

## Sticks and Stones

Cynthia had been saving the éclair for *after* her match with Barnett, but she had been a bundle of nerves about seeing the wolf again all day, and the sweet confection seemed to offer comfort.

After all, what if her stomach was growling again during this session? Barnett would think she was *always* hungry!

It had been another long day at work, and Mrs. Cleveland had forced her to stay late again to finish some work that needed to be done “urgently”. She had said that and then gone home herself, of course. Then she had come here to her home away from home, Ryland MMA, where she'd put in an hour of hard training and an hour of sparring. Five partners, three tap out matches. It had been a good day and she hadn't dropped a single point, which Hosaam, the fifty-something jack-rabbit who had been her trainer since she entered the elite level, had been sternly pleased about. She was odds-on favourite to win the upcoming National Championship, which Hosaam took a fair amount of pride in.

*What do you think?* Cynthia had asked him, *Could you have beaten me in your prime?*

In response, Hosaam had nodded towards the trophy case which included back-to-back World Champ trophies for 1992 and 1993.

*Sounds like a maybe to me.* Cynthia had jibed, so Hosaam made her do eighty push-ups.

She sat down on the floor next to the cardboard box from the bakery across the street, and peeked inside at the glistening, French pastry within. She glanced around the empty studio, although she knew she was alone.

Hosaam had agreed to let her use the studio after-hours, although she hadn't told him that she had invited Barnett. He insisted that he wanted a shot at redemption. She thought his pride might be a bit bruised after his public thrashing at the gym the week before. The fox had agreed, they had swapped numbers, and Cynthia had invited him out to Ryland whenever he thought he was ready to take her on.

This morning, he had texted her: "Let's do this" with a fire emoji, and then the flexing robot arm. *Very intimidating.*

Cynthia was holding the eclair delicately between her thumb and forefinger, and was just about to insert the cream-filled sweet into her mouth, most likely all at once, when she heard heavy feet coming down the stairs across the room.

Cynthia slammed the eclair back into the cardboard box, scrambled to her feet and charged across the room to where a heavy bag hung from the ceiling. The fox pounced at it, wrapped her legs around it, interlocked her feet and began doing inverted sit ups, doing her level best to look like she'd been doing them for at *least* ten minutes.

"Well hey, Foxy. Long time no see." Said the wolf from the entryway.

Cynthia glanced at him seriously, motioned with her hand in a *let me finish this set* sort of way, did three more sit ups and let herself fall back to her feet. Only then did she smile and say: "So, you actually had the balls to show up, huh?"

"Do you really think I'd let things end the way they did last week?" Barnett asked, arching an eyebrow at the vixen, "You'd best believe I'm here to settle the score."

“Oh, excellent,” Cynthia said, swaying up to the big wolf, and looking up into his face with half-lidded eyes, “I get to knock the confidence out of you all over again. I was worried your ego would still be broken from last time.”

A look of real annoyance flashed across the wolf's face. It was gone in an instant, but it made Cynthia worry that maybe she was taking the teasing too far. Geez, he was sensitive. She'd back off a bit, anyway.

“*Last* time,” Barnett said, “I didn't know you were some award-winning, ninja phenom.”

Cynthia laughed and suddenly realized she was playing idly with her hair. She covered by pulling it into a ponytail and securing it with her wristband.

“Well, *that* might be going a bit far, but I'm not bad.” She said, turning away to hide the flush that entered her face.

“Not bad? How many titles did you say you've won?”

“Four state, three national and last year I placed third in the world championships.” Cynthia said, sounding distinctly irritated by that third-place finish.

“Yeah, I guess that's not bad.” Barnett said, rolling his eyes, he brushed past the fox and dropped his gym bag on the floor beside the one that was already there, presumably Cynthia's. “However,” he continued, holding up a lecturing finger, “This time I'm ready for you, and I have one major advantage over you, Foxy.”

“And that is?” Asked Cynthia.

"I'm huge, Foxy, and you aren't." He flexed a bicep to drive the point home, which it did admirably. Cynthia wondered if it was possible that he was more jacked than he had been last week, and briefly forgot to respond.

"I hate to break it to you, Barnett, but you were huge last week too." She said at last, but this time she took some of the edge off with a wink.

