

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PENELOPE BARSETTI



A NOVELLA

CHAMPION OF CARDS

A DIRTY BLOOD NOVELLA

PENELOPE BARSETTI

HARTWICK PUBLISHING

Hartwick Publishing

Champion of Cards

Copyright © 2023 by Penelope Barsetti

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

1. [Fang](#)
2. [Fang](#)
3. [Fang](#)
4. [Fang](#)
5. [Fang](#)

ONE
FANG

Storm clouds covered the sky, thicker than usual, like it might rain. It was so dark it almost looked like nighttime, even though it was the middle of the day. While Kingsnake was off with Viper, Larisa and I sat together on the cliffside, watching the powerful waves break against the shore.

The breeze moved through her hair and pulled it behind her shoulder, revealing her creamy, porcelain skin that was unblemished and unaged.

I continued to watch her, see the way her eyes dropped down to the edge of the cliff instead of the water, like her mind was somewhere other than on the beautiful day. *Larissa?*

She lifted her chin and looked at me. “Yes?”

Sssomething troubles you.

“Oh, it’s nothing...” She turned back to the cliff and the waves beyond.

I won’t tell him.

“I don’t want you to keep secrets from him.”

I keep sssecretsss from you.

“Really?” she asked. “What secrets?”

I wasssn’t born yesssterday.

She smirked and looked away. “Life is peaceful. I’m happy. But I guess there will always be doubts if I made the right decision...”

What doubtsss?

She hesitated before she answered. “You promise you’ll keep this between us?”

Of coursse.

“Kingsnake is the only man for me. But it’s hard knowing... I’ll never have children. Some people know they want them, and some people know they don’t. I’ve always been the former...ever since I was a little girl.”

I’d had hatchlings several times, but once they were born, they slithered off on their own. We treated our young differently than humans. Because of that reason, I struggled to understand the ache in her heart, but I tried as hard as I could because her sadness made me sad. ***You have me.***

The corner of her mouth quirked up in a smile. “I know.”

And you’ll alwaysss have me.

“I know. But you’re already grown, powerful and autonomous. It’s different...”

Even when I wasss a hatchling, I was fierce. A human tried to take me, and I broke his wrissst.

She looked at me.

And then I bit his nossse off.

“Not exactly what I pictured in raising a family,” she said with a chuckle. “But I guess I need to learn to accept my reality. I don’t want to mention it to Kingsnake because it’ll make him feel bad...or make him wonder if I question our relationship.”

But you do quesstion your relationssship.

“It’s not him that I question...”

I wanted to make her feel better, but I didn’t know how. All she wanted was a hatchling of her own, but I couldn’t give that to her. ***It’sss been my dream to play in the Champion of Cardssss tournament. But only humansss are allowed to play...and no sssnakes. I understand your disappointment.***

Larisa looked at me, her eyes sad.

If I could play, I know I would be the champion. That trophy would be mine, and I would get the Golden Card to wear upon my neck. It would look sssooo beautiful againssst my gloriousss ssscalesss. I would give the gold to Kingsnake to donate to our people. The honor and the pride I would feel... would be unmatched.

“I know my dream can’t come true, but there’s no reason yours can’t.”

But no sssnakesss.

“Kingsnake’s father is the King of Kingdoms now. There’s no reason he can’t let you play.”

I’d despised Kingsnake’s father for a long time—since he killed all the golden serpents just to hoard his power. Not all snakes got along. Some of us were sworn enemies of each other. But to eradicate an entire race of them...was despicable. ***He’sss a sssnake killer, and I wisssh him a painful death...***

“I know, but he’s your only chance.”

Never. I looked at the ocean again. I was far too stubborn to ask for a favor from my enemy.

“What if Kingsnake asks?”

I remained quiet.

“I know he would ask for you. He would do anything for you, Fang.”

And I would do anything for him.

“Then let me speak to him. I want you to play, Fang. And I want to sit there and watch you win.”

I lay in my chair in the other room, my long body dispersed across the branches with my head turned toward the window. It was dark now, the sun setting behind the storm clouds that blocked out the sky.

The door opened and closed, and I heard Kingsnake enter the bedroom. The first thing he did was embrace Larisa, kissing her as he squeezed her ass. I couldn't see any of this, but I just knew.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Viper found the new settlement for the orcs. He wants to hunt them down, but I want to leave them be.”

Her smile was in her voice. “Because you're a good man, Kingsnake.”

“I'm just not barbaric. My brother likes to tie up loose ends.”

“I want to ask you something...”

“I'm listening, baby.”

“Fang and I were talking...”

Thanksss for sssaying hi...

His annoyance was audible in his voice. *Hello, Fang.*

Larisa continued. “He really wants to play in the Champion of Cards tournament.”

“*The what?*” he asked incredulously.

“It’s a card tournament in the Kingdoms. But I guess it’s for humans only.”

“If it’s for humans only, then why are we having this conversation?”

“Because he deserves a chance to play,” she said. “He shouldn’t be disqualified because of his race.”

“Not his *race*. His *species*.”

“Whatever,” she said. “He deserves a chance.”

Kingsnake gave a loud sigh.

I slithered out of my tree and joined them in the other room, snaking up the bed so I could perch myself up and be level with their gaze.

He looked at me. “What do you expect me to do about it?”

“Force them to let him play,” Larisa said. “You’re the King of Vampires and Lord of Darkness. They’ll do what you say.”

“The Kingdoms are now under the rule of my father, an egomaniac.”

“Then ask him to make an exception.”

Kingsnake studied her for a moment before he turned to me.

“What’s the winning prize?”

A trophy...and the Golden Card.

“What’s the Golden Card?”

A necklacce.

“You want to play for a necklace?” he asked incredulously.
“You don’t even have a neck.”

“Hiiiiisssssss.” *I want the honor. I want everyone to look at me and know I’m the besst.*

“Kingsnake,” Larisa said as she gave him a scowl.

He turned back to look at Larisa, a look of resignation on his face. “Fine. I’ll speak with him.”

Larisa smiled and moved into his chest to hug him tightly.
“I’m excited. I can’t wait to see Fang’s dream come true.”

I needed to practice. I slithered to the coffee table in the other room. *Come on, let’sss play.*

Kingsnake pulled away to look down at her. “Now look what you did...”

TWO
FANG

Kingsnake took the lead with his horse while Larisa and I shared another steed. If I weren't so heavy, we'd be able to ride together, but that was too much weight for a single horse. I was stowed in my bucket lined with sheep's fur, staying warm as we traveled through the snow toward the east.

Once the temperature started to warm, I poked my head out of the top. *Where are we?*

Close to Raventower.

I slithered out of the bucket and up the saddle to move around Larisa's shoulders. *It'sss warm.*

I'm surprised you don't choose to live somewhere warmer during the colder months.

And be apart from you and Kingsssnake? Never.

She remained close behind Kingsnake, who glanced over his shoulder every now and then to check on his wife.

I'm a vampire, and he still treats me as feeble...

He loooovessss you very much. You ssshould have ssseen how he treated the othersss.

He was that unkind?

Yesssss.

He spared those orcs. Seems pretty thoughtful to me.

He treatsss orcsss better.

She chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Kingsnake asked from up ahead.

Busssted.

“Fang told me you’re nicer to orcs than the women who were here before me.”

Kingsnake smirked slightly. “The sun is approaching its peak. We should make camp.”

I miss the sun.

I’m sssorry. Kingsnake used to struggle with the absence more than he did now. I knew it would take Larisa a long time to accept the darkness.

We made camp under the trees. Since it was warm, I slithered up one of the trees and found a patch of sunlight to warm my scales. They were far beneath me, twenty feet to the ground in their little cot with their swords on the ground beside them. They snuggled close despite the heat and went to sleep.

I watched them for a while before my eyes closed, and I drifted off.

We passed Raventower and the other Kingdoms and approached his father’s domain. The city had been rebuilt since the battle against the werewolves, the one that had nearly claimed Kingsnake’s life. Human kingdoms were much different from vampire ones. Everything was made out of gray

stone, and they were expansive, accommodating tens of thousands of people versus a few thousand in Grayson.

It was different now that King Serpentine was in charge. The flags along the wall had been replaced by banners of the Golden Serpent. The guards had been replaced by vampires, all bearing the armor of Crescent Falls. Humans completed their errands in the market, but there was a constant oppression in the air.

Wrapped around Kingsnake's shoulders, I could see the world as he saw it, see it from a height that I could only reach in length on the ground. People stared at me as we passed, admiring the color of my scales and the sharpness of my fangs.

Damn, I'm gorgeoussss.

"They don't think you're gorgeous," Kingsnake said. "They're afraid of you."

Real beauty can be terrifying.

Kingsnake chuckled then took Larisa's hand, walking hand in hand with her as they approached the castle. All the rubble had been cleared away. The fire damage had been repaired.

We took the steps to the castle, checked in with the guard who recognized Kingsnake, and then we entered the castle. The chandelier was bright with light, and the thick stone kept the heat outside, so it was cool and comfortable. We were escorted upstairs into the throne room, where King Serpentine waited.

