everyone immediately knew what that meant and it soured the mood. The Ghoul was one of them and they protected their own, even when they fucked up.

“I’m not sure you can,” Trevils sighed. “I’ve been trying to figure that out since I took my position.”

Neco was just grinning like a psycho and he had this in the bag.

“You didn’t work with Guttertown brats before.”

Trevils just grunted and drained his Bloody Mary. He was going to have problems getting home drinking it that fast, but Neco was right.

The Guttertown brats were pretty motivated to fuck the Barons over and keep the Ghoul off our streets.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Mom wasn't back at one hundred percent, but she was definitely feeling better and not coughing up blood anymore because she was meddling.

She was my best friend, and I'd never felt the need to keep secrets from her.

If she asked me something and I wasn't ready to answer it yet, she accepted and just waited until I was. I appreciated that.

"This could be your opportunity to make up with Neco," she said. "You both fucked up, but this feud has gone on too long."

"You're feeling spunky. Neco doesn't want to make up."

Before Mom could say anything, there was a knock on the door.

It was Basselt and Ollie. Basselt was here with food and tea for Mom and Ollie was here for me.

I gave Mom a look and mouthed something about stepdads before I left.

She flicked her middle finger at me and laughed.

Yeah, she was definitely feeling better.

"What's going on?" I asked, stepping out of our apartment.

It was the Day of Respect, so I couldn't make money with my tavern and I couldn't

dig into the Ghoul, either, because it was considered work. I kept trying to take care of my mother because she nearly died and still could, and she kept attempting to boot me out our flat to make up with Neco.

I had no intention of leaving her alone, but then Basselt showed up and he was definitely someone I wanted to leave my mother alone with. And only part of that was because he was a skilled healer. Basselt and Mom deserved to be happy.

“We’re kidnapping you. We have the whole thing planned. The Day of Respect sucks financially and the Barons don’t deserve it. We’re turning it into a day to respect each other. ”

“I like that, but shouldn’t I have been on the planning so I can respect all of you as well?”

“You will, in the future. Today is all about you since you have so much to stress about. I asked and Basselt said Caitrin is stable. If she stays that way, he can make the cure. You’re going to catch the Ghoul and we’re all going to figure out how to make him pay.

But we’re not thinking about any of that tonight. It’s forbidden. I will spank you.”

“We played in a brothel as kids, Ollie. Some people are into that. I might be.”

Ollie’s nostrils flared.

“That’s cheating,” he muttered. “We’re going to the brothel first. We worked it out with the Madame.”

“Um, you’re not bringing another girl in, are you? Because that would expose me. I know the girls there are a fortress at keeping secrets, but I’m not comfortable with



anyone else knowing right now.”

“Do you trust us?”

“Yes.”

“We’d never expose you like that and we’re also kind of possessive. I’m okay with Beck and Ronan touching you and I’d be okay with it if you and Neco made up and he joined us. I’m not violent, but I might be if anyone saw you like that. Actually, I definitely would be. We all would.”

Wow, so yeah, Ronan was the least violent of us. He avoided fights and got his revenge without laying a finger on you. Ollie was next. He’d usually give someone a chance to calm down and one free punch before he reacted. Beck never started it, but he would finish it.

It was a little comforting they were all that protective of me.

Ollie brought me to the back of the brothel where the Madame, Beck, and Panas kept their living quarters. I didn’t know what we were doing until Ollie let me into the bath house.

I was shocked it was free. Beck had a big family outside of the Madame.

They used the bath house all the time. I always wanted to take a bath here, but they all thought I was a man and it felt weird asking to use it alone since no one else did.

Also, I wasn’t related to them to ask to use their bath in the first place.

This was basically the fanciest, best kept secret in Guttertown. It was a little slice of the Jagged Key Isles, a place I’d never see. The Barons didn’t even have something

like this because they didn't bathe that often.

It smelled amazing in here. It smelled like Beck because he soaked in the perfumed waters daily. He was already lounging naked with Ronan.

"Hey, beautiful. I get why you never asked to bathe here now, but I could always tell you wanted to. Get in."

"Wait, you've all been bathing here?"

"Not a lot," Ollie said. "There's usually a schedule and we can't always get here when it's Beck's turn."

"I swapped with Aunt Keeva because she traumatized me and owes me," Beck said.

"What did she do?"

Because Keeva was not nearly as scary as her sister. She usually had sweets for us and always thought it was amusing when we cut up. She was honestly probably one of the nicest women in Guttertown. I couldn't see her saying or doing anything to traumatize someone like Beck.

"So, I'm not going to spill a woman's secrets without her permission, but she's got some dual training from my ancestors. She's only really using the baking, but she could use the other if she wanted. Anyway, I don't want to talk about it because it still disturbs me. Get naked and join us."

They'd all seen me naked, but we hadn't had time aside from once in the barn.

I'd been too busy with Mom and then Folcard gave me his task.

I wanted them again. I didn't think Mom would care if she overheard anything if I invited them to my bedroom.

She'd probably be happy for me and never say a thing about it.

I just felt like it was a little rude to make my mother hear my sex noises since she told me how long she'd been in labor with me.

I didn't know why I was shy right now. They'd seen all this before.

They told me how much they liked it. I'd seen plenty of naked women playing in the brothel.

I knew I didn't look bad, even if I had to hide it.

It was just weird exposing myself to them because I had to spend so much time hiding it.

Ollie came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

"You don't have to. You can just roll your trousers up and put your feet in."

No. I wasn't passing up something I'd been wanting to do for most of my life with people I loved because I was still getting used to not hiding around them. I pulled out of Ollie's arms and yanked my shirt off. Ollie traced the edge of my binding with his finger.

"You're beautiful as Lucy or Lance, but I hope one day, you don't have to wear this because it looks like it hurts."

It was uncomfortable, and I had scars, but I was used to it.

If I could ever stop wearing it, I'd jump at the chance, though.

I went to take it off, which was always a pain, but Ollie stepped in to help.

He wasn't as big as Neco or Autar, but he was still bigger than me and muscular from helping out on his uncle's farm. He was still just so gentle.

Once I was naked, I was fine. I didn't want to cover myself up. I liked the way they looked at me. I felt beautiful. I felt like Lucy.

I groaned as I sank into the pool. We bathed more often than most of Nestran because we had easier access to water. The palace had decent access and I couldn't imagine royalty walking around as ripe as the Barons and merchants did, but I'd never meet them to confirm they didn't stink.

We could either bathe in the ocean or haul water home. Unless you had access to this. The Madame had a pit cut into the ground and lined with stones. She filled it with water and perfumed oil.

This was the most luxurious thing I'd ever done. I was figuring out when Beck had his baths scheduled so I could sneak over if it didn't interfere with the tavern.

"You can bathe with me whenever you want, but you can't make that noise unless you want sex with your bath," Beck growled.

"That was definitely a sex noise," Ollie said.

"It really was, Lucy," Ronan said.

Yeah, maybe I was feeling a little more confident than I originally thought. We'd known each other since we were babies. I rested my arms out on the sides of the pool

and gave them a good look. I really was just enjoying the bath, but if they wanted to go there, I wasn't going to stop them.

"Maybe it was supposed to be," I purred.

I might have been pretending to be Lance, but Lucy paid attention at the brothel just in case Lance ever got to go away. They all started swearing.

"Well, we were going to wash you after you'd soaked a bit, but not if you're going to have a filthy mouth," Ronan said.

"Maybe you should put something in it to shut me up."

We hadn't done that last time, but I knew it was something men liked. I wanted to try it. Ollie stood up so fast, he tripped over Ronan and ended up in Beck's lap. My mouth went dry.

I knew they were together, too, because they told me, but they'd kept that from me because they didn't want me to feel left out before. I wanted to see it. I thought it would be sexy, but I also had no idea what I was doing.

"Show me what you like."

"I have an idea," Ollie chuckled.

We were all naked, so I was pretty sure we weren't going to end up in the cells this time, but this was also one of Ollie's ideas and stranger things had happened before. Ollie stalked over to me, picked me up, and placed me on the side of the pool.

"I know what these arseholes like. They know what I like. We need to learn what you enjoy, so I'm going to figure that out while Ronan shows you how Beck likes it."

I let out a whimper because I very much wanted that. I locked eyes with Beck as Ollie and Ronan knelt before us.

“Ollie and Ronan love giving oral,” Beck said. “The only reason they aren’t fighting about it is because we’ll definitely do this again, but with them switching.”

Ollie devoured me. Beck and Ronan were standing where I could see everything. There was just something beautiful about watching a man as deadly as Beck receiving pleasure. If I was the one doing it, I wouldn’t be able to see it from this angle.

Oh, I definitely planned to be the one to do that to him. All of them really. The Madame had rules since kids also lived at the brothel. Everything had to be done in one of the rooms. If someone had a thing for doing it with an audience, they had to pay for another girl and go to one of the rooms.

So, I overheard a lot of shit, but I’d never actually seen any of it at the brothel. I’d seen a little, though. If someone was getting drunk and handsy at the tavern, we usually tossed them so they could go home and do what they wanted to do. Sometimes, they got as far as the alley.

I didn’t stare because that was weird. I just walked away. I was staring now. I was enthralled, even if it was really hard to concentrate. Ollie said he needed to figure out what I liked, but I seemed to enjoy everything he was doing. There wasn’t a single thing I’d change.

“Fuck!” I yelled.

I was about to lose my mind. Ollie was really good at this and the show I was getting was just egging me on. Beck grabbed Ronan’s head and just kind of started fucking his mouth.

“Pull his hair, Lucy. It sets him off and I promise, you’ll like it,” Beck growled.

I tangled my hands in Ollie’s golden locks.

I pulled him a little closer, but I also yanked his hair a bit.

Ollie went completely feral on my clit and I couldn’t hold on anymore.

I was trying to wait for Beck so I could see what sent him over the edge, but I was completely gone after I pulled Ollie’s hair.

I leaned back on my hands while I caught my breath. Ronan and Beck were smirking at me and Ollie was nuzzling my inner thigh like he was immensely pleased with himself. Yeah, he should be. Sometimes, he was proud of himself when he definitely shouldn’t be, but this time, yeah.

“We were going to bathe you and then feed you, but you changed the plans. We can keep going, but only if you’re ready.”

“I want to keep going, but I’ll say no if it’s something I don’t want. What did you have in mind?”

I gulped. They were all grinning at me like Neco did when he was thinking about killing someone.

That was a dangerous look.

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I shifted because I'd known these men my entire life. We'd bled together, fought together, and ended up in the cells together. I knew that look on their faces. It was trouble. But it was going to be the fun kind of trouble that I usually enjoyed.

"So, I actually planned for this and it works out now that I know Lucy isn't opposed to sucking a little dick," Ronan grinned.

Ronan's plans were just as devious as Ollie's were. We just usually didn't end up in the cells. Ollie's plans were general mayhem, but Ronan's plans were usually diabolical because someone had wronged him or someone he loved. He saw me staring at him.

"Oh, it's not that kind of plan."

"Thank fuck," I muttered.

"Okay, so tell me if this is too much. You take one of us in your mouth and one of us in your pussy. Whoever is left gets the arse of whoever got your pussy."

I just stared at Ronan.

"I mean, it's kind of that kind of plan, but I'm intrigued."

"Good, because I'll do whatever you fucking want for the rest of our lives if you agree," Ollie said.

Beck punched him.



“You act like if she says no, she’s never having sex with you again. She might say no now, but yes later. It’s a lot. She’s only had sex once, stupid.”

“Not really,” I pointed out. “My first time was with all three of you, just separately. We were going to do it together, eventually.”

“Yes, but we aren’t arseholes,” Beck said. “We’ve done this before and we want to do it with you, but not until you’re ready.”

“Sorry, but when have I been afraid to try an Ollie or Ronan idea?” I asked.

“I know this is different, but it’s really not.

We were a team before and now we’re more than that.

You’d never suggest something that would hurt me and even if a plan goes off the rails and we end up in the cells, I still had fun.

So, yeah. I want to try it. But I’m not picking who goes where. I’m never picking.”

Because that would implode everything. They were completely different men, and I loved them for different reasons. Losing one of them would be like losing a part of myself. I already did that with Neco and I wasn’t doing it again.

“That part’s easy,” Ollie smirked. “Beck is going to want your mouth, I’m going to want your pussy, and Ronan is going to be totally happy with my arse. We can switch it up later.”

“That easy?”

Ollie just laughed.

“So, we just thought you had exceptional control, but if the wind is blowing a certain direction, our dicks get hard. Sometimes, you’d come up from working in the basement and your hair would be messed up just right and my dick would get hard.

Same thing happened with Ronan and Beck if they were in the tavern.

“It’s not healthy to get a hard dick and then not take care of it. Athan and Tarja told me I was a moron and Tarja smacked me in the head, but your balls will turn purple and fall off if you don’t. We experimented a lot and we know what we like.”

“I keep telling you that’s not a thing,” Beck said, hitting Ollie again.

“That’s just something men say when they are broke and can’t pay at the brothel.

They want free sex and try to turn it into a medical issue.

My family has been running the brothel since before my mom was born.

If that was a thing, Mom wouldn’t have me toss them. ”

“I think you’re all lying to me, but I was just explaining to Lucy how we know what we prefer.”

“Maybe don’t make our girlfriend feel better by telling her about the other women we’ve fucked, idiot,” Ronan said.

Ollie gasped.

“I promise, I wasn’t trying to do that!”

I fell out laughing because Ollie looked like I was about to revoke his taste testing

privileges and never fuck him again.

“You can’t seriously think I expected any of you not to fuck other women while you thought I was a man, right? It wasn’t like you were rubbing them in my face while you thought I was Lance, either.”

“It’s so fucked up,” Ollie moaned. “It wasn’t cheating when you were Lance. I feel terrible.”

I climbed into Ollie’s lap because he was about to get really dramatic over something that was all in his head. I wrapped my arms and legs around him while I ground myself on his cock. You couldn’t talk to him when he was in a spiral of his own making. You just had to distract him.

“Hi,” Ollie said as he wrapped his arms around me.

“I believe Ronan had a plan.”

“Yes, yes he did.”

“Let’s do it.”

Ollie wrapped his arms around my thighs and stood up.

The bathroom was a little slice of the Jagged Key Isles.

It just didn’t have the large, scented bathing pool.

There were blankets and pillows off to the side for lounging and I guess sex.

The Madame wasn’t married, and you’d never be able to attach her to any man, but

she was a stunning woman and I had a feeling she wasn't celibate.

She wouldn't be taking paying clients, but she could entertain her gentlemen suitors here.

Ollie lowered me onto the pillows while Beck lounged in front of me. I was a little nervous and Beck knew right away what I was thinking.

"You're only going to be bad at it if you use teeth," he smiled. "You'll probably gag while you figure it out. We all did. Ollie puked the first time because he didn't stop."

"You promised not to repeat that," Ollie sulked.

Beck only spilled his secret to relax me and to warn me so I didn't puke all over him. Note taken. That would be mortifying.

I decided to just go for it. Watching Ronan helped a good bit. I gripped Beck's cock and swirled the head with my tongue. I was waiting for Ollie and that didn't seem to be happening. Beck felt me tense and started stroking my hair. He knew what was going on.

"If you decide to let us take your arse, and that can be a lot of fun, you have to do it right so it doesn't hurt. Ronan is taking care of Ollie and then Ollie will take care of you."

That made sense and I didn't want Ollie hurt. I'd think about letting them put it up my arse at a much later date. I had way too much going on and that felt like something I should spend time making a list of the pros and cons instead of some split decision while I was horny.

So, I focused on Beck's cock and he helped. He stroked my hair and praised me, but

he also gave me tips. I didn't take it for him bossing me around because Beck had never been like that. It helped. And it was a lot easier to take him down my throat when I relaxed.

This was fun. I liked this dynamic. Beck was a big, strong warrior.

When he still thought I was Lance, I wasn't about to start anything with him because he could break me in half.

But this? Beck was completely under my control right now.

I'd never abuse it and I didn't really want to be his boss, but I guess it was different when we were naked.

"You ready, Lucy?" Ollie said.

Did he really expect an answer with Beck's cock in my mouth? He'd done this way more often than I had, so he knew damned well I couldn't talk.

"She's good," Beck said.

They'd never answer for me in any other circumstance and that didn't change when they found out my secret. They only did it when I couldn't speak for myself. I appreciated it.

I felt Ollie behind me and he gently stroked my back.

Then, he did the most Ollie thing ever and spanked me.

Which confused the fuck out of me because I didn't want to hit him back and revoke his taste tester privileges.

I actually liked it and wanted him to do it again.

I even let out a huge moan so they all knew I liked it.

Ollie chuckled, and I knew that laugh. He was going to completely abuse this. I let out another moan when Ollie eased inside me. He paused a minute for Ronan and then they both started moving.

Oh, wow. Ollie and Ronan had a totally different rhythm.

Ronan wasn't inside me, but I could still feel the force of his thrusts.

It was all of them. I had all of them and it was perfect.

There was this small twinge that would probably always be there that Neco should be with us, but that ship had sailed.

He'd made it clear he didn't want us and I hated him for it.

We got a little wild, and I was okay with that, too, now that it wasn't my first time. It was getting harder to hold on, but honestly, what was I even waiting for? And then I found out I had something in common with Ollie, too.

Beck pulled my hair, and I lost it. My body was bucking with pleasure. I was barely done when Beck was pushing at my shoulders.

"If you don't want it in your mouth, you should move."

I might not like it, but I wouldn't know if I didn't try. I let him finish in my mouth and swallowed. Ollie spanked me again and finished right after. Ronan wasn't that far behind.

Ronan left us to clean up to get me the tea so I wouldn't get pregnant. I knew they had this whole day planned, but what actually happened was perfect.

I didn't think about the Ghoul at all and only thought about fucking Neco Argent once.