Barnett smiled and almost seemed to be at a loss for words himself for a moment or two. Finally he said: "So where does one get changed in this dungeon?"

Barnett stepped onto the matted sparring floor of Ryland MMA and began to bounce back and forth on the balls of his feet like they did in all those YouTube videos he'd been watching. They'd just finished stretching, and Cynthia was standing on the other side of the sparring floor, hands on hips. She looked down at his feet with an expression of mock amazement.

"Wow, look at you go! You're serious this time."

"You nervous?" He asked, hopping backwards and forwards a few steps.

"Terrified." She said, smiling. She held her hands up in front of her, took a wide stance, and began to circle. Barnett followed suit.

The truth that he would never admit, was that *he* was nervous. It had started as soon as Cynthia had set foot on the sparring floor and suddenly started moving with that familiar liquid grace that had so dominated him last week. Suddenly images of him being cradled to sleep in Foxy's side headscissor in front of a rapt audience of gym-goers started flashing through his mind.

Well, he had promised himself in the mirror that morning that this time she wouldn't get a tapout from him. He was twice her size and had been hitting the weights feverishly all week thinking about it, and there was no reason he couldn't muscle his way out of any hold she had up her-

She darted forward with such sudden speed that Barnett could have sworn their were coiled springs in the fox's legs. He put up his arms in self defence and tried to dodge away but he was ages too late. He felt a pair of arms circle his waist, and suddenly his feet were no longer on the floor. Barnett's body was rolled over Cynthia's leg, and suddenly he was on his back and his arm was being grabbed.

When the dust settled, Barnett was locked fast in an arm bar. His shoulder was already on fire, and Barnett began to panic almost immediately.

"Wait!" He said, stupidly.

"Wait?" Came Cynthia's voice, "Don't try and tell me you weren't ready, Barnett." Despite her words, she did ease the tension enough that the wolf no longer thought his arm was about to break, and his mind could start to work again.

"Barnett? Are you okay?" The fox asked when he didn't say anything, sounding concerned this time. Suddenly the tension on his arm disappeared and Cynthia rolled backwards until she was kneeling beside him.

"What happened? That hold is *supposed* to hurt, just so you know."

"Yeah, I know." Barnett said, rubbing the shoulder of the arm she had captured, mind racing. "I'm, er...recovering from a football injury on that arm, is all."

It was bullshit, and lying his way out of a hold made a hot streak of shame run through his soul.

“Oh, Barnett,” Cynthia said, “I’m sorry, you should have told me.” She reached out, seemed to hesitate for a moment, then began to massage the shoulder with the fake injury.

This made something else entirely run through Barnett’s soul.

“Why don’t we postpone this until-”

“No!” Barnett said, too eagerly, causing the fox’s eyes to widen slightly. “Uh, I mean, that’s okay, I think I overreacted. Sorry, let’s reset.”

“Are you sure?” She asked.

“Totally.” He said and flashed a thumbs up.

A moment later they were circling each other again. This time Barnett was on edge. With her speed, he could be flat on his ass again before he knew what was happening. There was one other thing he could try though. Take the initiative.

Barnett suddenly hurled himself towards the fox, who quick-stepped back to avoid his first grasp. He reached out again, leaning forward, putting himself off-balance, which was something Cynthia would never allow to go unpunished.

She moved again, springing to the side this time while simultaneously grabbing his wrist and propelling him forward. He staggered, tried to stay up and failed, ending up on the deck on his hands and knees. He shook his head and began to stand as quickly as he could, but she was already on him, once again grabbing him by the waist and rolling with him back onto the ground. Cynthia climbed his frame, twisted her legs around his torso and managing to trap his

left arm down by his side. His right arm fell to her right knee and began trying to push down, as if he could slip out like a bar of soap through wet fingers. Cynthia ended that delusion by ratcheting up the pressure, causing the wolf to groan and his breathing to wheeze.

Better yet, with one arm trapped and the other hopelessly preoccupied, the fox was able to easily wrap her arms around his neck in a rear-naked choke.

*Shit!* Barnett thought, angrily, his free arm springing to the arm around his throat, like a firefighter trying to fight two flames at once, *how am I supposed to fight this ninja shit!?*

He began to wrench at the choke with his right arm, and could feel it wanting to move. If only he could get his other arm free...