One look at him made all the muscles inside my body coil in protest. ***Sssnake killer.***

Kingsnake addressed me. *You don't have to say that every time we see him.*

Yesss, I do.

“Son.” King Serpentine rose from his throne and approached Kingsnake, treating him more warmly than he had in recent decades. “What a wonderful surprise.” He embraced Kingsnake with a quick hug. Larisa received a polite nod in acknowledgment. She would always be beneath him since she used to be human...even though they all used to be human. “What brings you to my kingdom?”

“A favor,” Kingsnake said.

“What favor is that?” King Serpentine asked. “Peace reigns in our world. Can’t imagine anything more you would want.”

“It’s a small favor,” Kingsnake said. “Fang wants to compete in the Champion of Cards tournament, but I guess they’re pretty strict on their humans-only policy. Could you make an exception for him?”

His eyes shifted to me.

It took all my strength not to hiss.

His eyes shifted back to Kingsnake. “You want your snake to play in a card tournament while your older brother is abandoned in a foreign land?”

“We’ll travel soon,” Kingsnake said. “Cobra needed to take care of a couple things first...”

King Serpentine only looked more annoyed by that answer.

“Father,” Kingsnake said. “It’s not that much to ask—”

“I’ve just become ruler of all the Kingdoms, and you want me to begin my reign by allowing snakes to play in card matches?” he asked incredulously. “My subjects will think I’m a fool—and they’d be right to. He can’t even talk to anyone during the match.”

“Hiiiiissssssss.”

THREE

FANG

I hatess him.

“I’m not his biggest fan either,” Kingsnake said as we left the city and walked to the stables to retrieve our horses.

“Why is he like that?” Larisa asked. “We fought for the kingdom that he now rules, but granting you a favor is too much?”

He hatess sssnakes.

“I’m starting to wonder if that’s true,” Larisa said. “I’m sorry, Fang. I really thought my idea would work.”

It’sss okay. I was furious that King Serpentine refused to grant my wish, but I was more disappointed than anything else. That Golden Card would never circle my body. I wouldn’t have the opportunity to beat worthy opponents in the greatest match in this world. I was sure I could win, but now I would never know.

We rode back home, cutting through the warm fields and heading for the passage in the mountains. We passed Raventower then approached the hillsides, taking advantage of the sun as it hung low in the sky. I didn’t see anything... because I was too disappointed. I’d been playing cards all my

life, but for what? To crush every opponent I faced mercilessly.

We stopped when it was too dark for the horses to see. They were fed oats and given water before being tied to the branches of a nearby tree. Instead of sharing their cot with them, I chose to sleep in the branches up above...alone.

“I feel so bad...” Larisa whispered in the hope I wouldn’t hear.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I really thought that would work.”

“My father is an asshole who doesn’t care about anyone except himself...and Aurelias.”

“I know how much this means to Fang. There has to be something we can do.” They continued to whisper to each other in the darkness, oblivious to the fact that I could hear every word. My disappointment was amplified by their disappointment.

“Unless we can make him human...there’s nothing.”

They turned silent, the conversation finally over.

I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of the forest, the owls hooting in the distance, the crickets chirping. To others, it was distracting, but to me, it was a lullaby.

“Kingsnake,” Larisa said, her voice a little louder. “You said you could turn human if you wanted...”

Kingsnake hesitated before he spoke. “I thought we finalized our decision to live as vampires for eternity—”

“No,” she said quickly. “If the witch could make you human, couldn’t she make Fang human?”

Kingsnake was quiet for a long time. “I’m not sure. That’s a totally different scenario.”

“What if we ask? He would only need it for twenty-four hours, just long enough to compete and win.”

Kingsnake hesitated again. “I guess we can ask. But that’s up to Fang—”

Yesssss.

“Fang says he’s up for it,” Kingsnake said.

“Then let’s go to the witch and ask,” Larisa said. “Do you know where she is?”

“Yes,” Kingsnake answered. “I think I know where to find her.”

We stopped in Grayson to feed then continued west. The mountains were jagged and rocky, and there wasn’t much land west of the mountains so we allowed others to claim that land for themselves. Mostly small villages that lived without a king or ruler.

We camped during the brightest time of the day and the darkest part of the night, slowly making our way to the village.

“Are you sure about this?” Kingsnake rode his steed with me wrapped around his shoulders, Larisa slightly behind us.

Yesss.

“What about the cost?”

I don’t care about the cossst.

“Because you don’t know what it is...”

I wasss meant for this tournament.

“What if you can never change back?”

I don't ssspend my daysss worrying about thingsss that may never happen. Wassste of time.

“But what if that did happen?”

Asss long as I can ssstill crusssh bonesss and tear flesssh, that'sss fine with me.

The journey over the mountains was the longest part, and it took a while to find a safe path onward. The road was less traveled here, so the path wasn't beaten by hooves and wagons, the ground slippery rather than compacted. But we eventually made it over, descending downward until we reached a small village. It was unlike the others we'd seen. The buildings and homes were made of dark wood and black brick. There were moss and willow trees everywhere. A large lake was nearby, green fireflies visible in the air. There were no people on the road or in the center of town.

“This is the place?” Larisa whispered.

“Yes.” Kingsnake dismounted the horse with me on his shoulders then moved to help Larisa down, even though she was fully capable on her own. He tied the horses to the side of one building before he examined the road, one hand on the hilt of his blade. *Stay with Larisa.*

I left his shoulders and slid to her instead, crawling up her body and perching.

“This place is kinda creepy,” she whispered.

Everyone is probably assssleep. That'sss what I'd be doing right now...

Kingsnake lifted his hand to Larisa and gestured for her to stay put before he moved forward to explore.

Did he just tell me to stay like a dog?

Ssseemsss that way.

Bastard.

Kingsnake moved between the buildings as he searched for a sign of life, while Larisa and I remained still. Then, in the corner of my eye, I saw something move. I turned with quickness, spotting the cloaked figure approach.

“Hiisssssss.”

Larisa turned and drew her sword.

Kingsssnake.

“You look lost.” A woman pulled back the hood of her cloak and revealed a beautiful face, a face so beautiful it didn’t look natural. “Lost...and scared.”

“I look scared?” Larisa asked with a short laugh.

Kingsnake returned, standing in front of Larisa and me. “We are travelers unfamiliar with your village. We’re looking for someone, but this place appears to be abandoned.”

I left Larisa’s body and moved to the ground in a better stance for attack, my fangs bared and ready to pierce flesh.

She turned to look at Kingsnake, her head tilting slightly. “A nightwalker. I know your kind.” She looked him over from head to toe. “A strong young man in his prime...with features that could kill better than the sword he carries.”

Is this bitch making a move on my man?

I’ll choke, and you ssstab.

Deal.

Kingsnake said nothing to that.

“I’m the person you seek,” she said, her eyes upon Kingsnake. “But you’re too beautiful to be human, so your request is denied.”

I’m about to stab this bitch.

Don’t be threatened.

She’s got to be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen...

I know Kingsnake would disagree.

“I have a different request,” Kingsnake said. “A different kind of magic that I’m not even sure you can do.”

She smirked. “Try me.”

Kingsnake sheathed his sword.

Larisa didn’t.

He approached me on the ground and beckoned me to climb up his body. “This is Fang.” He watched me slide up until my head was propped on his shoulder. “It’s a long story, but he’d like to be human for a short time.”

“For what purpose?” she asked, looking at me with interest.

“To compete in the Champion of Cards tournament,” Kingsnake said. “It’s a yearly tournament in the Kingdoms—”

“I know of what you speak.” Her eyes remained on me.

“Vampires, werewolves, and snakes aren’t allowed,” Kingsnake continued. “I asked my father, King Serpentine, to make an exception, but he refused. Our only option is to make him human to compete.”

“It’s that important to you?” she asked.

Yesss.

“He says yes,” Kingsnake said. “It’s his dream.”

“Well.” She looked at Kingsnake again. “I think something can be arranged. Of course, I want something in return.”

“I assumed,” Kingsnake said. “Name your price.”

Her lips softened into a smile. “You.”

The air suddenly turned tense, so intense it felt like daggers against my scales. Kingsnake immediately glanced at Larisa to see her reaction.

Larisa snapped. “What the fuck did you just say?” She stepped forward, the hilt of her blade tight in her hand.

Kingsnake grabbed her by the arm and kept her back. “I’m married,” he said. “And this is my wife, Larisa.”

Larisa stared at her and slowly dragged her fingers across her throat, the threat clear.

I liked it.

The witch seemed unfazed by Larisa’s anger. “Kings have mistresses.”

“*Not this one,*” Larisa snapped, trying to take another step forward. “And bitch, you have some gall—”

“Baby.” He grabbed her arm again and gave her a hard look. “It’s okay.”

“*It’s okay?*” she asked incredulously. “If this were reversed, she’d already be dead—”

“*Silence.*” He turned away from her.

Now Larisa looked angrier than ever.