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I didn't get home until dawn and nearly lost my mind when I opened our front door and found a wolf sleeping on our shabby rug.

The only reason I didn't get the broom was that I knew it was Basselt.

I didn't know how much of that wolf was Basselt and how much of him was wolf and would bite me if I startled him.

There were two amber eyes staring at me. Of course, he knew I was here. I stayed perfectly still as the wolf got up to stretch. The air kind of vibrated around him and then I was looking at Basselt again.

"Sorry, I didn't get to ask the last time I met a Theran and I'm totally not trying to check out your arse, but how do your clothes appear and disappear?"

"You're your mother's daughter because she asked me the same thing when she saw my wolf and I couldn't speak.

It's part of our magic and it's a safety thing, especially since humans came to Nestran.

Sometimes, we need to shift far from home and we wouldn't have clothes.

Humans are weird about naked bodies and some of them might try to rape our women if they saw one naked. "

I nodded.



“I get it, but wouldn’t your women just eat them?”

“Not all of us are predators. We’re assigned an animal based on our jobs. Some wouldn’t be able to fight back and would probably get killed.”

“That makes sense. Why are you sleeping on our rug?”

“It was more comfortable than sleeping on your couch and I needed to speak to you. I just didn’t realize you were going to be out all night. I’ve got news about your quest.”

“What?”

“Ollie and I plotted behind your back. He got me the locations where the Ghoul struck. I was able to pick out his scent, but there’s something wrong with the Ghoul. It’s not a disease the Thera have. I’ve picked it up here in Guttertown, but whatever it is, the Ghoul has it bad.”

“Might be a bedroom disease. The Madame watches for it and has the girls trained if someone is showing signs when they get them to their rooms. Guttertown healers are really good at treating those and most of them don’t need copper instruments to make.

“It happens outside of Guttertown, too, because some of them cheat without coming here. Their healers should be able to take care of it. And most of them can afford treatment unless we were completely wrong, and the Ghoul is Lower Cutwart born and bred instead of a Baron or related to a Baron. But nothing makes sense if they weren’t a Baron. ”

“He’s pissing in the house. On the walls,” Basselt said.

“That’s how I picked him out from his victims because no one else would piss in the

house.

I was able to pick up his regular scent and where he went in the house.

There was one particular room in each house where he rolled in the bed.

That's a thing we do to leave our scent, but I can't imagine why a human would do it.  
”

“Can you tell whose room it was?”

“A woman. I could smell her perfume. It wasn't the matron because there wasn't an overwhelming scent that a man shared the room. A daughter most likely. Not a youngling, but not an adult yet to leave the nest.”

“There was a beautiful girl named Elsbeth in Lower Cutwart who was going to marry out. I thought she was the reason they were targeted, but her neighbor seemed sure she hadn't picked a suitor that someone would have snapped.”

“She probably is, but I don't think the Ghoul was her suitor.

He's pissing blood and pus. The rest of him doesn't smell exactly healthy, either, and you don't need to be Theran to smell it.

The only reason I did was because it was faint, but in person, it would be overwhelming.

He's probably not spending a lot of time around people unless he's killing them.

I'm shocked he's got the energy for it.”

“That honestly helped. Since it’s probably a Baron, you might want to let Neco and me take it from here.”

Basselt chuffed at me like a wolf. Yeah, he was part of an Ollie plot, so that meant they were just going to ignore me. It was one thing for us to end up in the Guttertown cells, but it wouldn’t be the same if Basselt got arrested stalking a Baron, even if the Baron was a murderer.

“You’re going to ignore me, aren’t you?” I sighed.

“I’m trained for this, Lucy. I know a lot more about this than I do about healing. Let me be useful.”

I understood. Basselt was a protector. He had been a bodyguard to the Theran prince. I thought what happened had been a terrible accident, and it wasn’t his fault, but he did and his people did.

Basselt wanted to protect me and it was honestly nice because the man who sired me was blackmailing me to get a serial killer off his streets.

“If you get hurt, I’ll murder you.”

Basselt just smirked at me.

“I won’t. They can’t tell a Theran from a human when we are wearing your clothes unless they see us shift and I’m way too good for that.”

“Thanks.”

I needed to rope Neco in and then we needed to talk to an expert. The leading experts on bedroom diseases in Guttertown were the Madame, Athan, and Tarja. I could grab

the Madame when I got Neco.

I was under no grand assumptions that the Madame wasn't going to make this as mortifying as possible unless I was crystal clear I was asking about the Ghoul and not for me.

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I was hoping I didn't have to knock on Neco's door.

I wasn't going to hit a kid, but I especially wasn't going to smack Rowena if she assaulted my tits again because she guessed I was the one who fucked up her brother's face.

Yeah, Neco still thought I was Lance and was a complete psychopath about his sister.

He'd toss me through a wall and then gut me in my sleep.

Plus, I just really liked that kid, even if she hated my guts.

Neco was eating breakfast with Panas and Beck when I found him. Panas was one of those men who spoke even less than Neco did, but he didn't really have to. If he needed to terrify someone, he could do it with a look. I also knew he was mostly a gentle giant because he watched us sometimes.

"I have intel on the Ghoul. We're going to need to talk to the Madame, Athan, and Tarja," I announced.

"You don't have little birds like the Madame and you couldn't work without me yesterday. How did you get any information I don't already have?" Neco demanded.

Yeah, I knew about the Madame's spies. We might get more intel out of her than just bedroom diseases because she knew shit about everyone. I also wasn't outing Basselt, even if I was pretty sure Neco wouldn't hurt him.

Basselt was keeping my secret, and I wasn't going to go around blabbing his without his consent.

“Do you want to catch the Ghoul or do you want to interrogate me? Just trust me.”

Neco Argent didn't trust anyone. The only person he'd never questioned was his momma.

He wasn't asking me any more questions now, but he was going to pester me later.

Especially since there was literally no way to tell from the crime scenes that the Ghoul was sick or Trevils would have done it by now.

“Mom should be getting out of the bath in a few,” Beck said.

“She usually has her breakfast after that and then does the books. She doesn't like being disturbed when she's messing with numbers because if she messes anything up, they are going to figure out we're all cheating on our taxes, but she loves chatting while she eats.”

Ah, fuck. The books. I needed to get that done.

“I'm dreading doing ours,” I said. “The rest of Nestrans knows about the Bloody Mary and our singers. They are trying to recreate both. Their patrons are coming here and eventually, they will send a spy to try to steal my recipe. The Barons are going to know we're making more money and want their cut of my profits, even though they've got nothing to do with it.

I'm going to have to get creative, but not so creative they know I'm lying to them.”

“Same,” the Madame said, joining us from her bath.

“My business is booming because yours is. A lot of the men who think they would never pay for sex go to your tavern to try the Bloody Mary and hear your singers. They get drunk and then start lusting after the pretty girls singing. Most of them end up over here.”

“What can you tell me about bedroom diseases?” I asked.

Oh, the Madame was pissed. I should have phrased that much better.

“Mostly that if you have one, you shouldn’t have been in my bath with my son!”

“Not me. I think the Ghoul has one, and it’s bad.”

“Symptoms?”

“No idea, just that he smells bad. Like, worse than a Baron normally would.”

“It might not be a Baron then. There’s one called Black Paranoia I haven’t seen in Guttertown for a long time that attacks the body and mind.

It’s not really a bedroom disease, though.

It can spread in the bedroom but that’s not the only way.

You can catch it from the pustules on the body or just from getting sweat on you.

Guttertown figured out the cure, and the Barons forced us to give it to them.

It’s one of the cures they keep to themselves unless they need something and a lot of people outside of Guttertown think our healers aren’t as good. ”

Neco had stopped staring holes in my head like he was fully planning on asking later how I'd figured all this out. The Madame had just thrown a wrench into our entire theory, but she might have given us a major clue as well.

“There was no sign of a struggle. That's why we thought Baron. If someone broke into your house with a disease like that, you'd just run unless it was worse if you didn't.”

“I couldn't tell you why they didn't run.

Black Paranoia first cropped up when my grandmother ran this place.

I've only been alive since we had the cure, but I've been told untreated, it's worse than death.

The Barons all hate each other, even if they are related, but they all have access to the cure. ”

“That should make him easier to find, though, right?” I asked.

“Harder to stop if he can give us disease,” Neco pointed out.

“If you take the cure as soon as you know you've been exposed, you don't have to deal with the badness of figuring out you have it.”

“How's he getting around?” Beck asked. “Demon Pox sets people in a panic because there's no cure.

This should, too, because you have to kiss Barons' arses and hope you have something they need or admit Guttertown has skilled healers.



Trevils would have heard about it and pass that to Neco and Lance. ”

“You’re trained to protect the girls. They have their own training,” the Madame said. “Some things, you can’t see until their clothes come off and some of these savages have the means to take daily baths and choose to do it once every fortnight. The smell might not tip anyone off.”

“It tipped Lance off,” Neco said.

Beck had to be in on Ollie’s plot because he usually was. I was honestly shocked Ollie hadn’t gotten some Ronan-level vengeance from the Madame, or my mother for that matter, for all the nights we ended up in the cells.

“Do you really need to know how Lance got that information or would you rather use it to catch the Ghoul?” Beck asked.

“I work better with all the information. Knowing how Lance obtained that information would help me figure out what to do with it.”

Tough shit. I was keeping the fact that Basselt was Theran to a ‘need to know’ basis and Neco and I weren’t friends anymore. Still, I had to give him something.

“You and Lance are smart in different ways,” the Madame said. “You can’t think you’re the only person helping him.”

The Madame gave me a sly wink. That woman and her spies.

She didn’t even have one in my tavern and she’d figured it out.

Beck and his mom were close, but he didn’t tell her everything.

Especially not secrets that weren't his to tell.

No, that woman figured out my cook was Theran and hunting the Ghoul for me all on her own.

"Have your little birds heard anything about the Ghoul?" I asked.

"I'd tell you if I did, especially since your mothers' lives are on the line.

They are mostly placed in the houses of people I want to keep an eye on and there are a few in the palace.

The Barons don't know who the Ghoul is, but they don't think he's one of them.

They don't think one of them is capable of the things he's doing.

I asked as soon as I found out Caitrin's life depended on catching him.

I just hadn't had a chance to talk to you. "

I let out a breath. That meant Neco was safe for now. They hadn't given him a name to pin the Ghoul's crimes on him. He still needed to hold off just in case it did end up being someone related to the Barons because they still could.

I thought finding out the Ghoul was sick would be a gotcha moment, but it just complicated everything.

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Lance had some serious explaining to do, but if I pressed it, he was going to fuck up my nose again. The Madame set it so it was straight, but if it got broken again, it was going to hurt like fuck and might end up permanently crooked.

I was going to get it out of him, I just needed to figure out how to talk to Lance again. Especially since it felt like someone knifed me in the gut when they all disappeared into the bath house and I knew what they were doing in there. I should have been with them.

I felt stupid I let it go on this long and I'd feel even dumber if I told him. I just needed to find a way because it was needed.

Lance had originally wanted to talk to Athan and Tarja, but the Madame gave us the information we needed. She told us the only disease in Nestrán that attacked the body and the mind was Black Paranoia and it did different things to different people.

The Madame said it mostly amplified things and lowered any barriers that might tell someone something was wrong.

If someone thought their spouse was cheating before they got it, they became obsessed with that and took it too far.

If they thought someone was swindling them, it started out with them just trying to prove it and ended in violence.

She told us if someone was fantasizing about murder, but wasn't acting on it, Black Paranoia would eventually push them to it without treatment.

The Madame also said even though they kept treatment to themselves, the Barons took it very seriously because someone with Black Paranoia would attack one of them.

They usually locked themselves in their castles until it died out.

We were about to walk to Ollie's farm to borrow horses again when we found Trevils waiting outside the tavern. He tipped his hat to Lance.

"If you're going to be working with me, I'd rather talk where the food and drink is better."

"I can do that. I have something you might not have figured out yet."

I knew damned well Trevils didn't know that because I hadn't figured it out.

I hadn't been to all the crime scenes, but I'd gotten a lot from the ones I'd seen.

Anything I'd missed, Trevils would have figured out.

The Madame was right. Sometimes you couldn't tell until someone got naked.

You certainly couldn't tell when they weren't even in the room.

This was going to drive me insane.

"Good because he's going to strike tonight," Trevils said.

Damn. And I didn't know who he was or what I was going to do with him when I found him if he ended up being Baron. If the Ghoul was a Baron and hiding that he had Black Paranoia, they'd just treat him and send him to Guttertown to kill.

“What do you mean he’s going to strike tonight?” Lance asked.

“The murders always happen after a Day of Respect. Always. They started further apart, but he’s escalating. If I’ve profiled him right, he’s going to strike again tonight, but I couldn’t tell you where or who his target is.”

“It’s going to be someone with a pretty young girl of marrying age,” Lance said.

What the fuck? That was a theory, but I hadn’t confirmed it. Lance seemed sure.

“I need a drink for this,” Trevils said, knocking back his Bloody Mary.

Fuck, I did, too, and Lance’s new drink was potent.

“So, I refuse to tell either of you who or how because they are under my protection. The Ghoul has what we’ve managed to narrow down to Black Paranoia, and he spent a lot of time in the bedroom that had to belong to a teenage girl.

He also rolled around in their bed and he didn’t do that in any other room. ”

The only person I knew who was under Lance’s protection was his new cook, who was also under my protection for helping Momma.

I had a lot of questions about the Whispering Raven’s new cook, but I also knew Lance wouldn’t be protecting him unless he had a very good reason.

So, even if I had a million questions about how he figured all of that out when he shouldn’t have, I could let it rest.

And even though I had no idea what the fuck was going on, Trevils seemed to. Which annoyed me because I hated being in the dark.

“Say no more,” Trevils said. “I might not have a name or face, but I know why you are protecting them. I’ve done similar in the past, but it’s not an option right now. What else did they find?”

“The Ghoul is pissing in the house,” Lance said, wrinkling his nose.

Gross. And I couldn’t tell someone pissed in the house over all the gore. Trevils couldn’t, either. Unless it was on cloth, most people couldn’t.

“Did he piss the bed?” I asked.

“Dunno. Does it matter?”

“Has your friend considered they might be the same?”

“He’d find that offensive since he doesn’t piss in the house. And he’d be able to tell.”

What was happening right now? Why was anyone pissing inside?

“Yes, of course. I shouldn’t have even thought that. Don’t tell them.”

I heard someone laugh from the kitchen and Trevils looked panicked.

“Fuck, he’s here?”

“I’m not saying a damned thing,” Lance said. “Could be Ollie making jokes.”

Yeah, Ollie wasn’t nearly as funny as he thought he was. That answered one thing. Lance’s new cook was pretty good at digging into crimes. I just really didn’t need him looking into mine because he helped my family.

“And you shouldn’t,” Trevils said. “We know the Ghoul strikes after the Day of Respect and he’s hitting families that aren’t at a wedding.

I took the liberty of sending men to the merchant district and Lower Cutwart to find out who has wedding and name-day celebrations planned as well as who isn’t invited.

“There are six in the Merchant District and five in Lower Cutwart. If we’re narrowing it down to homes with girls of marrying age, it’s going to be three in the Merchant’s District and four in Lower Cutwart.

I hate saying this because it makes me feel disgusting, but if we’re going to go further and do houses with girls that would get the Barons to overlook the fact that they don’t come with land and money, we’re down to four potential targets.

Two in the Merchant District and two in Lower Cutwart.

“I’ve only got a limited number of men I trust. The rest of them would walk in on an active murder and then turn around and walk out as soon as they realized they were dealing with a Baron.

They’d completely bypass me and tell the Barons for coin.

I’m going to need your help to cover a house and I still don’t know what to do when we catch him so he actually pays for it. ”

“Well, I’m Guttertown born and bred, so I know how we’d handle it,” Lance said.

What? I was also Guttertown born and bred and the only solution I’d had was figuring out how to get away with slitting a Baron’s throat without an innocent person going down for it.

“I’m listening,” Trevils said.

Lance told us his plan. It was actually genius.

If we did it just right, the Ghoul would meet the same fate anyone else would and the Barons couldn’t lie or pin it on anyone else.

I wouldn’t be the one to kill him, but I didn’t need to kill every single asshole in Nestran that needed to be squashed like a roach.

I just needed to figure out how I was going to be in two places at once.

I didn’t want Lance alone with the Ghoul out there.

The brothel and the tavern were always packed after the Day of Respect because people always acted like one day off a week from fucking and drinking lasted longer than it did.

The brothel couldn’t really spare me but the Madame would bring in a cousin since people’s lives were on the line. She wasn’t letting Beck anywhere near this. Ollie and the mysterious cook couldn’t leave the tavern. Not the day after the Day of Respect.

We could do this, but if Lance found the Ghoul instead of me and the Ghoul harmed one hair on his beautiful head, I was going to blow this entire plan.



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So, I already really liked Basselt, but apparently Theran also had really good hearing and he could hear everything Lucy was talking about with Neco and Trevils. I fully planned on abusing this later, but right now, I needed to keep my girl safe.

I turned to Basselt. I needed to keep him safe, too, because he was a friend, but he could help as well.

“First of all, Trevils was a dick for hinting you piss in the house, but he’s a good guy and kind of a hero to Guttertown kids, so please don’t turn into a wolf and bite his arse off.”

“Trevils knew Lucy was talking about a Theran because he’s worked with one before.

Specifically, me. It wouldn’t bring him back or end my banishment, but I helped him out in exchange for looking into the death of my charge.

I needed to know if someone murdered a kid just because he was Theran or they were just hunting and shot an arrow at what they thought was an adult animal.

He gave me closure that it was an accident. Trevils is a good man.”

I mean, yeah, Basselt burst out laughing and had to explain to me why he was laughing. He seemed to think it was funny and not offensive, but I would have been offended if Basselt thought all humans pissed in the house.