He wriggled and twisted it, and Cynthia's legs tightened up a notch in response like an anaconda sensing its prey's exhalations.

The wolf was already in trouble. He felt like his ribs were about to crack, and the edges of his vision were just starting to darken. He began to twist violently in an attempt to free himself, but the jerking movements didn't even come close to throwing Cynthia off. If anything, she tightened up more.

Eventually, he tired himself out, and all he could do was lie there and pant, wheezing, lungs straining against the living bonds constricting them.

"Am I gonna get a tap out of you today, Wolfie?" Cynthia suddenly whispered, mere millimeters from his left ear, causing his ear to perk and a shiver to run down his spine.

Despite all that, he had the wherewithal to respond in the negative.

“No!” He said, trying to sound firm and confident, but only sounding breathy and strangled instead.

“Who could have guessed?” She laughed in response, and then Barnett felt the hold sink the rest of the way into his throat, any remaining bloodflow to his brain was halted in its tracks and the slowly encroaching tunnel vision suddenly began to race. Just before Cynthia put him out for the first time that night, his hand gave up trying to fight the sleeper hold, caressed the upper arm once, then fell to the mat with a *slap!*

Cynthia sat cross-legged and gazed in impressed wonderment at the unconscious wolf. He was strong alright, DAMN strong. Even with one arm pinned, she'd had to fight hard to keep that sleeper in place. Not only that, but he'd stayed awake longer than most as well.

As inexperienced as he was, Cynthia would have to make sure he never got her in a real hold or even *she* might be in trouble.

A snort burst from Barnett's nose, ruining the illusion of a peacefully sleeping, giant baby, and a second later his eyes started to flutter. Cynthia struck a demure pose, pulling her knees up in front of her and wrapping her arms around them.

Barnett coughed and glanced around, finally seeing the fox.

“Was I too rough, Wolfie?” She said, shyly.

“That one I'll give you,” said Barnett, getting to his feet a bit unsteadily, “One point on the board for you.”

“Oh good, I was worried you wouldn't want to play anymore.” Cynthia said with a laugh. She rose to her feet in one motion without using her arms. “I wanted three taps from you tonight, but if you'd rather it be three knockouts, that's up to you. I can't *force* you to tap.”

“You won't get that lucky again.” Said Barnett, seriously. He put up his hands and waited.

Cynthia raised an eyebrow and walked slowly back to her starting position. Before getting into a stance she said: “Are you actually angry, Barnett?”

He looked surprised, seemed to consider for a second, then replied with a strained smile: “No, of course not. This is my game face is all.”

“We can stop if you want.”

“No, no! Let's do this.”

“Well alright then, sleepyhead.” Said the fox with a smile.

Cynthia took her position and began to close the distance with Barnett. He still looked angry, but maybe that it *was* just his game face.

She danced on her toes just on the edge of his reach, baiting him playfully. She let him come close to getting a hold on her only to sweep away with electric grace. Twice she let him land a hand on her only to twist and break the hold before he could really firm up his grip. With each failed attempt his face seemed to grow more and more sour. Cynthia noticed it as she spun away from another attempted grab, maybe she should stop toying with him.

Suddenly, Cynthia yelped as she felt herself being yanked powerfully backwards by the collar of her shirt. The sudden pull was strong enough that she slammed directly into Barnett back-first. Well, *that* was a new one on her. Usually, no pulling people by their clothes went without saying...

Before she could object, she felt the wolf's heavily muscled arm trying to slither under her muzzle, and Cynthia knew if he managed to lock it in she'd be as good as done. She

brought up both arms to fight the wolf's one, and was impressed once again. She couldn't even slow the big guy down. She felt it getting harder to breathe as Barnett's bicep bulged against her windpipe.

Okay then.

“What's wrong, Foxy?” Barnett taunted, “Where'd the National Champ goooOOO!?”

His last word became a comical hoot as Cynthia suddenly dropped into a horse stance. A trained fighter may have postured up against that, but it was enough to throw Barnett completely off his centre of gravity, next thing he knew he was landing painfully on his back. He was still coming to grips with the fact that a girl half his size had just judo flipped him, when his arm was cranked painfully, causing him to grunt and roll sideways to try and ease the pain in his shoulder. This opened him up completely, giving Cynthia a host of targets to aim for next. The obvious choice was another arm bar, which should could have slipped him into very easily, but the fox was mindful of his made up football injury. Instead, she twisted the wrist more, making the wolf groan and roll to face the ground. Then she planted a foot on either side of his head and scooped his wide open neck into a figure four with her right leg wound around the wolf, and her left hooking her right ankle to anchor the hold fast.