Kingsnake faced the woman. “I will not break my commitment to my wife under any circumstances. Not out of obligation, but desire. Is there something else I can grant you instead? I can give you enough money to change your circumstances substantially.”

She continued to look at Kingsnake like a slice of dessert. “I want you to feed from me. That is my final offer.”

“I told you I won’t break my commitment to my wife—”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m asking you to feed from me.”

Kingsnake hesitated before he looked at Larisa, who looked enraged.

As much as I wanted this, I couldn’t ask her to go through with it. *It’sss okay, Larisssa. It’sss not worth it. Let’sss go home.*

Slowly, her anger started to fade. *I know how much you want this....*

There’sss nothing I want more than your happiness.

“Excuse us.” Kingsnake escorted us away from the witch.

I moved up Kingsnake’s body to look at Larisa head on.

“This is your call,” Kingsnake said. “I want nothing to do with it.”

“I—I don’t know.” Larisa swallowed, visibly uncomfortable.

I told her it’sss okay. We don’t need to do thisss.

“Fang says it’s fine,” Kingsnake said. “Let’s go home.”

“But I want him to have this...” Her arms crossed over her chest.

“He doesn’t want to be the cause of your sadness,” he said.
“It’s not worth it.”

Her eyes dropped to the ground. “He deserves this. He deserves the chance to win.”

There’sss more to life than winning. Love isss more important. Alwayssss.

She lifted her chin as her eyes softened. “It’s okay...let’s do it.”

“Are you sure?” Kingsnake asked. “Because we’ll go home right now.”

“I’m sure,” she whispered. “But I don’t want to see it.”

Kingsnake gave a heavy sigh. “For what it’s worth, I don’t want to do this either.”

She stared at him, her eyes soft. “I know.”

He moved in close and kissed her, his arm circling her back.

My body wrapped around her neck, wrapping around them both as we all embraced.

When Kingsnake pulled away, I shifted to Larisa’s shoulders instead, knowing I would stay to comfort her while the feeding took place.

Kingsnake walked to the witch. “You have a deal.”

Larisa and I sat together under a willow tree, the brilliant fireflies floating around us and casting light upon our faces. There was a greenish glow from the color of the grass, the lake in the distance, loud with the sound of wildlife.

I stared at Larisa, feeling low. *Thank you for doing thisss for me.*

She smiled. “Of course, Fang.”

When we’re finisshed with her, I’ll sssnap her ssspine.

“As tempting as that sounds, it’s okay. I can feel Kingsnake, and unless he’s a master at controlling his emotions, he doesn’t feel anything. He never feels anything when he feeds.”

Of courssse he doesssn’t.

“I trust Kingsnake and know he’s nothing like Elias, but it’s hard to shake that feeling, no matter how much assurance he gives me.”

It’s undersstandable.

“It’s annoying being with a man whom everyone wants for themselves.”

Really? Kingsssnake is grouchy and moody...

She smirked. “Yeah, he can be.”

And annoying.

Now she chuckled. “He can be that too. But damn, that man is fine...”

Eh.

The smile stayed on her lips. “I wonder what you’ll look like as a human.”

I don’t know...hopefully ferocioussss.

“You’ll intimidate the other players at the table.”

I’d probably intimidate them more as a sssnake.

“True.”

Kingsnake emerged, leaving the little house on the hill then crossing the cobblestone road. There was no indication that anything had happened, no blood in the corner of his mouth. There was only a flush of color to his skin now that his belly was full. “You alright?”

Larisa got to her feet. “We were just talking about what he’ll look like as a human. He hopes he’ll be ferocious.”

Very ferociousss.

The witch appeared at the bottom of the hill, her cloak billowing about her in the breeze. Her eyes were on me before she slowly raised her hand in the air and beckoned me to join her in her cabin.

Wisssh me luck. I slithered away, covering the cobblestone street then reaching the soft grass. I slid through the blades and approached the entrance to her little cottage, the fireflies dancing just above my head.

She opened the door for me, and then we entered the humble abode. A fire burned in the stone hearth, and there were two chairs facing each other on the rug. There was a kettle pot there, the fragrance unusual. Her dusty shelves were full of glasses that contained flowers and plants in blue liquid.

I moved onto the chair opposite her, my head raised so we were eye level with each other.

She regarded me for several long seconds, two bloody dots on her neck, the blood already caked against her skin. “So.”

Ssssooooo.

She smiled. “Any requests before I turn you?”

You can undersstand me?

“Of course I can.”

But you aren't a vampire...

“I’m a little bit of everything.” There were secrets behind those mischievous eyes, secrets I would never know. “And just as immortal.”

Interesssting.

“So, describe how you want to look.”

Ferociousss. Powerful. Terrifying. Anyone who looks upon me will run in fear...

“Alright. So you want to be tall, strong, and muscular.”

Yesss.

“And what about your appearance? Hair color? Eye color?”

Whatever is the scariessst.

“You want to be a human, not an orc,” she said. “You want to be attractive?”

I don't care.

“Trust me, you’ll care,” she said. “I’ll make you powerful like you asked, but I’ll also make you a very handsome man. How about that?”

Sssure.

“Alright, let’s do it.”

I stepped out of the cabin and felt the cool grass against my skin. It was a strange sensation, almost as if it tickled me. Without my hard scales, I felt the temperature of the night more intensely. The breeze moved over my flesh subtly, but the heat my body generated felt substantial. When I looked

around, the world looked different, the colors different, and it was much harder to see in the dark than it'd been before. I looked up at the moon, bright in the sky, and then looked at the glow in the grass.

I took a step forward.

I was nearly as heavy as I'd been before, but now it was distributed differently.

I took another step...and then another...moving downhill as I learned to walk on two legs rather than slither forward on none.

When I looked down at my naked body, I saw the tightness and strength of my stomach, the defined abs that looked hard as steel. My legs were strong and muscular, dark hair visible on the tops of my thighs. I pulled my arms in, looking at the bulges of muscle close to my shoulder.

When I looked up, Kingsnake and Larisa both approached.

Kingsnake wore an expression I'd never seen before, his eyes glazed in shock.

Larisa grinned as she looked me up and down.

Do I look ferociousss? Kingsnake was the same height as me, our eyes perfectly level with each other.

“Yes...among other things.” Larisa looked me up and down appreciatively.

Kingsnake immediately gave her a cold look.

What isss it?

Kingsnake turned back to me. “Well...you're going to get a lot of attention.”

Why?

Larisa grinned. “Because you’re sexy, Fang. Really sexy...”

“You’d slap me if I said that about a woman,” Kingsnake snapped.

“Come on, it’s *Fang*,” Larisa said. “I know this isn’t real.”

I’m sssexxyyy?

Kingsnake looked at me again. “Never thought I’d say this about another man, but yes. There will definitely be admirers. Now we need to get you some clothes so my wife will stop staring at your dick.”

Larisa rolled her eyes.

I looked down at myself and admired my package. *Whoa, it looksss like that all the time?*

“Actually, it gets bigger,” Larisa said as she suppressed a smile.

How?

“Oh, you’ll see,” Kingsnake said. “You’ll see very soon...”

The journey back to Grayson was an opportunity for me to get used to this new body. I rode with Larisa sitting in front of me, letting her show me how to ride a horse and hold the reins.

It was strange to see the world from such a new vantage point. The colors of the trees and leaves were different, and the sun didn’t look the same either. With my body distribution altered, it took more energy to move than when I used to just glide. Now my teeth were normal and I had no fangs, but I had big hands and powerful arms to replace them. I just didn’t know how to use them.

We stopped when it was dark and made camp. We were able to find me some traveling clothes on the way back. The boots were a little tight, and the clothing wasn't as nice as what Kingsnake and Larisa wore, but it was better than being exposed to the elements.

I stacked a pile of branches on top of rocks and tried to light them with a match, but I grappled with the movement.

“Want me to show you?” Larisa asked as she kneeled down.

I continued to try on my own. *No. If I'm going to win the tournament, I need to know how to use my handsss.*

“You need to learn how to speak.” Kingsnake dropped the cot on the ground.

I continued to strike the match until I finally got it. I dropped it on the logs, and within seconds, flames lit up the dark encampment. The flames rose, and then I felt heat against my flesh, felt the temperature more vividly through skin than scales.

“What you speak in your head, just say it out loud,” Kingsnake said. “You've watched us speak enough times to understand the concept. You can't compete in the tournament without saying a word.”

I stayed by the fire, and they walked away, getting into their cot, a cot I would normally share as a snake to keep warm. But now I was bigger than Kingsnake, and there wasn't room for me. So I sat alone by the fire and practiced. “Kingsssake...”

Kingsnake was already in the cot with Larisa. “Drop the extra s's. You aren't a snake anymore.”

“Cut him some slack,” Larisa said. “He's trying.”

“He doesn’t have much time,” Kingsnake said. “He’s got to figure this out now.”