“We’re going to have to bring Neco in,” I said. “I’m not telling you his secret and I won’t tell him yours, but if you can point him towards the Ghoul without turning into

a wolf, he can take that house and we can keep Lucy away from it.”

“I know Neco Argent’s secrets. I’m not trying to eavesdrop, but it’s hard to tune you out when I’ve been trained to pick up words like murder.

Several of us shift into small animals that can easily slip into a human’s house.

We’ve only been using them to spy. It’s been suggested several times to turn them into assassins and wipe out the Barons in one night in their sleep. ”

“Guttertown would throw you a fucking party,” I said.

“We spy on the last Tempris, too. The only reason we haven’t is because the rest of the humans might take it as an act of war, even if we were doing them a favor.

We can’t do anything while the Princess Lisana is missing and there’s no heir.

If we play anything wrong, we could lose the Tempris altogether. ”

“Noted. Listen, Neco is intense, but he’s a good guy.”

I proceeded to air all of Lucy and Neco’s drama to Basselt.

It wasn’t like it was a secret. Everyone in Guttertown knew that mess.

And they were really messy about it. They could get really unmessy and get our group back together if Neco told Lucy he’d been in love with her this whole time and got a little extreme because he thought they were siblings and Neco would grovel to the ends of Nestran if he found out he hit a girl.

“I think we need to worry about the Ghoul instead of getting those two back together.

I trust him if you do. We both have secrets that could get us killed. If you think he won't react badly to me being Theran, then I'll work with him."

"Neco won't care. You helped his mom, so he'd die for you."

I ran out to snag Neco, but I had to sneak out the back. I wasn't stupid. If Lucy caught me plotting, she was going to murder me. She'd be fine with it if I pulled it off, the Ghoul was out of the way, and Caitrin got the cure.

Basselt passed Lucy's plan on to me and it was a good one. I just needed to make sure if the Ghoul ended up in Lower Cutwart that Neco was the one who found him.

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Everyone was freaking out about me being in Lower Cutwart when the Ghoul might be striking.

Neco was hovering and Ollie was plotting.

Beck was stressing and trying to get out of work.

Ronan was doing that thing he did where he got quiet and intense.

If my plan didn't work, Ronan was planning retribution.

I didn't even think the Ghoul would be in Lower Cutwart again. The rich fucks sniffed around the merchant girls if none of their cousins were acceptable. Lower Cutwart girls had to be practically perfect in every single way for them to marry out.

Which was stupid because the men they would be marrying were generally awful and flawed. The Lower Cutwart girls had to be beautiful, demure, have several brothers, and have the ability to bite down and never react when their future husband was an arse.

Yeah, even if they didn't think Guttertown women were total trash, that was a match made in the Underworld. They raised their hand to us and we'd hit back. Most Lower Cutwart women were like that, too. It was only acceptable when you crossed the line between Lower Cutwart and the Merchant District.

Finding a beautiful girl in Lower Cutwart wasn't hard. We had a ton of them in Guttertown. Finding a beautiful girl with several brothers with the disposition to deal

with those arseholes was going to be difficult, even if it meant marrying out.

If the Ghoul struck tonight, it would probably be in the Merchants District.

Trevils refused to let us take that one because he thought it, too.

He promised me that if they were the ones who caught the Ghoul, the men he had were completely loyal to him.

They'd say it was me who caught him red-handed so I could get the cure for Mom.

I was okay with that. I didn't particularly want Neco there either.

He might think he had a pass as the Blight, but Trevils didn't know that yet.

If Trevils ever decided to follow him and caught him at the scene, the Barons would just pretend they weren't paying him and hang him.

Everyone made mistakes and Neco could make one that cost him his life.

We had to plan things very carefully in Guttertown.

Things tended to get intense at the brothel and the tavern after the Day of Respect.

I refused to let Mom work even if she was feeling better.

I told Basselt to sit on her if she tried.

The Madame borrowed a cousin to help Beck, and Panas and Ronan were going to help Ollie and our new staff.

The Madame knew Ronan wasn't going to get much painting done with us in danger.

"Don't go inside. If you're the one who finds him, come get me," Neco said.

"Fuck, if we don't pull this off, he's going to get cured and start killing in Guttertown. This is our only chance."

"Arsehole, this is your only life. Don't get murdered. I'm not saying let him get away with it. I'm saying go after him with back up."

I grunted. That was logical and I could do that. I just wasn't going to let innocent people get slaughtered when I might be able to stop it.

"We make a pact," I said. "Trevils drew a map and the houses aren't that far from each other. We watch the house, but we check in with each other. You don't go in without back up, either. I'm not doing that to Theda and Rowena. It would kill them and you can't protect them if you're dead."

Neco also grunted. Yeah, that was settled. I'd learned to speak fluent male, and that was a grunt of confirmation. Glad that was settled. One thing about Neco was that he didn't lie. If he had no intention of agreeing with me, he would have just ignored me. And he went a step further.

Neco spat on his palm and thrust it at me.

"You have my back and I'll have yours. No one dies but the Ghoul. We swear it. No one does anything stupid."

Spit palm oaths were sacred, though not as legally binding as signing your name to a contract.

Everyone in Guttertown knew this. Even if I didn't know that grunt meant he agreed with me, no one in Guttertown spat in their palm and offered an oath when they didn't need it.

If you broke it, it was bad luck, and you'd be cursed for ten years.

Neco's eye was dark and unreadable when I spit in my hand and smacked it to his to seal our vow. He held my hand a little longer than he should, and we had a little weird moment until I broke it.

I couldn't with him right now. I didn't need to be distracted by Neco Argent when so much was at stake. Yeah, we were kind of talking without screaming at each other, but he'd broken my heart and my nose once and I wasn't going to let him do it again.

He gave me a curt nod. This was where we parted. Things might never go back to how they used to be with Neco, but maybe we could at least be civil after this. I didn't know if my plan would work and if it would, if I'd still get the cure from my father, but the Ghoul had to be stopped.

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I always felt like people were staring at me when I left Guttertown. Neco wasn't totally overreacting when he said I might get jumped because some asshole thought I was too effeminate for a man. I found the whole thing wholly ridiculous because it wasn't like that was even contagious.

The streets of Lower Cutwart were mostly empty, just like they were supposed to be when a celebration was going on. There were a few families that weren't invited, but they were mostly just hauling water home since all the businesses were closed.

They all passed by without even looking at me. I got it. It was a big snub not to be invited to a wedding or a name day when the whole town was there, especially when it wasn't a mutual thing like it was with Elsbeth.

Trevils got us a lot more information than I thought possible. There were two other girls that had the attention of Barons' and merchants' sons in Lower Cutwart. Those were the houses Neco, and I were staking out.

The people of Lower Cutwart wanted them to marry out to get rid of them more than wanting them to have a better life. The people who weren't invited to this particular wedding were those who'd burned bridges with the bride and groom's family.

Probably with each other, too, because they didn't seem to be having their own little get together. When we were kids, one of the boys broke Ronan's charcoal. Ollie punched him in the face and Ronan ruined his life later.

Yeah, Ronan ruined his life pretty badly.



We didn't get invited to any of his name-day celebrations or his wedding.

We threw our own party each time. None of these people were doing that.

The kid that broke Ronan's charcoal was a bully who made a lot of enemies, so we invited everyone he shunned from his parties, even if we didn't like them that much. It was a bonding thing.

These people weren't doing that, so there was probably some bad blood there, too. They all just seemed like they wanted to get home and didn't acknowledge me at all.

Which was perfectly fine by me, but that feeling I had when I left Guttertown that people were staring at me was worse than ever. The hair on the back of my neck was literally standing up, and I felt super exposed.

I hated it and wanted to leave, but I had a job to do.

The sky decided to dump rain on me. It didn't feel like there was going to be a storm.

It had been sunny and clear all day. If the townsfolk didn't have a barn or pavilion to move to, they'd all be on their way home.

If there had been any hint of a storm, I was guessing the Ghoul would have called this off. He still might.

There was a narrow alley between the houses. I had a very bad feeling, so I was just going to duck into the alley, peek into the window to make sure the Ghoul wasn't inside, and find Neco. I trusted my gut. This was where the Ghoul would be.

Their neighbor went into their house with water, so clearly, I thought he might not be here yet or they'd look more tense. I peeked into their window from the shadows of

the alley. They were all sitting down to eat.

Lightning lit up the alley and I jumped when I realized I wasn't alone. This was the Ghoul. He was dressed too nice to not be related to the Barons, but his clothes were ill fitting and dirty.

Before I could run, he slammed me against the wall and had his blade to my throat.

“Why are you following me?” he demanded. “You must be really stupid.”

Clearly, because I was alone in an alley with a serial killer. He'd never taken on Guttertown before, so I wasn't going to stand there and let him kill me.

Fuck that.

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Lance was definitely going to have Ollie's balls and he might maim my face again, but I knew her cook's secret now. He already knew mine, and I had no intention of doing anything about that.

I was honestly a little mad at myself for not guessing Lance hired a Theran and was hiding him in the back because there was honestly no way a human could have noticed someone pissed in the house once and rolled in beds. Not with all the blood and gore all over the houses.

He told me why he was banished from his people, and that wasn't his fault.

Ollie looked slightly worried I was going to take that for Basselt fitting my code and doing away with him, but I helped raise Rowena.

Some kids were wild and feral. If you didn't sit on them, they snuck out and got into trouble. I told Basselt as much.

He was on our side and that was all I cared about.

He was risking his life and freedom to help.

The Madame was able to tell us one thing that helped with the intel Basselt gave Lance.

Depending on where the Ghoul was in the disease, he was either going to be really weak or he might be in the stage where he thought he was invincible and would fight like that if someone challenged him.

Which didn't bode well for us. Barons had some training, but they fought with rules.

If it was a regular brawl where both parties fought to the best of their abilities, they'd get destroyed because they couldn't fight outside their choreographed moves.

They had no reason to think they needed any other training because no one was allowed to fight back.

Except the Ghoul was twisted. He'd use his training and fight dirty. He was also contagious, so I'd be trying to keep contact limited. Still, if Lance's plan worked, I wouldn't have to touch him much.

The streets were empty, and it was pelting rain.

We hadn't had a storm like this in a very long time and honestly, the crops probably needed it.

If it were me, I'd call the whole thing off and go home.

I also didn't kill because of some primal urge.

I was providing pest removal services and could do it on a better night.

Trevils had been looking at this longer than me. If he thought the Ghoul was escalating, then he probably wasn't going to let a bad storm stop him.

The Ghoul wasn't at the house I was watching, but the house wasn't remotely quiet. I couldn't imagine yelling at my momma the way this girl was. Rowena wouldn't even yell at me like that if I pissed her off. This was all over a dress, too, because I could hear everything.

I was about to leave and check in with Lance. We made a vow. It wasn't really time yet, but nothing was going on here. Basselt came running towards me.

“Sorry, I'm much slower on two feet instead of four. I picked up the Ghoul's scent, and it's near Lance's area, not yours. This is why wolves run in packs because I can't be in two places at once. We need to get there now.”

I'd feel much better with a wolf at my side, but I'd never ask Basselt to do that. If we failed, the only thing the Barons were going to concentrate on was that a Theran attacked one of them, even if the Ghoul was a fucking serial killer. We'd be at war again and no one wanted that but the Barons.

Damn the rain. It was usually a good thing, but tonight it was storming really hard and no one should be outside.

The lightning and thunder felt a little too close, and I just had a really bad feeling.

The Ghoul wasn't supposed to end up where Lance was.

I knew I couldn't control that, but Lance didn't know the first thing about proper surveillance.

I didn't like it when Basselt and I arrived to the house. It was across the street from a bakery with an awning. Lance should have been under the awning trying not to get wet or we should have met him on the way back to meet me because we'd made a spit palm vow.

“The alley,” Basselt growled. “I smell blood.”

Lance had better be alive and have a very good fucking reason for being in that alley. I'd never been more afraid in my life. Basselt and I went running just as Lance

stumbled out. He was cut and his shirt was ripped completely open and when I caught him, that was when I finally noticed.

Lance had a rather beautiful pair of breasts on him.

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I was bleeding and exposed, but my chest bindings may have saved my life because they took the brunt of it when I couldn't avoid the slice of the knife. And then my stupid tits saved my life because they shocked the Ghoul long enough for me to knock him out.

This was not how I planned all this to go down and now Neco Argent knew my secret. I thought he was staring at my tits, but he ran the tip of his knife across my scars gently.

“Who did this? Who scarred you?” he growled.

Yeah, Neco completely bypassed my bloody tits and was focusing on my scars.

“No one you can kill. That's what you're focused on right now?” I practically yelled.

Neco ripped his shirt off and manhandled it over my head. I was super grateful because I felt emotional, raw, and exposed.

“Some of that blood isn't yours,” Basselt said. “I scented him in the area, but I swear, if I'd known you two were this close, I would have come here instead of getting Neco.”

I couldn't think. I'd been in brawls with drunks or people who just wanted to teach me a lesson, but I'd never had to fight anyone who really wanted to kill me before. I never wanted to do that again, and I fucked my whole plan up by going into the alley.

I fought off the Ghoul, but I was basically dead, anyway. His clothes were filthy and

ill fitting, but they were expensive. Only Barons wore clothes like that. It wouldn't matter I was fighting for my life. All that would matter was the story that got told after.

Which I already knew would be that I was the Ghoul, and I attacked this man when he tried to stop me. He'd be cured, painted as a hero, and sent to Guttertown to work out his urges.

I wasn't a crier. Even at home when it was just Mom and me and I didn't have to be Lance. I certainly didn't do it around my friends and definitely not my mortal enemies who just found out my secret.

Except I burst into tears and I was ugly crying. I was so close. I could have gotten the cure for Mom, been free of my father, caught a killer, and made a Baron pay for once. It was all over now.

"I don't know who you are as a woman, but Lance Argent doesn't cry and give up," Neco said. "You adjust. Did you fuck him up?"

"He would have killed me, but my bindings took the brunt of his knife. He was shocked long enough for me to knock him out."

Neco Argent was less shocked about this than the Ghoul was and Neco had known me as Lance for my entire life.

"Good. Then what are you crying for, stupid? I can still work with this."

"I hate you," I sniffed.

"A Theran woman would have his balls for his delivery, but Neco isn't wrong. This is still fixable. And I have other news that should cheer you up. This infernal rain means



I can harvest the herb much sooner if your father decides not to uphold his end of the bargain.”

Well, that did make me feel better, but there was just one thing.

“How do you plan on fixing this?”

Neco grinned at me like a psychopath.

“Knocking the shit unconscious actually made it easier.”

I hoped so, but I really didn’t want to hang for this. Also, things might never go back to how they used to be with Neco, but I never wanted to be that man’s target.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

I fully planned on making Beck get drunk with me so I could lose my mind Lance was a woman.

Sometimes, people did that in Guttertown and we respected it, but you knew them before and then you knew them after.

Lance had always been Lance. We all grew up together and at no point did I know Lance wasn't a man. I had a lot of questions.

But first, I had to fix this.

“Do you think you could track Trevils to the Merchant District and bring him here?” I asked Basselt. “We need witnesses they trust.”

“That's dangerous for Basselt,” she said.

“Look, I don't know what to call you. Do you prefer Lance? It's dangerous for everyone if Trevils isn't here.”

“My name is Lucy but if you can't call me Lucy in private and Lance in public, then call me Lance. If you're going to go back to being an arse again, then just don't talk to me at all.”

I was so confused. We knew Mark as Mark and then she wanted to be Amelia, so we called her Amelia. We always called her Amelia. No one called her Mark anymore, in private or in public. If someone called her Mark behind her back, someone was probably going to whoop their arse.

Still, I could do that. I just needed to know what Lucy preferred.

And I had no intention of things going back to how they were before.

If anything, I needed to explain myself even better than I'd planned before because if I'd known Lance was a girl, I wouldn't have broken her nose. I was going to have to live with that.

"How much time do I have?" Basselt asked.

"Don't shift," I said, because he already said he was faster on four legs. It was too much of a risk. "If he wakes up, I'll just thump him again. It would be immensely satisfying."

This man killed countless women and children, but he'd also cut Lucy.

I didn't know she was Lucy, but I'd been in love with Lance since we were kids.

It didn't make a difference to me either way what gender she was or what gender she wanted to be.

I'd let her go because I thought we were related, but now that I knew she wasn't, I was going to make it right and make her mine.

I couldn't kill the Ghoul because that wasn't the plan, but I'd love to knock the shit out of him.

I had my next target, too. When she forgave me, I was going to find out who gave her those scars on her torso and really enjoy killing them.

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Getting my period in front of Ollie should have been the most mortifying thing that happened to me, but this was worse. There used to be a time that if I was going to tell any of my friends my secret, I probably would have told Neco first, but he ruined that and I still wasn't totally sure why.

"What happens next?" I asked.

Because I honestly still didn't know. And I was really frazzled, so I wasn't exactly thinking on the fly like I usually would.

"You're going to go knock on that door and ask the family to come outside."

"Neco, it's storming, I've got a black eye, your shirt doesn't fit, and I'm bleeding through it. Are you insane? Don't answer that."

"Well, I can't knock on the door because I gave you my shirt."

"Arsehole, people lose their mind over my nipples, but yours are perfectly acceptable in public."

He just sighed.

"Someone has to stay in case he wakes up again and I'd prefer that not be you, okay?"

That made sense, but I was a mess and so was the weather. They were nice and dry inside. I wouldn't come out, either. But then my brain started working again. I didn't

need Neco to tell me how to do this. I marched to the front door and just started banging.

A man threw open the door and glared at me like I was trash.

“We don’t have money for you and I’m not letting you in my house,” he sneered.