Barnett would have preferred an arm bar.

His hands went back and forth between the fox's strangling and anchoring leg, trying to find a weak point that didn't exist that he could exploit.

“Almost had me big guy,” Cynthia said, using one arm to prop herself in a reclined seated position and scratching behind the wolf's ear with the other hand, “We can talk about your shirt-grabbing technique once you've woken up.”

In response, a low growl began emanating from deep in Barnett's throat. It was a deeply unsettling and violent sound, and Cynthia could feel his vocal cords working to make the sound on her calf and thigh. It was...pretty damn threatening.

"None of that!" She said, trying to play it off as a joke. She coiled tighter around him, and the growling grew dim and feeble, but it didn't go away completely.

He squirmed silently, pushing and pulling at Cynthia's legs and turning his head the fraction his prison would allow left and right as if he thought he could work it out that way. Finally, he stopped, breathing heavily with both hands gripping her right calf.

"Just tap out, what's wrong with you?" Cynthia said. It was meant good-naturedly, and the response it evoked from Barnett was wholly unexpected.

The growl started to intensify, fighting through the constricted windpipe with renewed vigour.

*GrrrrrrrrRRRRRRRRRR*

He let go of her calf with his right arm and brought it careening down onto the sparring floor with a thunderous *CLAP!*

The growl continued to rise in volume until it crescendoed in a roar of fury.

*RRRRRRRRROOOAAAAGG!*

*CLAP!* The fist came down again and seemed to shake the entire studio on impact.

Cynthia watched all this in stunned silence, but came back to herself just in time as the hammering hand flew back to her calf.

He threw everything he had into escaping the figure four, managing to move Cynthia's leg enough to get half a grip on her calf. The fox powered down on the choke, prompting a sputter from Barnett, but even still he managed to work the fingers of his other hand between her calf and his neck. He craned his head back, and managed to get a better grip. The downside was that giving up that much neck allowed Cynthia sink her lock in the rest of the way, turning the fight into a war of attrition. Barnett was banking on a high risk, high reward strategy.

When Cynthia got a hold fully locked on someone, no one had ever escaped for the last five years. Brute strength alone wasn't enough to escape if you didn't have the technique to go with it. Hell, no one had escaped from her even *with* technique, but this was the first time anyone had ever gone Hulk mode on her. The hold almost broke right away since she was caught so off guard, but then when Barnett exposed his neck, Cynthia bore down, reaching back to grasp her anchoring leg for extra security. Then she just waited and prayed that the wolf's rampage wouldn't do any lasting damage to either of them.

Meanwhile, Barnett's face grew red, and he let out a power-lifting shout as he wrenched at the fox's leg. He started breathing easier as he managed to move it a fraction of an inch away from his throat. He took two puffs of air like a weightlifter preparing to lift a barbell, and quickly adjusted first one hand then the other to get a better grip. He heaved again and managed to move her again, another quarter of an inch or so. His heart raced as he started to believe that he was going to escape after all.

Another pull, but now his progress stopped. Barnett opened one eye in a squinting wink. Of course, her other leg was keeping the hold in place.

Adjusting his right hand to have as firm a grip as possible on her calf, he moved his left to her knee and started trying to slide it off her foot and break the anchor, unaware that the fox had gotten her arm involved as well.

The angle was awkward, he couldn't move her left leg at all. Not only that, but he could feel her right calf now cinching back into place, his one arm incapable of keeping it at bay. To top it off, the muscles in his arms and shoulders were starting to burn. He readjusted so both hands were pulling on her calf once again.

This went on for some time, Barnett's pulls became weaker and weaker as Cynthia's choke eased back into place. Then she cinched it even tighter. Barnett went up on his feet, bridging reflexively as he tried in vain to release the pressure. His attempts to reestablish his grip were now little more than pawing at her leg.

He buckled and his arms fell away as his resistance ceased.