When we returned to Grayson, I was outfitted with proper clothing. I was given a uniform identical to Kingsnake’s, even though he was the king and I was just his companion. They also outfitted me with his armor, black and red, with the kingsnake image in the center of my chest. And I was given a sword, a weapon that I’d never touched.

Kingsnake looked me up and down, his arms crossed over his chest. “You look great.”

Kingsnake refused to acknowledge me if I spoke internally rather than verbally, so I’d gotten better at speaking aloud. “Thanks.” My voice didn’t sound the same when I spoke. It was deep with a baritone, sounding nothing like me.

Kingsnake grinned. “This is weird...but it’s also not weird.”

“Are you scared of me?”

“Right now? No. But if I met you on the battlefield, I’d take you seriously.”

“Good.”

He patted me on the arm. “Ready to go? The tournament starts in a few days.”

I nodded. “I’ve been ready.”

Viper came down the hallway and entered the room, hesitating when he saw me. He glanced over my armor, then narrowed his eyes on my face again. “Kingsnake, who is this?”

It was a small community of vampires, and for me to wear their armor meant I was someone important, someone he would already know.

“It’s a long story...” Kingsnake grinned before he looked at me, like he wanted me to answer.

Viper shifted his gaze to me.

“It’s me,” I said. “Fang.”

Viper stared at me for a solid three seconds. “As in...the snake?”

“Yes,” I said.

Now he looked me up and down all over again. “What the actual fuck?”

“It’s a lot,” Kingsnake said. “He wanted to compete in the Champion of Cards tournament, but their humans-only policy is pretty strict, and Father wouldn’t change it. He’s human for a week.”

“Wow,” Viper said. “You’re definitely going to get laid.”

“You mean what Kingsnake and Larisa do every night?” I asked.

“Yep,” Viper said with a grin. “I know snakes only hook up to mate, but humans and vampires do it for fun.” He winked at me. “You’re in for a treat.” He clapped me on the shoulder before he walked away. “I’ll look after Grayson while you’re gone. Hope you win, Fang.”

“Oh, I will...”

We rode to the Kingdoms, taking the underground passage and then moving past Raventower. I rode my own horse this time, much more comfortable with my body and the way it moved. If I added my weight to Larisa's or Kingsnake's, the horse would move much slower, and it would take longer to reach the Kingdoms.

We finally approached the stables and handed over our steeds. We entered the city, sunset on the horizon, the sky a mixture of colors. The tournament was the following night, and we had to register before the match, so we walked to the pub where it was being held.

Once we walked inside, I saw all the plaques on the wall, the names of the winners in the previous years. Some names were repeats. One name in particular came up repeatedly. Drake. I recognized his name.

Kingsnake came to my side and looked at the wall. "It would be nice to see your name on that wall."

"Oh, you will." I turned and walked across the room to the table situated there, the banner for the tournament pinned to the wall above it. There was a man and a couple of women, and a sheet on the table where sign-ups were taking place. When I approached, they all looked up at me and stilled. "I want to play."

The man hesitated before he pushed the sheet toward me and handed me the quill.

I scanned the names already there, seeing Drake's name at the very top because he was the first to sign up. I grabbed the quill and steadied it against the paper, doing exactly as Larisa had taught me. I scribbled my name across the cream-colored paper.

The women continued to stare at me, exchanging looks among themselves before looking at me again.

“Fang.” The man read the name aloud. “Interesting name...”

“If we faced each other in battle, it wouldn’t be that interesting.” With the change of my voice, everything I said was far more terrifying than it sounded in my head. Everything sounded like a threat—even when it wasn’t one.

“Of course.” He set the paper down again and cleared his throat. “The entry fee is fifty gold.”

I hadn’t foreseen this caveat. Money wasn’t a part of my life, so I never paid attention to it. ***Kingssnake, I need money.***

How much?

Fifty gold.

Kingssnake came to my side and tossed a pouch of gold coins on the table. “Better pay me back.”

“You can have my winnings,” I said. “I just want the Golden Card.”

“Deal.” We walked away from the table and returned to the wall with the plaques.

“There’s an inn across the street,” Larisa said. “I just booked two rooms.”

“Why two rooms?” I asked, eyebrows raised.

Kingssnake gave a slight smirk. “It was different when you were a snake, but I don’t want a grown man to watch me fuck my wife.”

“Let’s get some wine,” Larisa said. “You’re probably hungry, Fang.”

My stomach ached all the time now. I used to eat once a week, but now I was hungry five times a day. “Yes.”

We crossed the street and entered the inn, which had a pub downstairs. We grabbed a table in the corner and took a seat. I’d never been in a place like this, so I stared at the people who sat at the bar, looking at the bowl of peanuts on every table. My eyes locked on a woman behind the bar, and her eyes locked on mine. I expected her to back down and look away like typical prey, but she didn’t.

She walked over, wearing a low-cut shirt that showed the crease between her breasts. Her eyes were still on me, nearly ignoring Larisa and Kingsnake altogether. “Never seen you around here before.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Oh, I would remember.” Her hands moved to her hips. “What can I get you?”

“We’ll take two glasses of wine,” Larisa said.

“Alright.” The waitress still didn’t look at them. “And you? Some ale?”

“Sure. You got food?”

“Meat lasagna.”

I waited for more offerings, but they didn’t come. “Do you have rat?”

Her eyes immediately narrowed, and she moved closer to me, as if she hadn’t heard what I said. “I’m sorry?”

“He’ll take the lasagna,” Kingsnake said quickly. “Thank you.”

The waitress walked away.

“What’s lasagna?” I asked.

“It’s a pasta dish with tomato sauce and meat,” Larisa explained.

I made a subtle cringe.

“You’ll like it,” Kingsnake said. “Trust me, it’s much better than rat and frogs...and whatever else you eat.”

“My favorite is squirrel.”

Kingsnake cringed slightly. “Let’s change the subject.”

“The waitress likes you,” Larisa said.

My eyes shifted back to her across the bar, and that was when I realized she continued to stare at me. Her shirt hugged her chest tightly, and I started to notice the snugness in my trousers. And then I noticed the big rod against my stomach. I suddenly felt warm and uncomfortable, like I might start sweating for no reason at all. “I think I like her tits...”

Kingsnake grinned. “Welcome to the club.”

I looked at Larisa across from me and stared at her chest, which was also very nice, something I hadn’t noticed before.

“*Fang.*”

My eyes shifted to Kingsnake.

“You can look at any tits but those,” he warned. “That was your only free pass.”

The waitress came over and brought the drinks. She leaned far toward me, bringing her tits close to my face. She gave me a nice smile before she turned and walked off.

My eyes dropped to her ass, and I stared as she walked away.

Larisa must have noticed because she said, “I think it’s time for the birds and the bees talk...” She took a drink of her wine.

“I’ve eaten birds, but not bees,” I said. “Too small.”

Larisa turned to Kingsnake. “It’s definitely time.”

Kingsnake took a long drink from his glass before he regarded me. “Listen, you’re probably going to get a lot of offers this weekend—”

“What’s an offer?”

Larisa laughed. “That woman shoving her tits in your face. It’s basically an invitation to talk to her...and see where it goes.”

“You can’t just cut right to the chase because...” Kingsnake tried to find the right words. “It’s complicated. You have to do a dance—”

“I don’t know how to dance.”

“Metaphorically. Flirt back and forth. Wait for her to touch your arm or something...and then invite her back to your room. Now, if you get that far with a woman, this is what you need to do—”

“I know this part.”

“You do?” Kingsnake asked.

“I’ve seen you guys enough times to know exactly how it goes...”

Kingsnake stared at me for a few seconds before he leaned back in his chair. “Fair enough.”

The waitress returned with my lasagna. “The plate’s hot.” She set it on the table in front of me, having dark hair like Larisa and dark eyes. She was petite, over a foot shorter than me as a

human, and while she was slender, she was curvy on the top and the bottom, which pleased me.

“Not as hot as you.”

Kingsnake cringed at my attempt.

But she smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Fang. Yours?”

“Denise.”

“Denisse.”

Kingsnake shook his head, trying to get me to stop.

But she still seemed charmed by me. “Nice to meet you, Fang.”

“So...you want to fuck?”

“Oh shit,” Kingsnake said under his breath.

Denise stilled at the question, like she couldn’t believe I’d said that. Then she walked away without saying a word.

Larisa chuckled when she was gone.

“What?” I asked. “What did I do wrong?”

Kingsnake sighed. “I told you it’s a dance. You can’t just cut to the chase.”

“Why?”

“You just can’t.”

“*Why?*” I repeated. “Viper said humans fuck for pleasure. I’m just asking if she wants to fuck for pleasure.”

“It’s more complicated with women,” he said. “They need more of an emotional connection.”

“What’s an emotional connection?” I looked at Larisa.

“It could be a conversation,” she said. “Or chatting over a glass of wine...”

“That sounds like a lot of work,” I said. “Kingsnake doesn’t make any effort with you, and you’re always agreeable.”

“I’ll try not to be insulted by that,” Larisa said with a chuckle. “But we’re married. The emotional connection is already there.”