“Don’t want any of that. Ever heard of the Ghoul? He was planning on murdering your entire family tonight, but my partner and I stopped him. If you want him to actually pay for targeting your family, Elsbeth, and the other families, I need you to come outside. Are you getting what I’m saying?”

“Fuck. Does my family have to come out?”

“Depends. Are they kind of violent and want justice?”

“I’d rather keep them away from all of that, but I do. If you’re saying what I think you’re saying, I’m not sure how you intend to pull this off.”

I shrugged. Neco was a man of few words. I knew he was expounding on my plan, but not where he was going from here.

“Just trust us.”

“Looks like he got you pretty good, girl.”

Shit. Even with Neco’s shirt being huge, he could still tell I had tits. I wasn’t going to Baron lands until I had my bandage. I just lifted my chin.

“I got him better.”

We stepped out into the pelting rain. Lightning lit up the sky again. Neco was illuminated standing over the Ghoul in the street. He must have dragged him out of the alley and thumped him again.

“Neco Argent. We need to get him to the wedding in this town.”

“Goran White. Why do we want him where people are?”

I grinned. I got where Neco was going with it.

“Street justice. He’s got Black Paranoia. I’ve already been exposed, but I can’t carry him.”

“Well, I’m not offering my cart. I’d have to burn it after and I can’t afford to replace it. One of my horses is nursing her filly, and the other gets stubborn about leaving her.”

“Then, you’ll help me carry him and swing by Guttertown for the cure to Black Paranoia,” Neco growled.

Yeah, Neco wasn’t giving him the option to say no. At least, Goran would have to be pretty fucking stupid. No one knew Neco was the Blight, but I wouldn’t fuck with a giant, scarred man with that look on his face.

“She’s already been exposed,” Goran whined.

“She was the one who got sliced up stopping the Ghoul from breaking into your house and killing your whole family. I got here after she knocked him out. You owe her. Nut up and help me lift him.”

I’d never say anything in this exact moment, but I was grateful.

The cut on my chest burned like fire and I couldn't check it to see if it needed to be stitched up.

I could tell it was still bleeding. It would have been much worse if not for my bandages.

I wasn't going to be able to take care of it until we were finished.

Goran tried to help, but he was completely useless. Neco was getting annoyed. I got it. Black Paranoia was terrible, but I also knew it didn't have to be if you got over your pride and went to Guttertown.

"Are you serious right now?" Neco growled.

"Just swing by Guttertown and get the cure. You won't have to deal with all the nastiness if you take it right after you know you've been exposed.

Look at his clothes. If I leave him here to wake up and tell the Barons, they are going to give him their cure.

They aren't really going to give a shit if he comes back to kill your whole family on his way to Guttertown.

Use your brain. What's worse? That or crossing the town line to Guttertown? "

"His clothes are expensive, but they don't fit and they are dirty. Are we sure he's a Baron?"

"They don't even breathe the same air we do," I said.

"They don't do hand-me-downs and if their clothes get holes, they don't sew them up

until the garment itself falls apart.

They also never wonder where their next meal is coming from.

If they lose or gain weight, it's because they wanted to or they are waiting for a remedy their healer gave them to kick in. ”

“How does Guttertown have a cure for Black Paranoia if the Barons clearly don't? They wouldn't let one of their own get like this.”

“I own the Whispering Raven. I grew up next door to the brothel. The Madame is a friend of the family and she's not a liar.

She also takes care of the girls and she says there is a working cure.

Help Neco and then swing by Guttertown for the cure and something to drink at the Whispering Raven.

The rest of Nestran is trying to copy my new drink and I'm telling you they never will. ”

Goran sighed, but he finally started pulling his weight. Getting the Ghoul to the wedding in a huge storm without him waking up again was only one problem. The plan had been altered, so the rest of it was going to be up to me.

I wasn't big on public speaking. They didn't exactly teach that in Guttertown schools. I grew up in a tavern. I was really good at de escalating a situation.

We were about to find out how good I was at escalating one.



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We were really bad at this and it was basically no contest when Caitrin wandered downstairs and into the kitchen and realized Basselt and her daughter were missing. Lucy told Caitrin everything, but sometimes, she didn't tell her until after she did it.

Caitrin was a Mama Bear, and she was downright terrifying when it came to her child.

Ronan and I knew that. Caitrin didn't even have to say a damned thing.

She hauled us into the kitchen and just glared.

The Barons hadn't realized people would say anything under torture.

They really just needed someone's pissed off mom to come in and glare because we immediately spilled everything.

Lucy couldn't hold that against us and take away sex and taste testing because she knew damned well her mom was scary.

We told her everything. And even though she should have been in bed, she marched out, kicked everyone out of the tavern on the biggest drinking day of the weekend, and then kicked Ronan and me out to go help Lucy.

Lucy could also be scary, but she wasn't as scary as Caitrin yet and we were both worried about her, so we did exactly what we were told.

It was storming like crazy out. We rushed to the brothel to see if maybe the Madame

could spare Beck, but she was already kicking him out of the brothel when we got there.

“Take him. I knew when he met a girl, he was going to get stupid. He’s way too distracted to work.”

We all just stared at her. The Madame knew everything about everyone, but she couldn’t know that. Caitrin wouldn’t have told her and Lucy was so careful we didn’t even know. The Madame just threw back her head and laughed in our faces.

“Oh, please. No sixteen-year-old boy pays to pleasure one of my girls when it’s their first time and doesn’t want anything reciprocated unless they are hiding something.

I thought that was always Lance’s business, but then he finally started returning Beck’s affection. He’s just a little too pretty.”

“Her name is Lucy,” Beck said. “She’s only pretending to be Lance because she belongs in the tavern and if she needs anything from her father, she’s going to be stuck at the brothel.”

The Madame just nodded.

“Caitrin hated that man. She even asked me about poison when he was still coming around. Honestly, good for her. Go save your girl. Her secret is safe with me.”

And I believed that. The Madame only used the secrets she knew when she needed to. Fuck, if I heard something, sometimes, I passed it to her just in case. Was I one of her little birds?

I’d think about that later. Honestly, only Beck and Neco were going to be a damned bit of good against a crazed serial killer, but Ronan and me would be cheering them

on and making sure the brawl didn't get near Lucy.

Damn, we hadn't had a storm this bad in a long time. I could barely see a foot in front of me and the road leading out of Guttertown was mostly dirt with a few paving stones. It was going to take forever to clean my boots.

But we kept going. Neco was there, and I already knew Basselt was going to use his nose to make sure Neco and the Ghoul met. Thing was, Basselt couldn't be in two places at once and the Ghoul could be at multiple places.

He might not even be in Lower Cutwart. I wanted him to be in the Merchant District, but I also didn't. Lucy needed this, but I didn't want her hurt.

I also knew she might think Neco hated her guts, but he would protect her with his life.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

K eeva drilled into me to leave emotion out of it.

As soon as I let my emotions get the best of me, I was going to get caught.

I was pissed when that man knocked my sister on her arse and talked to her like trash, but it was more the principle of the thing.

Rowena was a tough kid. Her pride was hurt more than her body, so I was completely in control when I broke into his house and slit his throat.

The Ghoul was going to make me lose it. He was the worst of my targets and I couldn't kill him. I'd visited his crime scenes. He'd nearly killed Lucy, and that just wasn't acceptable. I'd still be livid if I thought she was Lance.

I wanted nothing more than to drop this man in the mud and kick his face in with my boot. The most I could do was thump him again if he woke up, but I hit him pretty hard last time. I just really wanted to hit him again.

He had to pick the whiniest house to hit, too.

I could really understand why they hadn't been invited to this party we were trying to get the Ghoul to.

Lucy nearly died saving Goran's life. I was pissed she got hurt, but if she hadn't gone into the alley, the Ghoul might have gotten inside the house before Basselt and I got there.

If the Ghoul had open pustules, they were under his clothes. The Madame said it could spread through sweat and saliva, but it was also pelting rain and we were holding him up around his clothes.

Goran still wouldn't stop bitching about being exposed to Black Paranoia, how heavy he was, the rain, and the distance to the party. He hadn't even thanked Lucy.

Maybe I would come back and kill him later.

Lucy was quiet as she walked in front of us. I would have felt better if Basselt was with us, but I needed him in the Merchant District. I just wanted to get this over with. Yeah, I got distracted by her tits and then her scars, but the knife wound on her chest was going to need to be stitched up.

I just knew she didn't tell Caitrin she was off doing this and her momma was going to have my arse she got hurt. I'd take it. Logically, I knew I couldn't be in two places at once and I'd gotten there as soon as I'd known, but I still blamed myself.

We were so close. I could hear the party over the thunder and lightning.

They'd moved it to the barn rather than call it off.

I got it. Planning name days and weddings when you were poor was complicated.

You had to pay for the food and booze and everyone had to arrange their work schedules because we didn't sit on our arses all day while someone else did the work like the Barons.

If the weather turned to shit, you always wanted a friend with a barn.

Ollie, Ronan, and Beck came running up looking like drowned rats.

I didn't know why they were here, but thankfully, they didn't come pissed this time.

I was glad, though. Lucy had been through a lot tonight and she was wounded.

Even if I wasn't hauling a serial killer across Lower Cutwart, we weren't exactly in a place where she'd want anything from me.

I'd never be outgoing like Ollie. I couldn't make pretty things like Ronan. I couldn't use words to make anyone feel better like Beck.

But if we got through this, I was going to tell her why I did all this and if she forgave me, I'd tell her I was the one who would kill for her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

I wanted to be mad they all came. It was our busiest night of the week. Same with the brothel and Beck was here, too. But I needed them. That had been the most terrifying experience of my life. I nearly died, and I was surer than ever that someone was going to have to sew my chest up.

It took several layers of bandages across my chest to pass as a man. They saved my life, but they also got shredded in the attack. Neco's shirt was huge, but it didn't hide that I wasn't a man.

Everyone in Lower Cutwart would know. We were all about to be bound in one massive conspiracy if this all went to plan.

You didn't snitch in Guttertown. That was sacred.

It didn't matter what the Barons were offering, you didn't sell someone out.

You might get some temporary riches, but you were going to lose everything.

It was a trust thing. No one would do business with you after that. You couldn't get supplies and people wouldn't buy from you. Because we were all cheating on our taxes and we didn't need some asshole bringing that to anyone's attention.

Ollie and Ronan were fawning over me and I honestly needed that. Beck went back to help Neco because honestly, Goran was kind of useless and Neco might decide to kill him for that. I knew Neco had a code, but this was also a tense situation.

We were finally at the barn. I could hear laughter and music inside. I completely

would have preferred being at some celebration than doing any of this, but I was so close to getting Mom the cure.

“Make yourself useful and go knock,” Neco growled. “These people don’t know us and won’t let us in because we’re from Guttertown.”

“They hate me more than they hate you!” Goran snapped.

“Yeah, but everyone loves me,” Ollie said, marching towards the barn.

Ollie wasn’t wrong. It was why he always worked the bar. It didn’t matter who walked through our doors or what kind of mood they were in, after two minutes with Ollie, they were butter in his hands and spilling all their drama.

Ollie was our best chance of getting into that barn without the crowd turning on us.

Lovable, easygoing Ollie. I was already mad and bleeding.

If these people laid a finger on Ollie, I was going to go feral.

I’d already fought a serial killer and won.

I could totally take on a barn full of most of Lower Cutwart.

Ollie went in and he took a while to come out. I was starting to get worried, but that was when the cavalry arrived. Trevils was there with Basselt on the back of his horse.

Basselt couldn’t get off the horse fast enough. If this situation wasn’t so shit, I probably would have laughed at the look on his face and how he was walking. Yeah, I would imagine since he could turn into a wolf and run, he didn’t really have a need to ride a horse.



Basselt turned to stroke the horse's nose and then thanked him for the ride. Shit, were we supposed to do that? Could Basselt talk to animals? Could he talk some sense into our donkey?

“Shit, you got him?” Trevils asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest and walked over. Trevils wasn't a snitch. He hated the Barons just as much as we did. He said he trusted the men with him, but I didn't know them. I'd draw my own conclusions.

Trevils peered at the Ghoul and frowned.

“He's dressed like a Baron, but I don't know him.

I've met all of them and the kids. I know the extended families that don't have titles because they've sent for me to look into completely asinine things.

I notice everything, so I pay attention to their kids and their staff. I've never seen this man before.”

“You think he stole the clothes?” I asked.

“Most of us have never met them. I wouldn't know their kids from my asshole.

But if someone came up to me dressed like that, I'd automatically think they were kin to the Barons.

I also heard him talk when he pulled a knife on me.

Unless he's faking, he's got that pretentious accent like them.”

“He didn’t or someone would have had me digging into it.

They outgrow their clothes or they fall out of fashion and they stop wearing them.

They have rooms bigger than my house full of clothes, but their servants do inventory on everything in the house every few months because they are paranoid the poor people they employ are stealing from them.

“They double check their work just to make sure they aren’t hiding something. I’ve been called to investigate missing shoes, jewelry, combs, but this man is in his twenties. If he stole clothing recently, no one asked me to look into it, and trust me, they would have.”

I heard this absolutely evil laugh. The Ghoul was awake again and Neco looked ready to hit him again. Maybe I was stupid and should let him, but I’d been dragged, kicking and screaming with my mom used as blackmail, into this serial killer mess and I guess I just needed to know why.

I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night unless I knew what caused a man to do that because I didn’t think it was all Black Paranoia. The Madame said all it did was amplify what was already there.

And if I had any hope of my plan actually working, I needed every detail I could get.

“Don’t hit him. Hold him,” I said.

Because honestly, between Beck and Neco, he wasn’t going anywhere.

“I was given the clothes. I’m going to be given everything else when I’m done,” the Ghoul sneered.

“You sure about that? You haven’t even been given the cure for Black Paranoia,” I said.

“You were one of them. I saw you go in and I was eventually going to kill you. Then you fell into my lap. You weren’t supposed to fight back.”

I snorted.

“I’m honestly shocked no one else did.”

“Do you know who my father is?”

“Don’t really give a shit, but I’m pretty sure you’re going to tell me.”

“I’m Folcard’s first-born son. The title is mine.

His wife was having trouble producing an heir.

The only successful birth she had was a girl.

Folcard got desperate. He started having bastards all over Nestran.

But I’m the first son and my mother has the proper pedigree.

I was just taking out my half-siblings and then I would have killed the son he dropped me to recognize, and then Folcard finally would have given me what I was owed. ”

Shit. This man would have murdered me and Mom because of Folcard.

Then, he would have taken out Autar and his family when Autar’s mom didn’t have much choice in the matter.

Autar was hopeless with women, but he was a good guy.

If he actually learned to talk to women the right away, he would treat his future wife like the Queen of Nestran.

The bastards of Guttertown wanted nothing to do with the Barons. If our fathers showed up and offered us a title, yeah, we totally wouldn't have trusted that. We knew we were going to end up getting screwed, and no one wanted to be a Baron unless we could change things.

We certainly weren't willing to do all this for it. And the thing was, I didn't know if Folcard would have been impressed by all the murder to get what he wanted. It seemed like the kind of thing the Barons found impressive.

"You know them better than we do," I told Trevils. "Would that actually work?"

"Yes. Folcard would consider that kind of blood thirstiness impressive and his true heir. Especially if he's got no other living sons. Which is stupid because his daughter is actually brilliant and better suited to inherit the title."

"So, you see, you have to let me go to continue my work. I'm protected as Folcard's first-born son."

Ronan stepped forward and grinned.

"Except you haven't actually killed Folcard's heir. You're at the point in your deranged plot where you're just some bastard who threatened a Baron."

That was it. It was how I got Mom the cure. Folcard didn't care about his bastards. I was living proof. I presented the Ghoul and let Folcard know his heir was next and he had to give me the cure.

Except Neco Argent ruined everything when he whipped out his knife and slit the Ghoul's throat.

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Y eah, I didn't give a shit if anyone noticed my tits.

I just really needed to hit Neco again. How many times did I have to tell him that Mom's life was on the line?

The Barons were famous for loopholes in their contracts.

I hadn't found one when I read mine, but that didn't mean they wouldn't make one up and I couldn't do a damned thing about it.

Basselt caught the back of my shirt and yanked me back. I didn't fight because I wasn't mad at Basselt. He'd been nothing short of amazing and had risked everything for me. I appreciated that, and I was going to make damned sure no one found out his secret, even though mine was exposed.

"He did you a favor," Basselt said.

"They don't usually care about their bastards, but Folcard probably wants to punish this man himself."

"Unless he doesn't. These are bloodthirsty men who torture women.

They yearn for war. When you present this to Folcard, you are going to want the real narrative.

This man was butchering entire families to better his station.

If Neco didn't kill him, he'd put his own spin on it and it might impress his father enough that he got exactly what he wanted," Basselt said.

"He's right," Trevils said. "Folcard is a sniveling wretch who sends people to fight his battles for him, but thinks he would win if he fought them himself. He would probably put his heir aside and consider this man the more powerful choice because he would consider this ruthless and not completely insane."

"I'd never do anything to hurt your mom," Neco said softly.

"If we present this as one of his bastards who was taking out their half-siblings and had his sights set on Folcard's heir, we control how the story gets told.

If I didn't kill him, he could have said anything.

If Folcard decided to make him his heir, then you assaulted him.

It won't matter he was about to slaughter an entire family and was going to kill you.

You struck one of them. I'm not letting them kill you for that. "

Shit, I hadn't even thought of that. My whole plan had been to get the Ghoul in front of everyone in Lower Cutwart and out him.

I was going to convince the crowd if we got street justice and no one said they saw anything, then they couldn't punish anyone.

That was how it worked in Guttertown. Sometimes, the whole town needed to give someone a beat down, and no one saw shit after.

That all changed when he pulled a knife on me. We were going to salvage it by

keeping him knocked out and carrying him to the barn. It changed again when he admitted he was one of Folcard's bastards like I was.