Cynthia loosened up, but kept the wolf's head held loosely in the triangle of her legs as he twitched. She pushed herself back into a seated position and swiped the sweat from her brow. That had gotten intense, and he'd taken longer to wear himself out than she thought he would. It was good practice though. Raw power was a...new technique that she wasn't used to, and now she knew she could hold out even against a giant like this.

She was about to disengage herself, maybe sit on his stomach and wait for him to come to like last week, when he coughed and his eyes opened again. His hands instinctively rose to her legs, as his eyes rolled to see her.

"That's two," she said, wagging two fingers upside down in front of his face, "one more to go."

"I almost had you though." He said, now glancing nervously at the impromptu leg collar he seemed to be wearing.

“Sure you did.” Cynthia smiled, “I’ll give you this, Barnett: You might be the *strongest* person I’ve fought, physically.”

“Well, I’m basically He-Man, so…” Barnett said, a smile briefly wiping away his sour disposition. He could take a compliment with the best of them, apparently.

“Are you *ever*.” Cynthia said, giggling. The movement of the laugh made the triangle of her legs move slightly closer together, prompting a surprisingly satisfying jerk from the wolf as he moved his hand further up her leg. Cynthia watched his discomfort for a moment, an inner debate raging. Finally, she let the impish side of her win. “That must have taken a lot out of you though, didn’t it? That round?”

“I mean, not really.” Barnett lied.

“Really?” Cynthia said in mock amazement, raising one hand to cover her mouth like a 1950’s action comic damsel, “That’s crazy, let me see your hands.”

Slowly, suspiciously, Barnett raised his left hand. She took it gently and began to massage it.

“I’ll bet you can crush an apple with these hands can’t you? Let me see the other one too.”

For some reason, he did it without hesitation this time, and Cynthia took one of his hands in each of hers. For a moment she massaged both, and the wolf almost seemed to settle into her lap. If the imp hadn’t been in control now, she would have felt bad about firming up her grip on his hands and drawing her legs tightly together once more. Not *too* tight, this time, just enough to make him squirm.

“Oh c-c’mon Foxy!” He protested, “Let’s reset.”

“Use that strength, He-Man,” Cynthia laughed, “I’ll let you go if you can get your hands back.”

He tried, but as Cynthia had guessed, his arms were sapped, and his efforts were like those of a toddler.

“Awww...” Cynthia cooed as the wolf’s legs started to kick, “Is little old Cynth stronger than you? I guess I must be She-Ra, huh?”

“Let me go, this is cheap!” Barnett said, petulantly, held just tightly enough to be uncomfortable.

“Maybe if you say please.”

“*Please* let me go.”

“I’m gonna give you *one* hand back, okay Barns?” Cynthia said, as if talking to a child. “You’re going to use that hand to tap out, at which point I’ll let you go, deal?”

Barnett bobbed a small, restricted nod.

Cynthia let go of his right hand, which immediately flew to her calf and started to pull fruitlessly again as the wolf let out a series of strained grunts.

“Oh, wolfie. What am I gonna do with you?” Cynthia said with an eye roll and an exaggerated sigh. She rolled onto her side, elbow on the floor and propped her head up with her balled fist casually. Then she slowly tightened up her leg noose around the wolf’s neck without looking down at him. The only two senses she had to go on was sound and touch. She heard Barnett start to croak and wheeze, felt his body writhing desperately in her grasp, heard his

breathing start to grow raspy and laboured, felt when his big hand once again began to rub up and down the tightened muscles of her legs.

What she *didn't* feel from the stubborn bastard was a tap, but she decided her third knockout shouldn't come like this. Without warning, she unhooked her legs and raised her left away from his neck, causing Barnett to roll out of her grip like a drunk who'd just been thrown down a flight of stairs in front of a saloon. He was pissed and embarrassed, but still conscious...this time.

After this, Cynthia insisted that they take a fifteen minute break, despite Barnett's protests. This gave Cynthia fifteen minutes to complain about her boss who kept making her stay late, and Barnett fifteen minutes to get his strength back and form some sort of plan to take the damn fox down in the next round.

Fifteen minutes later, Barnett did a set of pull-ups on one of the studio's bars to hype himself up, and the pair returned to the sparring match for one more round.