“I have to marry her to fuck her?” I asked incredulously.

“No,” Kingsnake said quickly. “But there needs to be something—”

The waitress came back over. “I’m off in fifteen minutes.” Again, it was as if Kingsnake and Larisa weren’t even there. “You got a room here?”

“Uh...” I turned to Larisa, unsure what to do now.

Larisa mouthed to me. “Room eighteen.”

I looked at the waitress again. “Room eighteen.”

“Then I’ll meet you there.” She flashed me that nice smile before she walked away, her tight ass looking snug in her trousers.

I looked at Kingsnake again. “So...she does want to fuck?”

“I guess you have better game than I gave you credit for.”

“Game?” I asked.

“It’s the dance,” Larisa said. “Now eat your dinner before you go. You’re going to need your energy for what’s coming.”

I felt my mouth stretch into a slow grin.

Larisa smirked back at me. “I’ve never seen you smile before. It’s nice.”

We walked to our accommodations, and down the hallway, I saw her standing there, leaning up against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest, those tits nice and plump.

Kingsnake grabbed my arm and held me back. “Hold on a sec.”

Larisa stopped too.

“Baby, this is kinda a guy thing...”

She smirked and walked away.

“I’ll make this quick,” Kingsnake said. “You can’t...release... inside her. Not unless she takes the herbs, which you’ll need to ask.”

“Why?”

“Because you could get her pregnant.”

“I’ve had hatchlings before.”

“Babies aren’t hatchlings, Fang. Totally different level of responsibility. And it’s a shitty thing to do if you’re going to be a snake again in a couple days. So ask her, and if she says no, you pull out at the last moment. You feel me?”

“But that’s not fun.”

“I know, but that’s how it is,” he said. “Now there are two holes. Only go for the one closest to her belly...”

“But I’ve seen you use both.”

Kingsnake gave me a cold look. “So you’ve seen everything, then?”

I gave a shrug. “We’ve lived together a long time, Kingsnake.”

“Anyway...only that entrance. The other entrance is more of a committed relationship type of thing...or a whorehouse thing.”

“Can I go now?”

“One more thing,” he said. “You’re going to want to release immediately. Like, right from the start. But you can’t—not until she goes first.”

“How will I know?”

“Every woman is different, but her enthusiasm will grow more intense...and then she’ll feel tighter. This is a one-time hookup, so I guess it doesn’t really matter, but caring about your partner’s pleasure is the gentlemanly thing to do.” Kingsnake clapped me on the shoulder before he walked away. “Good luck.”

He turned down the hallway to join Larisa, so I walked to where the waitress waited for me.

She immediately straightened when I approached, looking up at me as she lowered her arms to her sides. A small smile moved on to her lips, and her hand automatically reached for my hard stomach. She grabbed the fabric of my shirt and tugged me against her, bringing my lips down to hers.

My lips landed on hers, and she kissed me hard, the way Kingsnake kissed Larisa. Soon, her tongue was in my mouth. It was chaotic and overwhelming at first, but within a couple seconds, I liked it.

Really liked it.

I moved her to the wall and slipped my hand into her hair, just the way I’d seen Kingsnake do a hundred times. The woman was much shorter than me, so I had to crane my neck to kiss her, and I got frustrated by that quickly, so I lifted her up in the air as if she weighed nothing.

Everything in this body was weightless. I felt like I could pick up a horse and toss it.

Her arms circled my neck, and she kissed me harder, releasing a quiet moan in my mouth like she enjoyed my display of strength.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key Larisa had given to me.

The woman held herself up by locking her ankles together and holding on to my shoulders so I could get the door unlocked.

I carried her into the bedchambers, a simple room with a bed in the center. I dropped her on the made bed and continued to kiss her, my anxious hand slipping underneath her top to grab her tit underneath. I found her nipple and flicked it with my thumb.

She pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it aside before she looked at me. Her palms planted against my chest, and she gave a satisfied moan. “You’re so damn hot...”

“And ferocious?”

She moved to my trousers and undid them with anxious fingers, too preoccupied with getting me naked to hear what I’d said. She tugged everything down over my ass, revealing the dick that Larisa had stared at.

She bit her lip when she looked at me. “Can’t wait to feel that inside me...”

I paused as I stared at it because it was much bigger than it was the last time I’d looked at it. “Whoa...”

She seemed to think I was making a joke because she chuckled and pulled her own shirt over her head. A black bralette was

underneath, so she pulled that off too, revealing nice perky tits with little nipples in the center.

I stared hard, my dick starting to hurt. “Tits...”

“You act like you’ve never seen them before.” She grabbed my face and directed my mouth back to hers as she undid her own bottoms and started to slip them off. She shimmied her hips and kicked off her boots until she was naked underneath me.

I stopped to admire her flat stomach, her belly button, her strong thighs. It was my first time seeing a naked woman in this body, and it made my dick hurt more. Something started to ooze from the tip, and I felt a desperation I didn’t know how to extinguish.

She separated her thighs and hooked them around my hips. “Fuck me.”

My cock gave a twitch, and I looked down to watch it. “Are—are you taking the herbs?”

“Yes.”

As I’d seen Kingsnake do many times, I guided myself between her folds, my head hitting moisture that made my dick ache. The pleasure was so exquisite, it made me lose my breath. I had to push to get past her entrance, but she seemed to enjoy the way the intrusion hurt. I got past the tightness and started to sink. “Oh fuck...” I sank as far as I could go, until I watched her wince in pain.

“It’s okay,” she said. “A big dick is gonna hurt...”

Now I knew exactly what Kingsnake referred to. There was a desperate need to release instantaneously, warm and tight inside her body, her naked curves and nice tits directly in front of me. Instead of looking at her face, I looked at her breasts... because damn.

She grabbed on to my ass and pulled me into her. “Come on, babe.”

I forced myself to move through her slickness, and instinct started to take over. I rocked into her slow and easy, restraining myself exactly as Kingsnake told me. But it was the greatest battle I’d ever fought, because letting go was all I could think about. Her beautiful tits didn’t help. The sexy way she bit her bottom lip and moaned didn’t help. I started to sweat, and that sweat somehow made it more pleasurable.

Now her moans increased, and her nails carved into my back. She dragged her nails down, squeezed my hips with her thighs, and her breaths started to interrupt her moans. She breathed harder and harder, and her voice began to crack. Something was changing—and even my dick could feel it.

Then everything cranked to another level, and she released a moan far louder than all the others. Her eyes started to glimmer with tears, but not from sadness. Her hips started to buck hard against mine too.

It was all too much for me, and I felt the greatest pleasure start at my center then reach outward toward my limbs. It was a flush of heat that burned every inch of me. The sweat became more intense, and then I felt my dick give a twitch before it released deep inside her, dumping all the seed I possessed.

Fuck, it was unlike anything I’d ever felt.

I pounded into her hard, spurred on by the pleasure, holding on to it for as long as I could.

The tide passed, and then everything grew weak again. The heat faded and now the sweat was uncomfortable. But my dick was still hard inside her, and I wanted another hit of that all-consuming pleasure. “Let’s do that again.”

Her hands palmed my chest, and she smiled. “I’d love to.”

FOUR

FANG

It was sometime after noon when I made it to the restaurant and ordered lunch. I was so hungry that I ordered two brisket sandwiches and two ales.

“Do you want me to wait until the other person gets here before putting in the food order?” the waitress asked.

“No,” I said. “They’re both for me.”

“Ooh, gotcha.” She winked and walked away.

A couple minutes later, she arrived with the sandwiches and the two glasses of ale. As if I hadn’t eaten in days, I scarfed everything down, realizing it tasted pretty good for not being rat.

Larisa and Kingsnake entered the pub then made their way over to me.

“Damn, that’s all for you?” Larisa asked.

I licked all the sauce off my fingers before I nodded. “I think I’m going to order another one. I’m not usually this hungry.”

“It’s because you’re two hundred and fifty pounds of solid muscle,” Kingsnake said as he took the spare ale for himself.

“I was two hundred and fifty pounds before,” I said before taking another bite.

“Different compositions,” Kingsnake said. “So...how was last night?”

I forced the food down my throat so I could talk. “I want to have sex all the time. I wish I were having sex right now.” It was the only thing I wanted more than food. “I wanted to keep going last night, but after a while, it wouldn’t get hard anymore.”

“That’s how it goes,” Larisa said with a chuckle.

“Kingsnake,” I said. “Show me where the whorehouse is, and give me some money. *A lot* of money.”

“You have your tournament tonight, remember?” Kingsnake asked.

“Oh...yeah.” It had slipped my mind. “I can go there before.”

“They aren’t open during the day.”

“*Why?*” I demanded. “People should be having sex all the time.”

Kingsnake chuckled. “It wears off after a while.”

“I don’t think that will ever happen for me.” I looked around the pub. “Why aren’t all these people having sex right now?”

“Because people need to work and live their lives,” Larisa said.

“If I were you two, I would be having sex right now.” I took another bite. “Not sitting here watching me eat this brisket.”

Larisa smiled. “We did before we came down here.”