"You hit him, too," I pointed out.

"I was going to hit him again, but you stopped me. It's different when you do it."

"What if he kills you for this?"

I didn't want Neco dead. He pissed me off all the time, but I'd miss him. It would destroy Theda and Rowena.

"He won't because I did what he had me sign my name to a contract to do. I read your contract over your shoulder. It said to catch the Ghoul dead or alive. It's not our problem he's such a shit father he didn't know it was one of his kids doing it."

Just then, Ollie came out of the barn with the entire mob we were going to use to take out the Ghoul.

They were pissed, and they had pitchforks from the barn.

Some filled sacks with horseshoes to beat him with.

Yeah, they might think they were above Guttertown, but beating the shit out of someone with a sack full of stuff you stole from the blacksmith was such a Guttertown thing to do.

And they actually seemed pissed Neco had already done the deed. There were women out here. One of them marched over in the pouring rain.

"Is this the man whole slaughtered Elsbeth and her family?"



“It is,” Neco said.

She lifted her skirts, kicked his corpse, and then spat on him.

“You should have made it last longer when you killed him.”

“Ma’am, only psychopaths do that,” Neco said.

I blew out a sigh. This wasn’t the time for one of Neco’s long-winded speeches about how he was an assassin and not a serial killer and there was totally a difference.

I knew Neco, and the Ghoul weren’t even remotely the same. They could have been. They both decided they were going to kill someone and did it. The Ghoul enjoyed it and got addicted to it. He kept escalating. Neco thought it was just like stepping on a roach.

Trevils stepped forward. I didn’t much have a plan for after we got the crowd riled up, but now we had a pissed off mob with no target. I didn’t know what to do with that.

“Everyone is mad and you have every right to be. This man targeted your town and your friends. He was here to kill again, and he was stopped for good. You might not like how it was done, but he’s dead and he won’t be killing again.

What we aren’t going to do is desecrate a corpse.

That’s what he did. So, you’re going to go back to your party and we’re taking him.”

Yeah, out of everyone here, Trevils would be the one people would listen to the most. He also had a lot more experience with calming angry mobs than us. Every single Guttertown resident here had spent time in the cells because we were the angry mob

and just didn't run fast enough.

Everyone grumbled, but they left. Trevils turned to us and he was all business.

"I'm going to move him somewhere until morning.

You need to be sorted before you go to your father.

I don't particularly give a shit how you choose to present yourself, but Folcard is going to take it personally because he would have used you differently.

I don't agree with any of it, but it is what it is.

Take her home and take care of her. Meet me at the same pub tomorrow and I'll go with you because I have a lot more experience managing Folcard's mood. "

Yeah, I didn't really think Trevils would give a shit I wasn't a man. He didn't ask why and he didn't care. He may eventually, but right now, he was treating it like it wasn't his business. I trusted him to keep my secret. Hopefully, he could make his men keep it, too.

I didn't trust a damned soul in Lower Cutwart. They hated us in Guttertown and they didn't have the same loyalty. They worked hard to marry out of their station, even if they knew they would be unhappier when they got there.

Hopefully, they were too distracted by the dead body to notice me.

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The biggest change was Neco. We knew he was in love with her and why he pushed her away. She didn't know that. We also knew he would lose his mind when he found out she wasn't a man.

For one thing, he hit her. It also solved his hang-up about making Theda happy. I didn't think Theda cared either way if he was with a man or a woman as long as he was happy. Neco just got idiotic ideas in his head and decided that was how it was without discussing it with anyone else.

Like, he was about to throw Lucy over his shoulder and carry her back to Guttertown. I got it. She had a black eye, a busted lip, and she admitted she was going to need one of us to stitch her up if we couldn't get Athan or Tarja this late. I was freaking out, too. She could have died.

Lucy and Caitrin were just like my mom. Strong women who didn't want to show weakness in public. Mom was a different person when it was just us. Lucy would want to walk home. She'd only want to be carried if she couldn't do it herself.

Neco stepped forward like he was just going to grab her and do it. I smacked my arm across his chest.

"Don't. She'll ask if she needs help and it probably won't be you."

She couldn't hear us because she was a few steps ahead with Ronan, Ollie, and Basselt.

"How do I make this right? I hit her."

I tried not to laugh at Neco. His whole thing was defending women and children and Lucy could brawl just fine on her own.

“Well, you’re going to have to tell her everything and apologize, but letting her fuck up your face twice is probably going to go a long way.

She’s Guttertown born and bred and so are you.

Obviously, don’t hit her again, but if a Guttertown man raises his hand to a Guttertown woman, there’s nothing stopping her from popping him back. ”

“Yeah, but I don’t do that. I find it repulsive.”

“Neco, when you hit her, even she didn’t know she was a girl. She got home and her period started. That was when she found out. How the fuck were you supposed to know?”

“Because she snuck in my window every night and half the time, she fell asleep in my bed!”

“And Lance always had that thing about not pissing in front of each other and we went along with it. We were ten when everything fractured, so the only way you could have known was taking her trousers off and we all know you’d never do that.”

“But—”

“Neco, I love you, but you’re a fucking idiot when you get this idea in your head.

There was no way you could have known. We only found out recently.

Mom thought Lance just had some hang-ups, and that’s how he ended up a legend at

the brothel.

She only figured it out when we found out about Lucy and announced it before we left.

The only reason we found out was because she started her period and Ollie saw. She decided to trust us after.

“I have no doubt you would have found your way back to each other and she would have trusted you, but that was taken away from her. She’s not just injured and traumatized from fighting a serial killer.

Caitrin made her think she was a boy until she couldn’t to avoid ending up in the brothels because of her father.

A bunch of people who could snitch could have noticed. ”

“I’ll kill them,” Neco growled.

“No, you won’t because that’s not you. You have a code.”

“How do I fix this?” he asked.

“Stop picking fights with her for one. You’re going to have to be brutally honest and let her get mad.

You were a fucking idiot and could have just asked her if she knew who her father was and told her why you wanted to know.

Grovel. Do something nice for her. Fuck, let her break your nose again.

We miss you and we want our group back together. Do whatever you have to.”

“I’m going to get her mom the cure no matter what,” Neco said.

That was a tall order. I honestly wasn’t sure how they were going to pull it off.

Lucy’s plan was risky when we thought he was a Baron.

Folcard didn’t care about his bastards and, apparently, he had a lot of them when his wife only had a daughter at first. He used and abused them, but he might care Neco slit his throat.

I hadn’t read the contract, but I knew Lucy was well versed in reading and looking for loopholes. Neco wasn’t half bad, either.

There might not be a loophole Folcard could trot out, but that wouldn’t stop him from making one up.

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I had been planning to bring Mom the cure and then confess I took on a serial killer, but she knew before I had my prize. I had been hoping she was asleep because she was sick and should be. She'd also be less angry if I was sewn up and could hide my bruises by stealing some of her makeup.

Of course, I was her daughter, and I knew better. She was waiting, and she had the whole scene set. She was waiting in the same chair she always sat in when I had to walk home after they let us out of the cells, but she had the candle flickering for extra effect.

“Lucy Argent, I swear to the gods?—”

Before she could really get going—and once she got going, it was difficult for her to stop—Basselt stepped forward. Did this man value his balls? Because Mom would rip them off with her teeth.

“I know you want to go she wolf to your cub and no one is stopping you, but she needs to be stitched up. You can call your healers and they will find out her secret, or I can do it. I know how.”

Neco growled. At a fucking wolf. What was he even doing here? Basselt bared his teeth and growled right back.

“I’m not interested in cubs. Use the rational part of your brain. You need a healer to sew her up so it scars less. I already know her secret. I’m a lot older than you and have seen more breasts.”

Neco just snorted.

“Doubtful. I’ve lived in a brothel since I was ten.”

“It’s also not your decision,” I said. “I trust Basselt. I’d rather him see my tits than you. If you can’t deal with it, then leave.”

Neco looked like I hurt his feelings. I didn’t want him to treat me any differently now that he knew.

If he ever wanted to explain things, I’d hear him out and decide if I wanted him back in my life, but Neco never did that.

Neco Argent grew up around strong women.

He needed to stop treating me like I was helpless.

“You all let her get hurt?” Mom snapped.

Oh, damn. Now she was mad at them instead of me. That was going to change really fast when she found out I was brawling again, but with a serial killer this time. Neco puffed up his chest.

“We got there as soon as we could, but she caught a serial killer and he got the worst of it. She won the fight,” he said proudly.

Mom rubbed her temples and started coughing. Her cough wasn’t as bad as it had been. Blood wasn’t coming up as much, but I’d need the cure soon.

“Your mothers might be proud you won a street brawl, but somehow, I doubt that. My child’s strength is in her cunning. Stop dragging her into fights.”



“Mom, they didn’t. I did this. I was the one who went to Folcard for the cure.

Neco did nothing but help me and protect me.

We had a whole plan to check in with each other and Basselt was there to let us know which direction the Ghoul was heading if he even hit up Lower Cutwart.

I was the one who messed up and dipped into the alley to see if he was already inside.  
”

I started gritting my teeth as Basselt sewed me up and he was being as gentle as possible. Mom wasn’t done, and I didn’t really expect her to be.

“And was all of this worth it? Ollie said this man was one of them.”

I told Mom the entire sordid tale as Basselt sewed up the wound in my chest. Basselt saved me again before she pointed out what everyone was thinking, but not saying.

“Even if her father refuses to honor his end of the contract, I can harvest the herb within the next few days because of this rainstorm. If Lucy hadn’t gotten involved in all of this, you both would have been a target because this man thought Lucy was Lance and his competition.

Folcard got around and the Ghoul managed to find out exactly who and where. ”

“Why was he rolling around in the girls’ beds?” Ollie asked. “I get we’re never going to understand why he was pissing in the house, but didn’t we all think it was the daughters who were of marrying age who were the reason behind all of this and not the sons?”

“I don’t know this man, but I can answer,” Mom said.

“Everyone thinks I slept with Folcard because I was stupid and trying to better my station. I wasn’t.

He would have made my life so much more difficult if I’d said no.

That’s not exclusive to Guttertown. It’s all over Nestran.

If it’s going to be worse if you say yes than if you say no, then people say no all the time.

“As shitty as they treat women, they can’t continue their lines without us.

They need us. The Ghoul wouldn’t have had a title to court them with, so I’m guessing after he took out his half sibling and any witnesses, he was arrogant enough to present his hand and a future title to their pretty sister and think they’d accept just because he thought he’d be a Baron. ”

“Momma would agree,” Neco said. “I kept asking why she didn’t send him away the second time because we both knew she’d end up at the brothel and she said it would be worse for us. He mostly ignored me, but if he’d ever laid a hand on me, she would have kicked him out and dealt with it.”

“You need to get to bed,” Mom said. “Get this done with in the morning. Whether he gives you the cure or not, your business is concluded. If he tries to screw you over and draw you into another contract, say no. Basselt sounds like he has it covered.”

“I do and I agree. I’d personally love to see you screw them over, even if it’s just a little.”

“I’m going to stay outside your door,” Neco said.

“No, you aren’t. I’m not helpless because you just found out I don’t have a penis.”

Neco deflated.

“I was hoping we could talk.”

Arseholes and traitors. Every last one of them. Even Mom got up and left me with Neco. I was honestly raw and in a lot of pain. If he was about to dump it on me that this was just a job for him and he would go back to avoiding me, this was a shit time to do it.

All of this just made me realize how much I missed him. It would destroy me all over again if he decided to drop me again.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Neco sat across from me in our living room.

It was awkward as fuck and it didn't use to be like that between us.

He used to be the one I was the most comfortable with.

I fell asleep in his bed most nights and would sneak home before Mom woke up.

I was pretty sure she knew that and was going to say something to me when puberty happened.

"I left my window open after I broke your nose. I was going to apologize and try to explain, but you didn't come. I was so hurt, but Beck told me why you didn't come. I could have tried to talk to you countless times after that, but I had something in my head and I thought it was for the best."

I was hurt he locked it the first time, but I wouldn't have gone back the second night even if my whole life hadn't gotten upended when my period started. He locked the window and broke my nose. I didn't really need any other hints he didn't want to be my best friend anymore.

I was shocked he even unlocked it because Neco and I were alike in a lot of ways.

We were both stubborn and when we set our mind on something, we usually saw it to the end.

I had stupid ideas all the time that ended up ruining things, but it usually ended with a

night in the cells or a recipe that ended up tasting vile, not the complete obliteration of my closest relationships.

“You’re going to have to explain that, Neco.”

“Okay, so I knew I needed to clean up Nestrán after I was attacked for defending Momma when she was pregnant. Panas told me Keeva could train me to do it without getting caught and?—”

“No way. Keeva makes sweets and tells fun stories to the kids.”

“Keeva makes sweets and also knows fifty ways to kill a man without getting caught. It’s just that people pay her to make sweets instead of murdering people. The Jagged Key Isles people pass their skills on, even if they might not be used.”

I gaped at Neco.

“Whatever you’re about to tell me isn’t going to be as shocking as Keeva being a serial killer. She used to slip me free cookies on my name day.”

“First of all?—”

“I know. There’s supposed to be a difference between a serial killer and an assassin and it’s important to you. Anyway, I’m tired and raw, so say what you needed to say.”

“Okay, so I pushed you all away because I needed to concentrate on learning to be an assassin. If I was bad at it, I’d swing and the rest of you could be implicated.

I pushed you away because I ended up falling for you when you were sneaking into my room and falling asleep in my bed, but we are Argents.

I thought I was in love with my brother. ”

“I mean, yeah, that’s always a possibility with the Argent kids and we all know you never say their name unless you want to invoke a curse, but that could have been an exception if you’d asked, you fucking idiot.”

“Beck, Ollie, and Ronan have already told me I was a fucking idiot and I agree with them. I just thought if I talked to you without screaming and you said we were related, it would make things worse. I’ve never done relationships, Lucy.

Some of it was because I always had the feeling the women who wanted one with me would kill Rowena’s cat if I was just doing my job protecting the girls at the brothel, but most of it is because I’ve always been hung up on you, even when I thought you were my brother. ”

I mopped my face with my hand because I had my first crush on all of them, even Neco. Then Neco broke my nose, and I thought I couldn’t be with the rest of them because I had to hide I was a girl.

But it worked out when I told Ollie, Ronan, and Beck. Being with Neco on this quest just made me miss the shit out of him, even if he barely spoke to me some of the time.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this when I was asking you to talk to me on the way to the Merchant’s District?”

“Well, I didn’t know what to say for one. Secondly, I didn’t need you distracted with my nonsense with a serial killer like that out there. I would have told you even if I hadn’t found out your secret, just after we caught the Ghoul.”

“I missed you the whole time we were fighting. Working with you made it worse. I

was bracing myself for you telling me you were only nice to me to save Mom.”

“No. Everything changed when I realized Folcard was your father.”

I snorted.

“At least one good thing came from that asshole siring me. You should probably kiss me.”

Because kissing Neco Argent was probably going to be sexy and a little dangerous. He also turned me down flat. What the fuck?

“The first time we kiss isn’t going to be when I’m soaking wet and you just got a knife wound sewn up. It’s going to be special.”

I broke out into goosebumps because with Neco, that could mean literally anything.

“Now, I have one big question,” Neco asked. “Who scarred your torso and who do I need to kill?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

I managed to convince Neco no one needed to die for my scars and that they were just a side effect from binding my chest. He looked like he briefly wanted to get revenge on some bandages, but then he realized it was pointless.

He wouldn't kiss me and I wasn't going to make him. I did ask him to stay the night. We were both going to have to get up early to see our fathers, and we did this all the time when we were kids. I missed it.

Neco was a perfect gentleman, even if my bed wasn't all that big.

He wrapped me up in his arms and ordered me to go to sleep.

I just felt safe and protected. This was new and Neco wasn't Ollie, Beck, or Ronan.

I made sure not to grind my ass against him in any way, even though it was pressed right against his crotch.

I didn't want to ruin this, so I enjoyed it until I fell asleep. I was out, and it wasn't just everything that happened before. I used to sleep better when I fell asleep in Neco's bed.

Except Mom was in my room violently shaking me right as the sun came up and I had no idea what was going on.

“What is it?”

“Your father is outside with Trevils. Get dressed,” she hissed.



What the fuck? That wasn't the plan, and I trusted Trevils.

He completely lived up to all the stories Old Man Aimes told us when we were kids.

He wouldn't have changed the plan. Trevils wouldn't have spoken to Folcard without me.

Especially not this early. The ride to Guttertown didn't take as long with the horses I knew they would have, but it still wasn't short.

Mom passed me a new set of bandages. He'd already seen them once, and I didn't particularly care if he saw them again, but Neco turned his back when I whipped off my shirt to bind my chest.

As soon as Neco and I were dressed, we went outside and everyone was out there.

The Madame took her place next to Mom, but most of Guttertown was about to watch this go down.

Most people looked the other way when a Baron slunk their way onto our streets to take a mistress, but that wasn't what this was.

Trevils mouthed an apology to me and I realized exactly what had happened when I saw Goran sitting on the horse next to Folcard.

Not only was this man not Guttertown, the Ghoul would have easily been able to kill him because Lower Cutwart didn't like his family enough to invite him to the celebration.

I figured out why. This man was a fucking snitch.

I could see the sweat on his brow. He told Folcard some tale and Folcard dragged him all the way to Guttertown to prove it.

Goran could have told him anything. He was there for everything because we decided to be nice and give him a chance to avenge his family.

I was going to rethink being nice to people who weren't from Guttertown unless I was sure they deserved it.

"Open your shirt," Folcard demanded.

Ah, fuck. He ratted out that. Neco stepped forward.

"This man is a rat. He was a target of the Ghoul because he was raising one of your bastards, but he made it easier for the Ghoul to get to him because the rest of Lower Cutwart didn't like him enough to invite his family to their celebration. You can't trust anything he says."