“Only one time?” I asked incredulously. “Does Kingsnake not let you go first?”

Kingsnake gave me a glare.

“Or did he stick it in the wrong hole?”

Larisa suppressed her laugh.

“The obsession wears off,” Kingsnake said. “You’re like a teenager right now. We were in that phase, once upon a time. Enjoy it while you can, but it’ll taper off.”

“I sseriously doubt that...”

“You need to stop doing that,” Kingsnake said. “You sound ridiculous.”

“Habits die hard.” I took another bite of the brisket.

“Are you ready for tonight?” Kingsnake said. “Need to practice?”

“I’ve been practicing all my life,” I said as I continued to eat.

“Because I can play with you,” Larisa said. “You aren’t used to playing as a human, so maybe get a few rounds in. Now that you’re a human, you have facial expressions, so that’s something you’ll need to address.”

“I thought I looked ferocious and terrifying all the time? Just as I did as a snake.”

“It doesn’t matter how terrifying you may seem in appearance,” Kingsnake said. “You still have an expression, a reaction to things. Other players can read that and guess your hand. That was something you didn’t have to worry about before.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I said. “Then, yes, let’s play.”

Once the sun had set, we crossed the street to the pub holding the championship game. It was packed with people who had

all come to watch the match, exchanging bets on the prospective winners. I heard Drake's name several times.

I checked in at the front desk and was assigned a seat at one of the tables.

Kingsnake and Larisa found seats in the front row, the chairs going in a circle around all the players.

When I felt eyes on me, I looked up to meet an angry stare.

He had dark hair and dark eyes, his size comparable to mine. When my eyes found his, he didn't quickly look away to avoid being caught. His stare continued.

I think that's Drake. It was Kingsnake's voice.

How do you know?

I overheard one of his conversations.

Guess he's afraid to lossse. I refused to drop my gaze first.

Neither did he, because the stare continued.

When the waitress came over to get my drink, it still continued. I ordered without taking my eyes off him. "I'll take an ale."

Someone else spoke to him, so his attention was pulled elsewhere.

The waitress handed out the drinks, and then the cigars were lit. I'd enjoyed a cigar as a snake, so I grabbed one for myself and popped it in my mouth.

The dealer at my table spoke to the room. "You know the rules. Four draws. No cheating. And no fighting. Let the tournament begin." There was a loud round of applause before the dealer handed out the shuffled cards. They landed in a pile in front of me, slowly growing taller. Others reached for their

cards one at a time, but I waited until the end. When the dealer was done, I pulled the hand close and examined what I had. It was strange to have people sitting behind me who could easily see my cards. The spectators didn't participate in the game, but I was still very private about my hand.

I rearranged my cards based on what I had, a couple mediocre ones and a couple good ones. I had an ace and a queen and a two and four, but I also had the Elite Orc card along with the Vampire Fang card.

It was silent, cigar smoke rising to the ceiling, tankards tapping against the table when they were returned after a drink. I examined the men at my table, all of whom were staring at their cards or rearranging them. Sometimes, I caught one of them looking at me to see what I was doing with my cards, but they quickly looked away.

The first draw commenced, going clockwise.

Every single player exchanged a bad card for a new one. Me included. It was rare to play with so many players at once. Most of the time, it was just me and Larisa or me and Kingsnake, if he was in a good mood. Occasionally, I played with Kingsnake and his brothers, and that was a rare treat.

We all pulled cards from the center and examined our hands. Quickly, the room became so heavy with smoke that it was hazy, the features of the audience indistinguishable. Once we all had a chance to look at our cards, the bets started to roll in.

Chips were tossed into the center, everyone ready to stay in the game.

Based on the number of cards in the deck and the number of players, I knew at least two players didn't have a great hand. Unfortunately, I was one of them, but I had to stay in the

game. I tossed my chips into the center and kept my cards flat against the table so nothing was visible to the other players.

Now another card was drawn. Despite the fact that we'd all put bets down, every single one of us pulled a new card—except for one guy. He kept his hand exactly the way it was, which was either a bluff or truly a great hand.

I glanced at my card before I slipped it into place, but I was pleased by what I received. The War Hammer, a card that paired well with most others. I remembered what Kingsnake said about my expression, that I had to try to keep it neutral as a human. As a snake, I couldn't even smile. My eyes didn't dilate the same way. The only visible expression I could make was a hiss.

More bets were placed in the center.

In cards, the best hand didn't necessarily win. It was the best bluff.

And a lot of these assholes were bluffing.

The guy who didn't pull a card suddenly pushed his chips into the center, all of them.

Tension filled the air.

The tournament was based on elimination. Once you lost your hand, you were out. So if they put up their chips and lost, they would lose their seat. But if they kept their chips and the guy won most of the pot, he would probably still win because he had more to lose.

Nobody made a move.

I pushed most of my chips into the pile.

The guy's eyes shifted to me, like he hadn't seen me before.

Not a word was spoken, and I expected there to be some heckling, but it was dead silent.

A subtle grin moved on to his lips, like he was pleased I'd fallen for his trap.

I pushed even more chips into the pile, putting everything I had on the line.

That smile was wiped clean off his face.

Now I smirked.

You know what you're doing? It was Kingsnake's voice.

Abssolutely.

The other players at the table folded.

The guy stared at me, his cards flat on the table.

I gestured for him to show his cards. "Ladies first."

His eyes immediately narrowed.

A slight chuckle rippled through the audience.

He turned over the cards and threw them down. It was an ace with a Goblin King and two fours.

I'd misjudged his bluff. It was a better hand than I'd thought it would be.

But mine was better. I turned over my cards, showing the War Hammer with the Elite Orc and the Vampire Fang. It would have been a stronger hand if combined with the other cards, but none of them was compatible. Nonetheless, it was a better hand than his.

The dealer pushed the chips to my side of the table. "Tabor is eliminated."

When he rose from his seat, he kicked the table and made it jerk.

The guards at the door immediately rushed to him and forced him away from the table.

I smirked as I hoarded all the chips to myself. “Alright, ladies. Who’s next?”

Taking out the other players was easy now that my pile of chips was so high. I could afford more risks because of my financial stability. Could take the time to observe my opponents and search for a weakness in their game. Everyone had a tell, and it was only a matter of time before it was revealed.

Over the next hour, I took them out one by one, leaving just me and some blond guy in the running. He had a nice pile of chips, and so did I. Fortunately, the deck had been shuffled in my favor, because I had a killer hand, but I didn’t shove my chips into the center in a rush. I played it cool, wanting him to put up his chips in arrogance.

And he fell for it, putting a large portion of his chips in the center.

It was a double bluff. I acted like a person with a bad hand pretending to have a good when I actually did have a good hand...it was complicated. I pushed my chips to match his.

Then he made the grave mistake of putting all his chips in the pile.

Idiot. I did the same, still having some chips left over because I had more than he did.

We stared at each other for a long moment before the dealer prodded us to show our hands.

He went first, showing the War Hammer with the Hurricane and a couple other cards.

It was a good hand—but not good enough.

I put mine down, three aces with the Black Dragon, the Goblin Queen, and the Bloody Dagger.

His jubilant face immediately turned crestfallen.

I smirked and watched the dealer push the pile of chips across the table toward me. “Fang is the winner of this match.”

I grabbed one of the chips and flicked it up into the air before I caught it again. *Alwayssss wanted to do that.*

Congrats. But you still have a long way to go.

It’sss even more exciting than I thought it would be.

The other four winners of their matches moved to join my table. Drake was one of them, staring at me with the same hostility as before. There were two other guys...and a woman.

A very attractive woman.

I wanted to hold Drake’s gaze, but I also wanted to stare at the lovely woman who now sat across from me, her low-cut top showing a sexy line of cleavage that I could glide my dick through.

Drake looked away, and that was my opening to look at the woman across from me, a woman with dark hair, green-colored eyes, beautiful full lips. Her elbow was on the table,

and her fingers were curled around her chin, her fingernails along. Her eyes lifted to meet mine when she felt my stare.

Dammnnnnnn.

Fang, focus.

Titssss.

Fang. You didn't come all the way here to get distracted by tits. You came here to win. Forget her and focus on the cards.

Fine. Can you take me to the whorehouse later?

Sure.

Yaassssss. I shifted my gaze away from her and focused on something else.

Drake stared at me again.

Ignore him.

Once the room had settled down, the dealer shuffled the cards and passed them around. No one touched their cards until the handout was completed, just the way I did. Drake grabbed his pile and slid it toward himself, flipping them over once they reached the edge. There was no tell on his face, no reaction at all.

None of the others had a tell either, which made sense since they'd all won their matches. These players were in a different league, and now I was finally playing against my equals.

Everyone took a moment to stare at their cards and adjust them.

Instead of looking at my own, I took the opportunity to stare at each one of them, to watch the slight arch of an eyebrow, to see eyes narrow slightly as they arranged their cards. Only

when they were done and their cards were flat against the table did I glance at my own.

It was the worst hand I'd ever received. Just a bunch of numbers. No aces. No specialty cards. Unless every new card I pulled was a winner, I was screwed. I'd have to bluff the fuck out of this match.

About half the players took a new card. It was hard to know if they actually needed a new card but didn't want me to know that. I had no chance of winning this match if I didn't get something good, so I had to pull one. It was the War Hammer.

Thank the godsss.

People examined their cards for another moment, before chips started to get thrown in.

To hide the fact that I had nothing, I added my bet to the pile. I had enough chips that I could lose those and still win the game, and I'd rather throw competitors off the scent. Drake looked at me several times, as if he'd marked me as his greatest competition the moment I walked in the door...even though he had no idea who I was.

Every single person joined the bet.

All five of us were in it now. We could show our hands, and the winner would take the small pile. Or someone could raise the bet.

Not a single person did, so perhaps no one had great cards.

But that would mean they'd know I had shit—and I couldn't let that happen. These were professional card players, so they would tuck that information in the back of their minds to use against me later. So I raised the bet by tossing more chips in the center.

Every single pair of eyes was on me now.

My eyes shifted between them, waiting for someone to join me.

One of the guys did, meeting my bet and then raising it.

Everyone else immediately folded.

Fuck. Now if I lost, they would know how much of a bluffer I was. Hopefully, this guy had worse cards than me, but that didn't seem likely.

He stared at me.

I stared back.

We both waited for the other to raise the stakes further.

I didn't want to risk any more chips. If I lost more than that, I'd be out for good.

He put his cards down—and it was a shitty hand.

I put mine down—and it was also a shitty hand.

Everyone looked at our hands, realizing we'd both been bluffing that entire time.

But my War Hammer won me the match.

The dealer pushed the chips toward me.

The player's eyes smoldered in rage. He'd lost by a single card. It was a tough defeat to digest.

The chips were added to my pile, and now I officially had more chips than anyone else in the game. That meant they would all be strategically trying to take them away from me since I had the greatest chance of winning. Drake glared at me. The beautiful woman flirted across the table with her eyes. My gaze immediately dropped south.

Cards now. Tits later.

The dealer shuffled the cards and distributed them for another round. “Damien has been eliminated.”

Now it was just the four of us.

Cigar smoke continued to float to the ceiling, and the waitress refilled our glasses. We all continued to drink booze, trying to prove to the other players that no amount of alcohol could poison our thinking. I had ale on occasion, but I’d never had the luxury of drinking it as much as I wanted. But my increased size seemed to reduce the potency of the alcohol.

We played more rounds, and the woman and Drake became locked together in a silent exchange. The rest of us had folded, but their bets grew in size. Drake was the one who raised the stakes, trying to get her to put all of her chips into the pot.

I knew she’d walked right into a trap. I wished I could warn her.

Once all of her chips were on the table, they both laid down their cards.

She smirked when she saw his cards, because her hand was unbelievable. The Black Dragon, the War Hammer, and four aces.

Drake did his best to cover his annoyance as he showed his hand. It was a good combo of cards, but not nearly good enough.

The dealer pushed the chips into her pile.

Drake still had a lot of chips, but now the woman had more than he did.

And that meant she’d become my primary target.

I felt a little guilty about it...

More hands were played, and I focused on the woman, waiting for the perfect opportunity to take all her chips. Now that she'd shown how good of a player she was, the other guy had the same idea. His eyes kept shifting to her instead of me and Drake.

We continued to play, and now she was the one who raised the stakes. A little smile moved across her lips, a flicker, and then it was gone. Perhaps it was a tell that slipped...or perhaps it was a fake tell.

But I thought it was real.

I met her bet just so the rest of the players assumed I had a good hand or assumed she was bluffing.

They fell for it, throwing their chips into the pile too.

My hand was shit, so I had no intention of moving forward, but I needed to get the others to the finish line. If she won, she would have more power, but at least another player would be eliminated.

She raised the bet.

The guy met it with his own and then raised it.

Drake stayed out. So did I.

Now the two of them were locked in battle, throwing more chips into the pile until he was cleaned out.

The moment of truth came—and their cards were put on display.

She pulled off another good hand, miraculously.

He bowed his head in disappointment, releasing an angry sigh through flared nostrils.

The dealer pushed the chips to her. “Hugo is eliminated.”

Now it was just the three of us. We all stared at one another for a moment, trying to determine who was the easier target. She’d become the most powerful player in the game besides me, so I imagined it would come down to the two of us, unless Drake had a trick up his sleeve to eliminate her.

She seemed like the harder opponent, so I wanted to eliminate her and battle Drake directly. Strangely, there was this innate sense of protectiveness I felt toward her, but I had no idea where it came from. Was it because she was a woman? Was it because I wanted to fuck her? Her presence at the table distracted me.

Perhaps that was her move. Her beauty, her sexual energy, it messed up everyone’s game. I’d come here to win the Golden Card, and I wasn’t going to let a pair of beautiful tits fuck that up for me.

The dealer dealt out a new hand of cards, and we all looked at the same time.

Finally. I had some really good cards. Couldn’t have come at a better time, because the players had probably noticed that I won by a thread most of the time, that my cards were usually just on the cusp. They’d never seen me with a powerhouse set of cards like this, so that should throw them off.

We all pulled cards, and I exchanged my one bad card for another good one.

We sat in silence, all pretending to look at our cards when we were really thinking about how to proceed to the next stage. Every player at that table was ruthless and savage. No one wanted to make the first move.

The woman stared at Drake, like she wanted him out first. She tossed a couple chips into the center unenthusiastically, like she just wanted to get the game going. I couldn't read her moves, and perhaps that was the point. Perhaps she had no plan...and that was her plan.

Drake met her bet.

I took my time before I added the chips to the table, not raising the bet, trying to fly under the radar since they seemed more consumed with each other than me. She wanted to eliminate him, but I wanted to eliminate her. Or maybe she wanted to make it *seem* like she wanted to eliminate him...but I was her true goal.

I love cardsss.

She raised her bet. Drake met it and tossed in even more.

I didn't know who had a good hand or a bad hand. It seemed to be a pissing contest at that point. I could fold and let them take each other out, but that seemed like a waste of a great hand. Maybe I could continue to raise the pot and get one out...and still decimate the other.

I met Drake's raise.

They both looked at me, as if they expected me to fold. Now they took me much more seriously...and I no longer flew under the radar.

Drake stared at me, desperately trying to figure out if I was only bluffing to stay in the game or if this was the real deal. He seemed to think I was bullshitting because he pushed the rest of his chips into the center of the table.

Kingsnake's voice came into my head. *I can see his hand...*

Despite what you all think, I don't cheat in cards. I kept my head in the game.

Fair enough.

I met his bet. So did the woman.

If Drake was wrong, he would be eliminated from the match. But if he was right, he would take most of her chips, as well as mine.

She put down her hand first. Triple pairs.

He put his down next, a smirk on his face. He had the Kingdom Come hand, the second-highest hand you could have. When he looked at me, that smugness was still on his face, because statically, it was incredibly unlikely that I could beat that.

I put down my cards—and wiped that smirk off his face.

His stare immediately hardened, like he wanted to put a blade to my throat and cut me wide open.

“Drake is eliminated.” The dealer pushed all the chips to me.

Drake remained at the table, clearly overwhelmed by the loss. He didn't know what to do except stare at me.

The dealer took the cards and began to shuffle them.

One of the guards came over to escort him out.

Drake jumped to his feet and pulled out his dagger. It all happened within the blink of an eye. He threw it at me where I sat just seven feet away.

But I still had the reflexes of a powerful snake, so I caught the blade in midair, my palm immediately bleeding from the cut of the blade. I had to squeeze it to steady it before it impaled me right in the face.

A collective gasp moved through the audience.

I got to my feet, flipped the dagger in the air to grab it by the hilt, and then threw it at the wall where the plaques of previous winners were hung. I hit the most recent one with his name on it, the tip hitting it right in the center.

Wordlessly, I sat back down and watched the guards eject him from the tournament.

The woman stared at me, and now she wore an expression she hadn't shown through the entire match, and I knew it wasn't a bluff or a tell. It was just her.

“Sore loser...”

The dealer started to hand out the cards.

I wiped my palm on my trousers to get rid of the excess blood then pulled the cards close to look at them. Now that she was directly across from me, there was no chance she could see my cards, so I was free to hold them comfortably.

Her gaze hardened, and she focused on the game once again.

We drew a couple cards and admired our hands, thinking of our game plan.

I had substantially more chips than she did, so all I had to do was wait for a good hand and bait her into raising her bet until I cleaned her out. Her approach would probably be to win whatever hands she could and slowly build up her inventory, but that was a risky move because that would give me more opportunities to learn her tells and her strategy.

You're so close, Fang...

I've got thisss. I tossed my chips into the center.

She immediately folded.

The dealer reshuffled the cards and started over, passing out new hands. We pulled new cards and started the dance from the beginning.

I threw my chips in the center—and she folded again.