"I'm not stupid, boy. I was fully aware he was lying when he showed up with a story about single-handedly stopping the Ghoul and wanting a reward.

When pressed, he started babbling about a one-eyed giant and my daughter.

I decided to come to Guttertown to clarify because I signed a contract with a Lance Argent.

If someone used a fake name on a contract, then that is fraud and I demand payment.  
„

Fuck. He was trying to throw me in the brothel for free. He'd say the contract was void, and he didn't owe Mom the cure, but since I didn't use my name, I had

committed a crime against him that I needed to pay off at the brothel. It would never be paid off. He'd leave me there until I died.

Mom stepped up next to me and squared her shoulders. She really should be in bed, but I was pretty sure she'd been wanting the chance to face my father in some capacity since he decided she was his.

And Folcard might think he was the smartest man in Nestran, but Mom was smarter.

“Check the census. When I registered her birth, I gave the name Lance Lucia Argent. It's a family name.

She signed her name as it's written on the census.

I'm guessing she didn't correct you when you assumed she was a boy because she didn't want to embarrass you that you couldn't tell the difference, sir. ”

Oh, gods, I loved my Mom. She had thought of everything when she decided to hide me as a boy. I didn't know she had me on the rolls officially as Lance just in case, but with Lucia as a middle name so I could be called Lucy.

And she just put it back on Folcard that he should have known if he was that smart.

And this was Guttertown, so not a single person was going to speak up that they didn't know, either.

Most of them liked me and didn't give a shit why they all thought I was Lance, but the ones who didn't weren't going to speak up, either, because the Barons might lose to Guttertown just for once.

“She didn't correct me because she knew I wouldn't have given a woman that task. I

would have put her in her place at the brothel!”

Yeah, this was my turn.

“Oh, no, sir, I was just so shocked you couldn’t tell that I didn’t want to embarrass you. I didn’t know what to say and then the contracts were signed and you sent us off. I figured I’d just better do a very good job catching the Ghoul.”

“She was the one who caught him,” Neco said.

“She worked with Trevils and they figured out where he might be striking, but she was at this man’s house when he was there to murder his entire family and she was the one who knocked him out so he couldn’t.

You should probably rethink how you’re using your daughters who come to you for help. ”

I agreed with him. If someone wanted to work at the brothel, they absolutely should. If they had to, they should be able to keep all their money. No one should have to do what the Barons forced them to do.

Folcard narrowed his eyes at us because we had him. I didn’t lie about my name and put a false one on the contract. I had a perfectly good reason for not correcting him. I did what was outlined in my contract and caught the Ghoul.

All of Guttertown was out here. He didn’t give a shit about any of us, but it would look bad if he threw me in the brothel after all of this.

They got free labor and money off of their Guttertown spawn.

Folcard didn’t know Basselt was about to change things.

We'd only have to go to them for money now, but if he screwed me over, no one would bother.

We knew we were getting screwed in the whole arrangement, but what we did get saved our family, so it was worth it to us. If he threw me in the brothel after I caught a serial killer just because I wasn't a man, no one would come to them again.

"I still think you deceived me. Consider the remedy I gave you to stabilize her payment for catching the Ghoul. I'll sign a new contract with you. I'll give your mother the cure and you can pay it back in the brothel."

"No," I said, raising my chin.

He wasn't going to force me, but he wouldn't blackmail me again, either. I had a secret weapon and that bloody thunderstorm last night meant I didn't have to wait.

"No?" he sputtered.

"Obviously, I have other skills and I don't want to work at the brothel. I'll find the cure another way. You've shown me you can't be trusted with contracts and if you were a decent father, you would have known it was your son butchering people all over Nestrán."

"I tried with that boy, but he was never right in the head. It was an issue with the bitch. I can't be blamed. Don't come crawling back to me when your mother is on death's door because I'm only making this offer once."

"It's a shit offer. Your first one was better. I did what you asked, and you didn't pay up. I'm not making a deal with you again."

"Suit yourself. It's not my mother who is going to die," Folcard said, kicking his

horse and riding off.

Goran stood there awkwardly for a moment and then joined him. Trevils was the only one who stayed, and I was fine with that. I owed him a drink and some food because he probably defended me when Goran was snitching.

I was guessing Goran didn't get a damned thing out of this, but I hoped it was worth it because Neco was seething. Neco had rules and he just might break them over his friends and family.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:23 pm*

The Guttertown gossip mill was now in overdrive.

I'm sure a lot of that was how I managed to fool everyone, but there were other people who lived like me for completely different reasons and they usually made that decision later in life, so everyone knew, but respected it. They had always thought I was a man.

I'm sure most of them wanted to talk about Folcard showing up here and me telling him no to his face, but I was free now and I wanted to capitalize on that. I stood on the stump outside the Whispering Raven.

“Listen up, fuckers! I'm Lance Lucia Argent and from this day forward, if you want to drink at the Whispering Raven, you'll address me as Lucy. Lance was just, so I didn't end up at the brothel because I don't want to work there. No offense, Madame.”

The Madame just chuckled.

“Your look would bring in customers and your disposition would turn them away. Men don't like it when you punch them in the face and start a brawl.”

“Speak for yourself,” Neco grunted. “She can hit me whenever she wants.”

“Not everyone wants to pay for that, Neco,” the Madame said.

Neco turned purple because the Madame had that effect on people.

“How about drinks on Lucy for standing up to the Barons?” someone called.

“Erik Barlow?” I said, putting my hands on my hips. “Lucy isn’t giving you free drinks any more than Lance did.”

He just gave me a rude gesture and a grin. Erik wasn’t mad. It was a game to him. He ran a market stall, so he was used to bartering. I had no problem bartering drinks for his wares, but he always tried to get free booze from me. I gave him one right back.

“After I’ve had breakfast and had time to prepare, we’ll be opening early if anyone wants to celebrate Guttertown getting one over on the Barons, but I can’t afford to feed all you assholes for free, so it’s a party where you pay me for food and libations.

In addition to the new Bloody Mary, we’ll be debuting a new drink with the same spirit, but it’s sweet. ”

Because somehow, in the mess that was my life since Mom got sick, I still went down to the basement to check my infusions before I went to bed.

I found the perfect recipe and set a barrel of it going.

Ollie rigged up a tool to strain it and promised me he got it bottled up in between running off to save me.

That seemed to do the trick. Everyone went about their business, but Belinda came up to me. Belinda was Heath when we were in school. She didn’t drink at the tavern much because it wasn’t her thing, but she made the best damned cheese in Guttertown, so I visited her stall all the time.

“If you ever want to talk, your life seems confusing and I have some experience.”



“I’m going to take you up on that because yeah, it can be confusing. I know the tavern isn’t your thing, but maybe somewhere else?”

“It’s not the tavern, it’s some of the men in your tavern. I’ve been meaning to check it out since you hired musicians. I like music.”

“Any of the men get stupid, you let me know and I’ll toss them.”

“Some of them are going to treat you differently.”

I shrugged.

“I’m looking forward to not having to bind my chest. I don’t intend on dressing any differently.

My clothes are comfortable and I’m not buying a whole new wardrobe.

I’ve never had long hair, but I like mine short.

I might grow it out to see if I like it, but if I don’t, I’ll cut it off again.

They can treat me differently all they want, but I’m still the same person who tossed their arses before. ”

Belinda nodded.

“I’ve got this rosemary and garlic cheese I need to check on. I just left because everyone was talking about Folcard on horseback.”

I moaned.

“You’d better save me some of that.”

“Will do, Lucy.”

After Belinda left, the insanity of what happened finally hit me.

I told a Baron no. I called him stupid. He knew damned well I wasn’t a boy now.

I burned all my bridges, and he was probably going to target the tavern.

I was already going to have to get creative with the books because my tavern was getting famous outside of Guttertown and they were going to want part of that.

Fuck.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

One of the best things I did was hire Basselt. It wasn't just his help to catch the Ghoul. He could hear everything from inside the tavern because of his enhanced hearing. Basselt was cooking breakfast while everything was going on outside.

I stepped into the tavern with Neco, Beck, Ollie, Ronan, Mom, the Madame, and Trevils. Basselt had food out, but he started plating it and setting it in front of Mom and if she didn't swoon, I was going to.

"You need to keep up your strength. I went out to check on the herbs I'll need. It should be another day or two and I can make the cure."

The Madame was grinning like a cat with the canary and she knew way more about relationships than I did and if she was smiling at Basselt fawning over my mom, then she was seeing what I was seeing. That was a good thing.

"So, Folcard had me dragged out of my house for my version of events after Goran tried to lie," Trevils said. "He was less concerned that one of his sons was murdering the others and had his sights on his heir than he was that you might be a girl."

"I find it hard to believe this man had access to fancy tutors the rest of us didn't."

His eldest is brilliant and would be the best choice for Nestran to take his seat.

His eldest is a girl, so he's going to marry her off to some asshole instead of giving it to her.

Lucy was instrumental in helping catch the Ghoul. "

“Of course, she was,” the Madame said. “She’s always been brilliant with anything she set her mind to. She might be a legend with the girls at the brothel, but I couldn’t exactly put her with a man because she’d probably kill him.”

“Only if she didn’t want what he was offering,” Mom said.

“I have a feeling you’d have trouble with these men, too,” Trevils said.

Yeah, they were all agreeing. There was a rap on the tavern door and I couldn’t imagine who it was. Folcard was the type of dick who would have just barged in and I didn’t think he’d be back. I didn’t think my neighbors would be bothering me.

Beck got up to answer the door, and it was Leodos.

Now, I usually loved it when he visited, but Basselt was here.

Leodos refused and made sure it couldn’t continue, but his ancestors right down to his father used to torture people like Basselt to try to steal their magic.

I knew Leodos wasn’t like that, but Basselt had every right to be mad about it.

“Hey, kid. You caused a big stir at the palace,” Leodos said.

“Let me get your whiskey. Basselt, can you help me?”

As soon as we were alone, I stopped him.

“Do you know who that is?”

“We all know the Tall Man and it’s an honor to meet him. It takes a special kind of man to lose everything to stand up for people different from him. If he guesses what I

am, then I'm fine with that, but I'm not quite ready for everyone to know."

"It's honestly kind of a relief that everyone knows my secret, but our situation is different."

"Yes. He's obviously fond of you, and I know you want to hear what kind of tantrum Folcard is throwing. I'll stay back here and prep for when we open. You know I'll be able to hear everything."

"Thanks for taking care of me, Basselt."

Leodos was laughing harder than I'd ever seen him when I got back.

"What's so funny?" I asked, plopping back in my seat.

"Folcard. Princess Esylle's husband went looking for their child when she got kidnapped and has never come back.

Most of us know he's dead, but Esylle still insists he's coming back with Lisana.

Eventually, Joron is going to have to force her to remarry and have another child, but he's not there yet.

"Folcard has these grand ideas of setting his wife aside and getting his arse on the throne, but even if Joron tells her she has to remarry, he's going to let her pick and she can't stand Folcard.

"He keeps accosting her and running his mouth. You haven't been around him much, but he can afford regular baths and fancy perfume oils. It's like both offend him. Any time he's at the palace, they have to open the windows and light incense to air it out because his stench is that potent.

“So, anyway, he corners Esylle, who is an intelligent, powerful woman, with this tale about how all women are liars. She asked, because she figured if he got it all out, he’d leave faster.

We got this entire story about how his daughter from Guttertown tricked him, but managed to catch a deranged serial killer, and all he was worried about was she didn’t have a cock.

“Esylle laughed in his face, which he also had a tantrum about before he left, but he did drop your name in his rants. Esylle would love to meet you, but if you come anywhere near the palace, it’s going to set Folcard off and he’ll make your life difficult.

You okay, kid? That’s a pretty decent black eye. ”

“The palace is way too fancy for my blood and those people don’t even talk like me. You’re different because you actually lived here with us. It’s neat she knows who I am. It would be neater if she did something about why I had to pretend to be a boy.”

“Not much she can do. Esylle and her father are just the two of them and they are surrounded by snakes who always carry the one thing that can weaken and kill them. She might have money, but her life isn’t easy.

It’s just hard in different ways. But you are going to be a legend to anyone who gets stuck smelling him while he rants about this for a while. ”

“Not in a bad way?” I asked. “A lot of stuff in Guttertown doesn’t fly across the town line and there are other people like me who aren’t just pretending.”

“Fewer people care about that than you think. It’s just the ones that do are very loud about it. It also happens more often than you think outside of Guttertown. Anyway, I

came to check on you but I also came to help. He's going to target your tavern and you need to be prepared."

"What can we do?" Mom asked.

"How are you going to play this now that your secret is out?" Leodos asked. "Are you going to grow your hair out and wear dresses? Not judging and I don't care, I'm just planning."

"My clothes are comfortable. Mom complains about corsets all the time and I don't want to wear one after binding my chest for that long.

It's also going to be expensive to buy a whole new wardrobe when I have one in good shape that I like.

I like the way I look, so I'm not sure if I'll grow my hair out or not. "

"Well, word of your tavern is spreading. People are actually starting to believe me that my whiskey comes from Guttertown and they'll eventually come here to order their own.

They'll come to drink the Bloody Mary in person and you said you were working on something else.

The girls you hired to sing are massively talented and I'm not sure you realize the kind of power headed your way.

You'll be able to play it differently if you're a beautiful girl or so androgynous, they can't really tell. "

"I don't get it," I said.

The Madame just grinned.

“You’re about to come into possession of some pretty powerful secrets.

Drunk men and horny men tend to have loose tongues.

We aren’t saying you’ll be able to blackmail them into changing the whole country, but you can keep them off your money to a point.

It’s what I do. If my birds tell me anything, I’ll pass it on. ”

“Thanks.”

“I’m stealing Lucy,” Neco said.

“But the tavern!”

We were going to get slammed when we opened. Everyone shooed me out and promised to handle it. Letting other people handle things was definitely a problem I had, but everything had changed.

I could skip out to rekindle things with Neco and let my friends and family help out at the tavern.



## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

We had a lot to do at the tavern because we were about to throw a party the like of what Guttertown had never seen. We shoed Neco and Lucy out because that definitely needed to happen. We had a full house. The Madame, Leodos, and Trevils were helping us, too.

Sabina and Mira showed up to help. Mira flirted with Leodos, but he gently put her in his place without being mean about it.

Based on how he talked about her, that man was desperately in love with our future queen.

I thought it would be neat if they got together because he could really tell her how bad things were here.

Speaking of future love matches, we were all noticing the looks between Caitrin and Basselt. Yeah, those two were going to be together soon. There was another knock on the door and I went to answer it this time. I couldn't imagine who was missing, but it was Aimes.

"Lucy isn't here, but come in," Ollie said. "I'll get you some food and drink."

"Is she okay? I was starting a walkabout and had made it to Lower Cutwart when this snake no one likes came walking through with this story I'm pretty sure he was hoping was going to get himself some sympathy.

If there was anyone left in Lower Cutwart that didn't hate him, there's not anymore.

They know who really saved them. They think he's an arse for trying to take credit and screwing Lucy over in the process. I came back as soon as I could, but my leg isn't so good. ”

“She’s fine,” Ollie grinned. “She stuck it to Folcard and Caitrin is going to be just fine. If you can hold off on the walkabout, we’re having a big party at the Whispering Raven to celebrate winning for once.

It wasn’t a big win, but they embarrassed the fuck out of him and Lucy told him no straight to his face, so it’s still a win. ”

“You’ve got competition, old man,” Aimes joked to Trevils.

“Oh, no. Lucy is completely happy with her experiments in the basement. She’s good at everything she sets her mind to, but she’s happiest tinkering,” Caitrin said.

Yeah, and that was completely true. Lucy would have been good at piecing together a plot to catch a serial killer, but she was always happiest in the basement.

“The boy has a future in it,” Trevils said. “I’ve never seen someone be able to read a crime scene like that with no training.”

There was this awkward silence from everyone who knew Neco could read a crime scene because he regularly caused them. He just wasn’t messy with his and never left evidence.

“You taking an apprentice?” Aimes asked.

“Not sure if he wants it and he already has a job. If he doesn’t, I’ll probably ask him to help me catch the Blight. That one is never going to be caught unless he messes up.”

Ollie started choking and Beck pounded on his back. Smooth. Neco couldn't be that stupid, right? He kind of had an ego about the whole assassin thing and he'd been a total fuck-wit about Lucy. The quickest way for him to slip up was to insert himself into that investigation.

His whole immunity deal with the Barons could be up in smoke after today. Folcard never said he wasn't going to give Theda the cure. He didn't really address Neco at all, but Neco stood up for Lucy.

They didn't like to be questioned. Neco didn't try to embarrass Folcard at all. He just pointed out what everyone in Guttertown knew. Their daughters could do more than just work in the brothels.

"If you poach my employee, you're going to owe me," the Madame said.

She couldn't...the Madame protected her people, but if they had a better opportunity, she used her resources to help them.

The Madame was a web of secrets, but could she know Neco's?

What was I saying? Of course, she knew. The Madame and Keeva were twins.

They went different directions in life, but they told each other everything.

Keeva wouldn't have agreed to train Neco without talking to her sister.

I wondered if Neco had figured that out.

"No way," Trevils said, holding up his hands. "A lot of people talk about the workers at the brothel, but just as many talk about the ruthless, but beautiful, woman who runs it. I'm not pissing you off."

The Madame preened under the compliment.

“Good, because Neco would be missed.”

Oh, yeah. The Madame knew Neco was killing her abusive customers or she would have been talking him up to Trevils as an apprentice. She wanted Neco as far away from the investigation into the Blight as I did.

Sounded like that was handled. Neco had better be doing some serious groveling after he stole Lucy because I wanted my family back.

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

Neco took me straight to the brothel. Rowena would have been off school today and looking after Theda, so they didn't see anything that went on outside. They probably would have heard about it.