My eyes narrowed on her face, unsure what her strategy was. To wait and see when I stopped putting chips in the center? Then she would assume I had a bad hand? So I continued to put chips in the center just as she continued to fold. That way, we would never learn anything from each other.

After a couple rounds and frustrated sighs from the audience, she finally met my bet. The game was completely different with just two players. Her only objective was to beat my hand. She couldn't bluff her way to the end, not when she was low on chips. I could afford to lose a hand, but she couldn't afford to lose anything.

So I assumed she had a good hand if she was going to use her chips.

I was afraid to raise the bet because she might just fold anyway.

We put down our cards—and she won the match. She took the small pile of chips in the center. But it was a little victory because my chips overwhelmed hers by a landslide. And it was a fatal move on her part, because now I knew she would only come to the table if she had a winning hand and she would never bet all of her chips. Her tactic was to be conservative, and my tactic was to dominate her as quickly as possible.

I tossed my chips into the center as I did for every match.

Without hesitation, she met me.

I raised the bet.

Now she hesitated before she matched my chips.

I wanted to be greedy and add more, but if I pushed her too much, she would fold. I knew she had a good hand, but I had an exceptional one. “Ladies first.”

She put down her cards. It was a good hand, a hand that would win another round.

But mine was better. The second my cards hit the table, her eyes turned guarded in disappointment.

The dealer pushed the chips toward me.

Now she grew flustered because she only had three chips left. Compared to my enormous pile, it was nothing. There was no chance she could come back from this. She might as well fold the entire match.

But she continued to play, using the same strategy, doing whatever she could to stay in the game, winning some chips, losing some chips. It was obvious the audience grew bored because we all knew she was just avoiding the inevitable.

I raised my bet.

And to my surprise, she did the same. She put all of her chips in the middle, either because she’d given up or because she believed she could take it all.

She put down her cards.

I put down mine.

And won.

She sat back in the chair and crossed her arms over her chest.

The dealer pushed the chips to me. “Lana has been eliminated. And Fang is the winner of the Champion of Cards

tournament.” A loud round of applause erupted from everyone in the audience.

My eyes moved to Kingsnake and Larisa. They clapped harder than everyone else, their smiles infectious.

I felt my mouth stretch wide, an indescribable warmth inside my chest, a numbness in my fingertips. All I’d ever wanted was to be the best card player in the Kingdoms...and now I was. Every year, I’d had to read about the winners in the newspaper, knowing I would be able to beat them all if I just had the chance. Now I’d finally had my chance...and I won.

The dealer brought the winnings. The silver trophy, the Golden Card on a chain, and the bag full of coins.

My fingers touched the necklace, and I examined the Golden Card. Inside the material was an engraving.

Champion of Cards

Year 9220

My finger brushed over it as I continued to smile. “I did it...”

Kingsnake and Larisa came to me.

Kingsnake clapped me on the shoulder. “Congratulations, Fang.”

“You did it!” Larisa hugged me, falling into my lap slightly because she was so much smaller than I was. “I knew you could.” She cupped my face and kissed me on the cheek. “I love seeing your smile.”

“Come on, let’s put it on.” Kingsnake took the necklace out of my hand and placed it over my neck.

The metal plate rested against my chest on top of the fabric of my shirt.

I looked down at it as my fingers touched the cold metal.
“Thank you, guys. It’s a dream come true...”

We sat at a table together at the pub across the street.

The necklace was in my hands again so I could stare at the Golden Card, to appreciate the fact that it was truly mine...that I’d earned it.

Kingsnake opened the sack of coins and counted out the entry fee. “Now that I’ve been reimbursed, you can use the rest of this at the whorehouse.” He tightened the drawstring and pushed it toward me. “And buy us a round, of course.”

“I don’t really care about that now.” My thumb smoothed over the edges. Women and tits didn’t seem important anymore.

“You proved us wrong, Fang,” Larisa said. “We were wrong to ever question your integrity. All those times you beat us, you beat us fair and square.”

“Damn right I did.” I grinned before I reached for the necklace around my throat.

Kingsnake stared at me across the table, affection in his eyes. “I’m proud of you, man. Those were some good card players, but you kicked ass. How do you do it?”

I shrugged. “It’s complicated...”

Larisa smirked. “He doesn’t want to share his secrets.”

Lana approached us from the other side of the room, her eyes focused on me like I was her target. Drake had thrown a dagger at me, so my body stilled in preparation for some kind of assassination attempt.

But she stopped at the table and placed her hands on her hips. “I think congratulations are in order. You played well.” She extended her hand to shake mine.

I hadn’t done that before, so I tried to act naturally, but I think I gripped her wrist too hard because her eyebrows lifted slightly. “Thank you for a handshake instead of a dagger.”

She gave a quiet chuckle. “Drake has always been a walking toddler.”

My eyes moved to her tits, but I forced them elsewhere before she noticed.

She seemed to catch it because her smile widened. “I’d love to have a drink with you sometime.”

“Really?” I asked in surprise.

“Your reflexes are fast, you’re a champion, and you’re pretty eyes on the eyes. Yes, I want to have a drink with you.”

I turned to Kingsnake as I tried to suppress my grin.

Kingsnake gave me a nod. “Larisa and I will see you in the morning.”

I rose to my feet and walked with her. “So, how long have you been playing cards?”

She smiled. “A long time. What about you?”

“My whole life.”

We sat at a table together, drinks were brought, and we talked about the match for a while. It was nice to talk to someone about the game who knew it as well as I did, but the fact that she was so astonishingly beautiful was distracting.

She seemed to know my mind drifted a couple times because she said, “Want to go back to my room?”

My eyes dropped to her tits again. “Definitely.”

She smirked and got to her feet. “Come on. And make sure you keep your necklace on...”

FIVE
FANG

The next morning, I found Larisa and Kingsnake sitting in the pub, their bags packed and ready to go.

I was still dead tired as I dropped into the chair across from them, the Golden Card around my throat.

“Have fun last night?” Kingsnake asked.

“Is fucking always this exhausting?”

He grinned. “It is when you have to slip out first thing in the morning. Once you’re in a relationship, it’s a lot less exhausting.”

Too bad I would never have one of those.

“Ready to go?” he asked. “Said goodbye to Lana?”

I nodded. “She asked to see me again. I told her I’m not from around here. She looked sad.”

“It’s how it goes sometimes,” Kingsnake said. “Don’t feel bad about it.”

“She’ll get over it,” Larisa said. “Maybe you’ll see her next year.”

“Next year?” I asked. “I was already lucky enough to do this once. I don’t need to do it again.”

Kingsnake smirked. “Let’s see how you feel next year.”

We left the pub and walked to the stables, where the horses were waiting. After we packed our saddlebags, we left the Kingdoms and rode through the countryside, covering as much ground as we could before the sun rose too high in the sky. Then we napped in the shade of a tree, and I knocked out until Larisa woke me up hours later.

We continued the journey, riding past Raventower and then under the mountain. A day later, we returned to Grayson. Based on my math, this was the last night I would be human. When I woke up tomorrow, I would be a snake once more.

We returned our horses to the stables then walked to the palace of Grayson, where we all resided.

“How’d it go?” Viper clapped me on the shoulder.

“I won.” I grinned and pulled the necklace out from under my shirt.

“Wow.” Viper regarded the card then smirked. “Good for you, man.”

We entered the study and had a drink. It was just Kingsnake and me because Larisa was tired and went to bed. Kingsnake poured me scotch and it had a much stronger taste than the ale at the pub, but I drank it anyway, the fire warm against my back.

“So...are you dreading being a snake again? Or are you looking forward to it?”

I took another drink then licked my lips. “Being a human is nice, but I do like being a snake.”

“Didn’t think you’d say that.”

“I’ve spent fifteen hundred years that way. Life is much simpler.”

Kingsnake gave a nod in agreement. “Honestly...I’m gonna miss this.”

“Really?” I asked, my head cocking.

“Yeah. You’ve been my closest friend for so long. And now I can hear your voice, go to the pub with you, hug you... It’s nice.” He dropped his chin, avoiding my stare when the moment became too intense. “I can spend time with you in a different way...is all I’m saying.”

“I’m still here, Kingsnake.”

“I know...I know.” He looked down into his glass before he took a drink.

“And I can’t protect you as well as a human.”

He released a quiet laugh. “If I trained you, you’d be a killing machine, Fang. You’re a big man.”

“Even if I wanted to be a human permanently, I can’t.”

“I don’t know. I’m sure the witch could make it happen if we paid her price.”

“Yeah...maybe.”

“But if you’re happy being a snake, then that’s all that matters. I want you to be happy.”

“I wish I could be both,” I said. “Change at will. But I don’t think such a thing exists.”

Kingsnake stared down at his glass again. “Maybe we could ask the witch someday...”

“Maybe.”

Kingsnake lifted his chin and raised his glass. “To the Champion of Cards.”

I smiled before I tapped my glass against his. “To me.”

If you haven't started the Dirty Blood series yet, fall in love with Fang all over again with **Bite the Woman That Feeds**.