The girls still giggled like they always did when they saw me.

"You're still a legend if you want another go!" they called at me.

I threw a rude gesture with a wink and a grin so they knew I didn't mean it.

"Watch it. That's my girlfriend," Neco growled.

"I wasn't going to steal her. I was just saying if she wants to pay to spoil me again, I won't complain."

"Look at Neco," I said. "I'll bet he spoils for free."

"You're lucky, because we've been asking, and he never takes us up on it. He treats us like his sister."

"That's probably for the best because it means he'll protect you like Rowena."

Neco tugged me away.

"They are going to get pretty graphic because they know what you are like in bed, but not me. They love shit-talking on their down time because they can't do it when they are with a John unless they pay for that."

“Noted.”

Neco took me to his apartments. Theda looked like she was feeling better like Mom was, but still wasn't at one hundred percent. Rowena practically snarled when she saw me and I really didn't want her to punch me in the tit again.

“So, Lance is really Lucy. I've been in love with her since we were kids, but I thought she was my brother, so I started this whole feud with her. It was my fault, Rowena, not hers.”

Rowena's face brightened.

“So, I did good when I chose to punch you in the chest instead of the dick because you don't have one!”

“Good thinking, runt,” Neco said, ruffling her hair.

“Excuse me, as the owner of the tit she hit, it hurts. Would you like a sympathy dick punch?”

“My sister would avenge me.”

“I would.”

I fell out laughing because Rowena would definitely maul me and I wouldn't lay a finger on her because she was just a kid. Neco joined me. Theda looked at us like we were both insane and Rowena just smiled shyly.

“Well, I'm happy you reconciled with your friends, but I could have told you that your best friend wasn't your brother.”

Neco rubbed his neck sheepishly.

“She could have, too, if I’d just asked her. I didn’t handle it well at all.”

“Do I need to punch you in the dick?” Rowena asked solemnly.

“I’ll hold him down,” I said, tackling Neco and tickling him.

Most people in Guttertown didn’t know that the big, brooding, one-eyed giant happened to be really ticklish when he was a kid. Neco yelped, but Rowena just dog piled on him because, apparently, she knew this and he was the same as an adult.

I caught Theda staring as we held Neco down and tickled him. Her kids were the most important thing to her, even if their father was a total arse. She looked content. Probably happier than I’d seen her since they had to go to the brothel.

I got it. It was probably hard on her to when Neco decided to cut everyone out to go on his assassin mission to protect Theda and women like her because all Theda saw was Neco isolating and not talking to his friends.

I loved Neco, and really much more than just a best friend, but he was a complete moron with tunnel vision sometimes.

We were just going to have to keep him close and make sure he didn’t do shit like that anymore. We weren’t kids anymore.

Neco’s tunnel vision could get him killed now.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

Neco's family was one of the most important things to him, so I wasn't all that shocked he stole me from the tavern to present me as Lucy and someone important to them. It would make Theda happy and it was probably stupid since she was a kid, but I really wanted Rowena to like me.

We hung out for a while and Neco lied through his teeth about being completely done with his father and serial killers. Unlike Goran, I wasn't a snitch, so I wasn't going to tell Theda a damned thing, I'd just make sure he never got caught.

Neco brought me straight back to the tavern because he knew it was important to me and we could make a killing tonight at this party. Our kitchen wasn't that big, but it was packed. The Madame had rolled up her sleeves and was baking sweets.

Ugh. The Madame and Keeva were both amazing cooks, but only one decided to do that professionally. Having the Madame bake for the Whispering Raven was a huge honor because she only usually did it for her girls and the kids at the brothel.

"So, I did a little meddling," the Madame said.

"The Whispering Raven can't fit everyone in Guttertown at the same time and everyone is going to come out for this.

The people with food stalls are going to drag them into the square near the brothel and the tavern.

Some people in Guttertown don't drink or pay to fuck and they should be able to celebrate, too. "



“Good call! Thanks.”

Because yeah, a lot of people did drink in Guttertown, but there were some that didn't.

Some came in because we had decent food, but they weren't frequent guests.

They came a little more often now that we had music, but yeah, all the merchants in Guttertown should be out for this.

Everyone should have something they enjoy at a party and everyone should get a chance to make a little money.

It was weird, but there wasn't actually much for me to do. My infusions had been bottled while I was away tracking the Ghoul. Ollie rigged up something to make the Bloody Mary base easier to prepare.

I was pretty sure most of the recipes Basselt had been whipping out were Theran. I was going to ask him to teach me, but they were delicious and going over really well with customers. The Madame was mostly just waiting for the bread to be done so she could put her goodies into the ovens.

Yeah, and everyone knew better, so Mom was sitting on a stool sipping hot tea with whiskey. I could hear someone pounding on the door because I locked it and I couldn't imagine who it could be.

Guttertown knew the party was later. Trevils and Leodos were the only people outside of Guttertown that I could imagine would want to be here and we always made exceptions for Aimes. They were all here.

Neco was hovering when he answered the door with me. It was one of Folcard's men,

based on the crest on his arm, but he wasn't here for me. He had a summons for Neco.

Fuck. Did Neco take care of the name he was given? Did I screw Neco over when I was sticking it to my father?

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

I knew they would send for me even before the scene outside the tavern.

It was why I snuck out of Lucy's bed and took care of my target last night.

She always did sleep like the dead when we were kids.

I was back and holding her in my arms before that shitshow outside.

I wasn't going to keep secrets from my friends anymore because that blew up in my face.

I just hadn't had a chance to tell them yet.

Something stunk the last time I was in the same room with Folcard, but I just figured one of their fancy maids hadn't emptied a chamber pot and left food out to spoil.

It was worse than anything I smelled in Guttertown, but I figured a maid was being passive aggressive because these people were arseholes.

Now that Leodos told me the stench was coming from Folcard, I didn't know how it was possible for one person to smell that bad.

It wasn't like he was doing hard labor outside like everyone else.

He could have built a bath house like the Madame did.

Folcard didn't have to haul water to bathe like the rest of Nestran did. Someone did

that for him.

You had to try really hard to have a stink like that. It was probably seeping into my clothes and I was going to have to go to Lucy's party with second hand stink. Ollie was going to give me so much shit about it.

"Are you dense, boy?" Folcard snapped.

"Sorry, what?"

Yeah, it was so bad, I wasn't even paying attention to him.

"You could have clarified when my daughter didn't," Folcard said.

No, I couldn't. I had no idea. No one in Guttertown knew. I had to play this right. Lucy was happy with her deal ending the way it did. She was free of Folcard and Caitrin was still getting the cure.

I wanted mine. I didn't want to be a soldier, but I would have if it saved my family.

The wages would probably be shit since they were keeping most of it to "pay them back," but if I could supplement what I was earning protecting the girls at the brothel with a little murder, I could buy Momma a house and take care of her.

Momma wasn't one of those women who wanted to work there. She had to. If I could replace what she was earning with extra money, she wouldn't have to anymore. I needed to play this very carefully.

I lost complete respect for myself as I launched into this completely misogynistic monologue to kiss this man's arse.

I didn't want him looking at Lucy or her tavern again and this man was petty.

She was a girl, so he thought he owned her body.

She made damned sure her body was her own, and she even hired Basselt to make sure other girls got that option.

I wasn't going to take that from her by fighting her father and defending her. Sometimes, men got violent and sometimes, they just needed to rant. I was going the route where he could get a freebie trashing the woman I loved and I wouldn't kill him so he didn't come at her tavern harder later.

And he did. He went on this grotesque rant about how women should be soft with long hair, big boobs, and child-bearing hips.

If I didn't know he had children all over Nestrán and I was in love with one, I'd bet a week's wages he hadn't actually met a woman before.

They came in all shapes and sizes and that was a beautiful thing.

Men wore their hair long, too, so that wasn't a woman thing.

Beck's had never been cut, but even men who weren't from the Jagged Key Isles wore their hair long.

Rich people were weird and I couldn't stab him to shut him up.

When Rowena was a kid, she was a terror. Sometimes, you just had to let her yell until she was done. She grew out of that when she was six. This was worse than that. Rowena was a kid and didn't know any better. Folcard had adult children and was puppet mastering our monarchy.

I just really wanted to stab him.

He looked like he was finally winding down and if he kept going, I might actually slit his throat, so I jumped in.

“Well, you showed her any way. She’s just a stubborn woman. She doesn’t have the cure, and she’s too proud to go crawling back to you for anything else. You could just pretend she doesn’t exist because she’s probably furious you changed the rules on her.”

I mean, she wasn’t. She had the cure lined up and was preparing for a street party. Lucy was proud of the fact that she burned that bridge. So was I. I planned on getting very drunk and finally kissing her. I just couldn’t until everything was settled.

“Hrm. Yes. It’s just unnatural for a woman to look like that. I wanted to talk about your contract, too. Have you completed your end?”

“What’s going to happen if I did?”

“Well, Trevils would have reported to me if there was a murder, so I happen to know you didn’t.”

“Unless someone waited until his family was visiting in-laws and haven’t reported it yet. Not confirming if they did or didn’t until I know what’s going to happen.”

Because Keeva also taught me how to get rid of a body. I left them because it was really risky to move them and I didn’t leave any other evidence. If they were going to screw me over, then they’d never find that body.

“I think if someone was careful enough to do it when his family was gone, then their mother would get the cure, and I’d be interested in paying them a small fee to

continue that work.”

“What about Trevils? Because he’s well-loved and I actually like the man.”

“That man is like a dog with a bone, but I’ll handle him with regard to your work. The only reason I haven’t insisted he retire at his age is that he’s nearly irreplaceable. Eventually, he’s going to insist and you won’t have to worry.”

“Then, yes. It’s done. I can do it again for money, but I won’t touch women and children. I also want the ability to decline jobs.”

The man was a complete moron, but he wasn’t totally stupid. I’d all but told him I was the Blight and he just needed to connect the dots. He could hang me or hire me. I was counting on this stinky, little weasel wanting to hire me.

“Done. But if you ever get caught, I don’t know you.”

I grinned. I wasn’t going to get caught, and I’d just gotten everything I wanted.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

G uttertown looked beautiful. People had pulled their stalls over and Sabine and the girls set up outside to make music for everyone.

The girls at the brothel had made themselves up and intended to flirt up a storm to bring in money.

Leodos stole Mom to go over the books because he got that she needed to rest.

It was almost time to start and Neco wasn't back yet. I was worried and they could all tell.

"He'll be back. He's a big boy," Ollie said.

"You don't think he killed a Baron, do you?" I asked.

"Neco is way too careful for that. If he did, they'll never be able to pin it on him," Beck said.

"Isn't that him? No one else is that big and walks like a cat," Ronan said.

Yeah, that was definitely Neco walking up the road. I took off running and flung myself at him. He caught me and squeezed me.

"This is assault. What was that for?" he asked.

"I was worried you gutted Folcard."



“Nah. I just manipulated him. I don’t think he’ll be bothering you too much and I got exactly what I wanted. No women or kids and I can turn down a kill if I want. I got the cure, too.”

“Shit, we did it? We got exactly what we wanted?”

“I wanted Neco to gut them,” Ollie snorted.

“You could pick them off one by one,” Ronan said. “You’d be doing Nestran a favor.”

“Mm, can’t,” Neco said, nuzzling my hair with his cheek. “They know I’m the Blight now.”

“Holy shit, you never told me you were my sister!” Autar yelled, jumping into the conversation and pulling me into a hug.

“Which makes all the times you told me I knew nothing about women hilarious, asshole.”

“I still think women like it when you tell them they have splendid tits.”

“Not right after meeting them and not right before you ask them to marry you.”

“Hey, you think Sabine would marry me? She’s gorgeous and I love her voice.”

“I think she’d flirt with you if she wanted something, but I’m pretty sure she’s into women.”

“Damn. I wish I was a woman right now,” Autar moaned.

“No, you don’t because our father would have thrown you in the brothel.”

Autar leaned in.

“What’s the plan? We’re taking them down, right? I can get information from the inside because the idiot made me his general just because I’m big.”

I wanted that more than anything. There were more people who hated them than liked them. It just wasn’t possible because of the arse kissers like Goran.

“We can’t do shit to them. I might have gotten the cure and this would have gone differently, but Goran inadvertently snitched when he was trying to sell me out. We’d have to get everyone on board to overthrow them without knowing ahead of time and you just can’t trust some of these people.”

“It’s just not fair,” Ronan said. “They’ve screwed everyone over and there’s still people begging for scraps from them thinking they won’t. Even if they do help, it’s only when they benefit.”

“Nothing’s going to change until Nestrans find someone stronger than them who everyone can rally behind. Someone who can rally everyone and show them they can stand up to them,” Beck said. “But that person doesn’t exist.”

No, they didn’t. The gods were cruel. The people on Nestrans with magic had a known weakness. They wanted the Barons gone, but they didn’t really want much to do with humans, either.

“They probably never will,” I said. “Let’s get your mom the cure and get the party started.”

“She’s over there with Rowena. Rowena wouldn’t want to miss this and with me

gone, someone needed to make sure no one stepped on her foot by accident and got assaulted.”

Yeah, that was valid. I still liked that kid. Neco presented Theda with the cure. She gave him the ‘Mom’ stare before she drank it.

“This is the end of your dealings with your father, right?”

“Of course. Please take it.”

Neco wasn’t technically lying. Folcard was the one who hired him, not his father. I wasn’t going to correct him because I wasn’t a snitch. Neco was good at what he did and I didn’t want to worry Theda. I’d handle it.

Rowena flung herself at Neco. He picked her up and squeezed her.

Rowena didn’t know half of what was going on, but she was a smart kid.

She was still an Argent kid, and she knew what was up.

Her mom was sick and her brother had to go to her father.

Her father could have demanded payment from both of them when she was old enough. Neco took care of that.

“You know I’ll always protect you, right?” Neco growled.

“One day, I’m going to get big and change everything.”

“I’ll bet you will.”

Rowena was beloved in Guttertown. We would rally around her. The rest of Nestran would just see her as a Guttertown brat and probably wouldn't.

I could hope, though, because that person Beck mentioned certainly wasn't me.

"Let's get this party started!" I yelled.

The rest of Guttertown started hooting and hollering. Yeah, it was time for a celebration the likes Guttertown had never seen.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

I poked Leodos, who was sitting at the bar of my tavern waxing poetic to Trevils and Aimes about how the sun shone out our future queen's arse. Yeah, he might not be saying it to her, but Leodos was madly in love with Princess Esylle.

"Listen, now that you know I'm a girl, can I give you some advice?"

"Sure, kid."

"You're insanely tall, not ugly, and her dad likes you. Just tell the woman you're in love with her."

"Are you kidding?" Ollie asked. "Leodos is kind of hot for an older man. I wouldn't kick him out of our bed if one of you wanted to invite him."

Leodos started choking.

"With that, I'm going to buy something greasy from a stall outside. And whatever you're calling this new infusion, I want regular bottles."

Yeah, I hadn't even named it yet, but people loved it. I was going to have to step up my infusions, especially if Leodos was buying. I was going to let Ollie and Ronan loose when it came to naming it because my creativity lay in recipes.

Just then, Darnell, who managed to live in Guttertown and not be able to handle his spirits, crashed into me and held onto me for dear life.

"Lance! Lucy! Shit, do you see it?" he slurred.

“See what?”

“There’s a tiny blue demon pissing in the corner of the Whispering Raven. Oh! He’s waving his cock at me and mocking me. Make him leave!”

Yeah, Darnell was pissed on spirits. He usually just embarrassed himself with the ladies and then started a fight.

He could still do that. Beck swooped in to save us because sometimes, when we tossed Darnell out of the tavern, he wandered over to the brothel and caused a scene there. No one wanted that.

“Why don’t we get something greasy to eat while Lucy takes care of the demon?”

“Maybe Ollie should do it. His cock is giant and it shouldn’t be anywhere near girls.”

“Then, Ollie will handle it,” Beck said, steering Darnell out of the tavern.

“Okay, so if the new spirit has Darnell hallucinating demons with a third leg, then we have to call it something special,” Ronan said.

“Nothing about dicks,” Ollie said. “Call it Demon Rage.”

“That’s perfect,” I said. “I’m going to have to set a lot of it infusing. Between that and the Bloody Marys, we’re going to be really busy when the rest of Nestrans figures out they can’t recreate them.”

“Which is why we’re going to celebrate here and then we’re going to celebrate after at the barn,” Ollie said.

“You can wait,” Neco growled. “I haven’t even kissed her yet.”

“Uh, yeah, because you were a fucking moron,” Ollie said.

“What Ollie was trying to say is that it can be very sexy to watch, so we’d all be more than happy for you to go first.”

I broke out into goosebumps. What was Neco like in bed? Was it dangerous because he was a killer or was like how it was when we were alone and he just held me and I felt safe?

“Well, I’m planning on taking my time,” Neco grumped.

“Good. If you were bad at it, I’d get Keeva to teach me how to kill you,” Ollie said.

“I’m not bad at it!”

“We’ll be the judge of that.”

Neco pounced and put Ollie in a headlock.

“I missed you, you asshole.”

We were all just so happy to have Neco back, not even Ollie pointed out we had been here this whole time waiting for him to come back.

But right now, we were celebrating. We took turns slinging drinks and running food from the kitchen and going out and seeing what people were getting up to on the street.

It was getting pretty rowdy. Sabine and the girls were playing some pretty raunchy songs. Most of them were written by men about women. It was pretty amazing hearing them sung by women, especially one as talented as these.

Guttertown didn't have much of an occasion to party like this often.

Things weren't going to get better for everyone but they would get better for a lot of the Argent kids.

If fewer Argent kids came to them for help when their moms were sick, maybe the Barons would stop swooping in here and forcing women to be their mistresses.

The Whispering Raven stayed open until we ran out of a lot of things.

We couldn't make Bloody Marys anymore and I didn't know there was going to be a party when I set the infusions for the Demon Rage.

We closed up before we were completely out so we'd have some to sell while I replenished our stores.

We enjoyed a little bit more of the music and then we headed off to the barn for our own private celebration.



*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

Despite growing up above a tavern, I never got messy drunk, and neither did my friends.

We did that when we were fifteen, spent a night in the cells, and then woke up with the worst hangover ever in the cell next to another group of drunk people who missed the chamber pot every time they puked, pissed, or shat. The smell was unholy.

We were stupid sometimes, but we learned our lesson the first time.

We ended up in the cells the other times for reasons other than drunken shenanigans.

So, we drank enough at the party to feel nice, but not enough that we couldn't still run a business or end up in the cells again.

The Guttertown constables would be looking the other way for a lot of shit tonight, but not everything.

The barn wasn't as fancy as the first time I was here with these men. Ollie refused to let anyone proceed until he ran inside to get blankets and candles.

I was just as nervous as I was the first time I was here. It had been so perfect with Ollie, Beck, and Ronan, but this was Neco. Even when I hated him, I still loved him. I didn't want to lose him again.

He was just leaning against the post with his arms crossed and he had no right looking that sexy.

“Promise me this isn’t going to change anything,” I said.

Neco stalked over to me and yanked me to his chest.

“Oh, this is going to change everything.”

And then he kissed me. It was gentle but passionate.

And I knew everything would change, but for the better.

Neco Argent was mine now. He was mine just like Ollie, Ronan, and Beck were.

Everything was exactly how it was supposed to be.

We were back together, stronger than ever, and I didn’t have to hide anymore.

“Ollie better get back soon or I’m going to have you in the hay,” Neco growled.

“You’d better not,” Ollie said, coming back in with his arms full. “Everyone else might see her as a Guttertown brat, but to us, she’s the bloody Queen of Nestran. You don’t fuck the Queen of Nestran on hay, Neco.”

“I don’t know,” Beck snorted. “Leodos is in love with the future Queen of Nestran and spent time in Guttertown. It could happen.”

I fell out laughing because I had a feeling Leodos was never going to tell her. Ronan stepped forward and pressed me between him and Neco.

“I think Lucy would be into it if her lover wanted her so much, that he just threw her down on the hay because he couldn’t wait for a blanket,” Ronan said, licking my ear.

I couldn't help the moan that came out of me, but Neco snatched me away from Ronan.

"We can share her later. I want her to myself first and I won't stab you for watching. I think I might like it."

"We need some rules," Ollie said. "You can't threaten to stab us every time you want alone time with Lucy."

"Why not? I'm good at it," Neco smirked.

"No stabbing. I'm not picking, either. You're going to have to work that out amongst yourselves."

"And we would have let you go first without the threat, asshole," Beck said.

Neco just grunted and started tugging on my shirt.

"May I?"

"Of course, but you all need to watch my stitches or I'm going to have to leave to find Basselt. I'm hoping he got drunk enough to make a move on Mom."

Neco was reverent when he pulled my shirt off. As soon as my father left and my secret was out, I went back upstairs and took my bindings off. I was considering burning them. Today was the first time I was out in public without my chest bound.

It was freeing, but for once, I didn't have the urge to cross my arms over my chest when one of them took my shirt off. This was me. I wasn't ashamed, and I didn't have to hide anymore. My men enjoyed it based on the growls around the barn as soon as my breasts were bare.

Neco stepped into my personal space and looked down at me.

“You always were the most beautiful thing in Nestran, even when I thought you were a man.”

I could have been a total asshole because everyone knew Princess Esylle was the most beautiful woman in Nestran, but I didn’t.

That was actually insanely sweet and Neco didn’t lie.

He just didn’t say anything if he didn’t want to tell the truth.

I actually blushed because Neco really did believe that.

“Neco...”

“Shh. Let me just look at you. I used to imagine this and beat myself up because I thought we were siblings. You’re a little different without your clothes on than I pictured, but fuck, are you still perfect, anyway.”

“Damn, when he actually opens his mouth, he’s smooth,” Ollie grumbled.

“He’s perfect,” I said. “When do I get to see you naked? I might want to stare, too.”

“Oh, no, Lucy. I’m barely holding myself back. When these clothes come off, you’re going to have about two seconds before I have you on your back with my face buried between your thighs.”

“Oh, gods, Neco, you can’t say shit like that,” I moaned.

“Too late,” he growled, shimmying out of his clothes in seconds.

Neco was on me in seconds, but he was just so gentle when he placed me on the blankets.

I was actually back to wanting to murder Neco Argent.

He had me pinned to the blanket, and he'd lick my clit until I was so close and then just stop.

And since he had me pinned down, I couldn't kick him in the face like I wanted.

"Neco, I'm going to get Keeva to teach me to kill you," I growled.

Neco just chuckled and stopped licking me again.

"What the giant isn't telling you because his tongue is busy is that when he does let you cum, it's going to be really intense," Beck said.

"Don't hit him because you'll be thanking him later," Ollie said.

"We'll go over there and help him hold you down," Ronan warned.

"I hate all of—Oh, fuck!"

Neco was a sly fucker. He didn't stop that time and my orgasm took hold of my entire body. I was pretty sure they were all just fucking with me like we did when we were kids because it felt like Neco was torturing me for kicks.

I was wrong. I was so wrong and I could admit that. It was intense, and it never seemed to stop. It seemed like it was going to go on forever and then I was limp on the blankets.

“First of all, fuck you all for being right about that.”

They all started laughing at me.

“Lucy, two of us live in a brothel and we tell each other everything. The girls talk and some of them wanted to make sure they didn’t send men into the world who were bad in bed.

None of them fucked us aside from that one time we paid for it, but I guess you could say we were their apprentices,” Beck said.

“I’ll have to give them a round of drinks on the house in thanks. Can I touch you, Neco?”

Because I didn’t know how to navigate naked Neco. He was particular about being touched. It had to be someone he cared about and it had to be on his terms. I didn’t want to make him uncomfortable.

“You can always touch me, but not right now. I need to be inside you.”

“Then do it.”

There were a lot of things I could always expect from Neco Argent, but he also surprised me all the time. It was gentle, but it was so just so intense. Neco’s eyes never left mine, and I completely forgot we were being watched. It was like we were the only people in Nestrán right now.

I couldn’t help clawing at Neco’s back and he seemed into it.

“Scratch me up, Lucy,” he growled. “I want to wear your marks and remember this.”

Fuck. I didn't take Neco for being so good at bedroom talk since he only spoke when he had something to say, but it was doing things to me.

"Come, Lucy," Neco growled.

Yeah, that shouldn't have worked, but it did. I might have drawn blood when I scratched his back. Neco bit me when he came and yeah, I was into that, too.

Neco held me and rested his forehead on mine.

"Is it too soon to say I love you?" he whispered.

"No, because I love you, too. I love all of you. And I want to show you."

Because this celebration wasn't done yet.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

I could probably die happy after that, but I'd still fight it because I wanted Lucy again. I wanted a whole life with her and these arseholes. We could do that now and I was going to make damned sure it was the best life it could be.

For the longest time, I didn't understand men who wanted to watch. There were men who wanted to pay to watch, but the Madame made sure we all knew what consent was. She said that extended to everyone and the only way these men could watch was if the people they were watching consented to it.

I still didn't completely get the appeal of watching strangers, but I liked watching this and I was taking notes. Lucy was the center of us and she always would be, but we loved each other, too.

Lucy didn't seem jealous, and she wasn't forbidding anything.

I thought if I eventually got over Lance and met a woman, I'd have to ignore that part of myself that also enjoyed being with men.

But based on that hungry look in her eyes as she watched Ollie and Ronan paw at each other, she not only didn't care, she was also very into it.

I was still hard, so I pulled my cock out and started stroking it.

I had the perfect advantage right now because I insisted on going first and alone.

I was studying everything. I was figuring out who liked what and what they didn't like.



They had an advantage over me because they'd been with Lucy longer and been together even longer than that. I'd only been with Beck once.

I already knew Beck was a little dominant in bed. I could have guessed Ollie was into pleasing people, but I guess seeing him on his knees in front of Beck just spelled that out for me. There was no way I could have guessed Ronan was completely obsessed with arses.

They'd managed to talk Lucy into something I really wanted to see.

Ronan just needed to prep her, but he had his face buried in her arse like he was desperate for it.

No one had ever done that to me before, but I knew some of the girls liked it if it actually happened.

Based on the noises Lucy was making, she loved every minute of it.

What did that feel like? I was curious and I could try that now. I'd stepped out of our group and now I was back. Even though I wasn't participating in this, I didn't feel left out at all. Beck had locked eyes with me while Ollie sucked his cock and there was so much promise in his gaze.

Yeah, Beck knew exactly what I was doing.

"Do you like what you see, Neco?" Beck purred.

"Fuck yes. Watching and learning."

"Does your assassin brain work on sex?"

“Pretty sure it does, and that’s why I’m not terrible at it.”

“And I can confirm that and so can Lucy. Remember when we were kids? We all have to agree or it’s not true. You’re going to have to prove you aren’t terrible at sex with Ronan and Ollie.”

There were four moans. Mine, Ollie’s, Ronan’s, and Lucy’s was the loudest. Yeah, she was really into the idea of all of us being together.

Ronan finally decided he was done feasting on Lucy’s arse and got the oil out to prep her.

She had that tense, cagey look I knew so well, like she was going to kick Ronan in the face if she didn’t like anal.

Maybe it was different now that the relationship had changed, and we were older, but that was how it used to be.

If we didn’t like something, we just punched each other.

We should probably stop doing that if it was still a thing.

But Ronan clearly knew what he was doing, and she was putty in his hands. When I did that for the first time, it would be with Ronan. When Lucy was finally relaxed, that was when things finally got interesting.

The girls told me about this, but I’d never sat there and watched it go down. I’d also never done it before because it was hard enough finding one woman to have meaningless sex with because they all acted like it wasn’t going to be meaningless and it’d bite me in the arse later.

Lucy crawled on top of Ollie and lowered herself onto his cock. They were walking her through everything. Ronan pressed her back so her breasts were pressed against Ollie's chest.

"Good girl. How do you feel?" Ronan asked.

Yeah, she liked that. Lucy liked being called a good girl. Noted. I intended to use that. She had a lovely flush on her cheeks. I wanted to be the cause of that.

Lucy was completely relaxed from Ronan's attention, but he still took his time. I appreciated that, and I knew she did, too. When he was buried to the hilt in her arse, he started petting her back.

"How are you doing, love?"

"Perfect. I want Beck."

Ronan and Ollie were always the ones with ideas when we were kids.

Ollie's usually got us in trouble and Ronan's were usually revenge based.

Ronan was the one who suggested this. The girls at work said most of the men wanted to pay for several girls at once, but sometimes, they'd get a few friends who'd come in and want to share a woman.

I knew this was possible, even though I'd never done it, but seeing it was completely different.

Women were amazing creatures. Beck was a Jagged Key Isles-trained warrior.

Ollie was pretty big from working at his uncle's farm.

He played the joker and avoided fights, but if he wanted to, he could hurt someone.

Ronan fought his battles with his wits, but he also swam every day he could, so he was pretty strong, too.

Lucy was taking all three of them and enjoying every minute of it.

She was glorious. I'd probably never meet the future Queen of Nestran, but I just knew even with the rumors of her beauty and the fire magic, she just couldn't measure up to Lucy Argent.

There wasn't a single woman in Nestran who could.

My hand started moving faster on my cock as the foursome in front of me picked up their pace. It would be me in one of those places soon, but not tonight. Tonight, I was just really enjoying watching.

The cords in Beck's neck were tense as he fucked her mouth with his hands buried in her short hair. The muscles in Ronan's arse flexed as he pumped into her. Ollie had thick arms from working on the farm. The tendons in his biceps tightened as he gripped Lucy's hips to fuck her pussy.

Lucy came undone first. She was beautiful when she came. Beck came next, and she swallowed every drop of him. Ollie and Ronan were next. My cock erupted shortly after Ronan growled that he came.

Fuck. She was mine now. They were mine. The only person in Nestran I had to worry about putting two and two together that I was the Blight was Trevils and the Barons agreed to run interference for me.

I couldn't believe it. The Argent kids never came out ahead if we needed anything

from our fathers, but we'd gotten exactly what we wanted.

And now I had an inside with the Barons to make damned sure Folcard stayed away from Lucy's tavern.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

I was sore in all the right ways when I woke up.

I really didn't think the rich half of Nestrán knew how to throw a proper celebration like Guttertown did, but they did have one advantage we didn't.

They had people who did the work for them, so if they stayed up too late or got drunk, they could just sleep it off.

We didn't have that advantage. My tavern wasn't an early morning business, but the prep work had to start at sun-up, so we were all walking back. We were joined on the main road by Basselt, Athan, and Tarja,

Tarja could be mean when she wasn't hung over, but she'd hit the Demon Rage pretty hard and also hit Darnell, probably because he came to her first about that blue demon with the giant cock. She actually appeared to be in a decent mood considering how much Ollie and I served her last night.

"I want a bottle of that Demon Rage for my stores. And Basselt showed us how to make the cure for Caitrin. It doesn't need copper. They use copper and have a vein of it, but it's not required for healing like it is here. This is going to change everything. And I owe Caitrin an apology."

"Why?"

If Tarja was rude to Mom, she'd just be rude right back. I couldn't imagine a scenario where Tarja owed Mom an apology and Mom didn't also owe Tarja one.

“You. She was always particular about your treatment and I thought she was saying I was one of those perverts who got weird around kids when I needed to get a certain look at you when you were younger. I get it now, but she could have trusted us.”

Ah, yeah. That was the one thing that Mom wouldn't have returned the favor over.

“She couldn't let you know because I didn't know. You could have kept that secret, but I was a kid and I might not have been able to.”

“I never figured it out when you got older because you weren't one of those big, stropky lads, but you were always healthy like one. I never treated you that often.”

“That's because I do all the things that I know are healthy and some of the things that are just rumors so you don't have to.”

“Mm. We should probably study some of the things you thought were just rumors to make them fact.”

When we got to the tavern, Keeva came out to meet us. She was Beck's aunt by blood, but she was our aunt, too, by extension. She was close with her twin, but she was also friends with Mom, so I didn't question her being here while I was gone.

She walked over and hugged Beck, but she punched Neco right in the stomach. He just grunted and grinned at her.

“I heard you got the rich people to pay you and now you're safe.”

“I did, but I don't know how you know that.”

“My twin is not the only one with spies.”

I should have been worried two of the most powerful women in Guttertown had spies everywhere, but I didn't. They were my family, and they'd keep our secrets. If they heard something we needed to know, we'd find out. It actually made me feel safe.

"Caitrin is still sleeping. I made her a tea to help her rest. If you've got that cure, now is a good time to give it to her."

Mom came stumbling out of the tavern. She'd never been a morning person, but she had to be to own a business. I grabbed Mom and hugged her because this was it. I finally had the cure, and I didn't have to lose her. She hugged me back just as tightly because she got it. She could have lost me, too.

When we let go, Basselt held out a vial.

"Drink it quickly. Honey cuts down on the bitterness, but it still tastes terrible."

Mom uncorked it and threw it back. She screwed up her face as she swallowed.

"Wow, that is terrible. I'll bet between Lucy and I, we can figure out how to make it taste better."

"That would be a good thing. Sometimes, the cubs don't want to take it because it tastes bad, but they need it. Your young are probably the same."

"How long does it take to work?" I asked.

"What's in her lungs has to come out. I'm going to have to thump on her back and teach her how to cough. The same goes for your mom, Neco. The Barons should have at least passed that along when they gave you that remedy. It's more painful when you don't."



“Arseholes. Show me.”

Damn. I was hoping to get Basselt and Mom alone when she was feeling better so he could thump all over her body.

“One last thing and if this offends you, it never happened,” Mom said.

Basselt raised an eyebrow at her, but then he had to catch her because Mom was kissing him. My friends and I being us hooted and hollered while we encouraged them to go upstairs and get naked.

Basselt was definitely kissing her back, so he wasn't offended by that at all.

That was the last thing I wanted. I wanted my mom alive, but I also wanted her happy. Folcard insured she'd have to go it alone with just me because Guttertown men were cowards. Folcard wasn't coming back. He might try to tax us harder, but he was done with us.

I was going to eventually marry, and I wanted someone for Mom when I was gone. I also wanted Basselt to be that man because I actually liked him and thought he was good for her.

It looked like he agreed. Yeah, I got everything I wanted.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

We fell into a bit of a routine after that.

The Madame was right. Ollie and I got all kinds of secrets from people who came from outside of Guttertown when they realized their taverns couldn't do what mine could and they got curious.

We leveraged them to keep Folcard far away from the Whispering Raven.

I didn't bind my chest anymore, but I grew out my hair and hated it, so I cut it off again.

I let the girls at the brothel show me how to do makeup and I also hated that, so I didn't do it.

Everyone in Guttertown knew, but some of the folks who weren't from here still thought I was just a feminine man sometimes.

I used that to my advantage all the time.

There wasn't really any ceremony for the five of us in Nestrán, but there was in the Jagged Key Isle. It wasn't Nestrán official, but we were all hand fasted and Guttertown knew we were married.

Neco ferreted enough money away to buy Theda a house to retire in. She fussed, but he wouldn't hear of it. We were socking money away to have a house built for the five of us. It wouldn't be a fucking Nestrán palace, but it was going to be nice. Ronan designed it.

I thought it was impossible, but five years later, a tiny girl with an Idric Island accent, red hair, a mouth that would make a Guttertown drunk blush, and dressed like the shifters strolled right into my tavern and bonded with Neco over a man they both beat the shit out of.

That was when everything in Nestrán changed, but that's another story.