They started to size each other up again. Cynthia waited, giving him a chance to make the first move. He didn't seem to want to, but seeing how that went the last two times, Cynthia didn't blame him. She moved in herself, and this time instead of dodging, he made his stance stronger and braced, reaching out with both arms. Cynthia ducked them, wrapped her arms around the wolf's waist and attempted to take him back to the floor, but now that he was ready for it, it wasn't so easy.

Before she could try another technique, a massive hand closed over her right wrist, and pulled violently. She left the ground completely as the wolf spun her like a baseball bat. Her shoulder screamed in pain as it rolled awkwardly in its socket. When she landed, she did so as

gracefully as possible, but it still hurt. It wasn't so much what you'd call an MMA throw, it was more like being manhandled.

Barnett seemed to think the move was fine, because when he approached, it wasn't in a concerned sort of way.

She managed to get on her back and spin so that her legs were facing him, causing him to hesitate, obviously not wanting to get caught in them again.

"Can we pause for a sec?" Cynthia asked, holding up a finger from her turtle position on the ground.

Barnett looked questioning at her, then smiled somewhat madly.

*She knows you've got her!* He thought

"As if!" He said.

He started forward again and Cynthia raised her feet in a defensive movement. Barnett seized the ankle of her right foot, and Cynthia, worried that he intended to swing her again, hooked the back of one of his knees with her left foot. He fell to his knees in front of her, and Cynthia hooked her now free right leg over his shoulder so that her calf was on his back, pulling the wolf forward.

Barnett fought right away, trying to shake the fox's leg off his left shoulder, but when Cynthia's other leg landed on his *right* shoulder, he started to fight with the strength that accompanies panic. By then it was far too late.

Cynthia used her calves to lever the wolf forward and used both hands to pull his head forward so that the bottom of his muzzle pressed into her stomach and his throat lodged as deep as it could go between her legs.

“No!” Barnett said. In fact, he said it a lot.

“Barnett.”

“No!”

“Wolfie, listen.”

“No! No, no!”

“Wolfie!”

“No! Foxy, Please!”

He was pulling desperately on each thigh, trying to pry her legs away from his neck, and the fox was struck again by his strength. True, she wasn't actually applying any pressure, and sure, he didn't have even the smallest chance of freeing himself, but he sure was putting up a fight, and after being knocked out cold *twice*. Cynthia smiled and let him tire himself out a little.

Finally, Cynthia gave him a warning squeeze. Nothing major, just enough to get his attention. The muscle groups in her legs grew taught and corded, and she gently levered his head forward just a tad more. He choked and spluttered and finally swayed drunkenly, but Cynthia lightened up on him before there was any real danger of knocking him out. You had to be careful though, this was a powerful choke when applied by an expert.

“Barnett, listen to me, okay?”

He knelt slouched, breathing heavily with one big hand on each of Cynthia's thighs and both of Cynthia's much smaller hands still pulling his head forward lightly, but at her voice he looked up and met her eyes.

“What I was *gonna* say if you'd agreed to take a time out, was that swinging people by the arm like that is really dangerous.” She said, “Like, I could have dislocated my arm or something. I could show you some real throws if you want.”

Despite her tone, Barnett's eyebrows drew down angrily as if he thought she was making fun of him. He renewed his struggles with the fox's legs, and Cynthia responded by moving them a bit closer together, and that's when the wolf choked out two words that he would instantly regret.

“F-fucking bitch!”

Cynthia's jaw dropped open an inch, and a dumbfounded numbness swept through her limbs. It caused her hold to loosen to the point where Barnett began to make headway in his escape efforts.

“What did you say?” She asked. She said it quietly, but something in her tone made Barnett glance up. Only then did he seem to realize himself what he'd said.

“What did you just say to me?” Cynthia asked again, and this time a deadly venom had seeped into her tone.

Barnett's eyes became round as saucers.

“Foxy, I-”

Cynthia pulled his head forward as tight as she could against her pelvis, cutting off whatever excuse he had been about to make with a strangled *ULK*. She crossed her heels, straightened her legs and finally began to put a *real* squeeze on the wolf.

She squeezed harder than she had today or the week before, she shut her eyes tight and throttled the wolf like she was at the Olympic games fighting for the Gold Medal.

Any hope of using his touted strength to muscle his way out of this one evaporated out of Barnett's mind like vapour. He was stupid for ever thinking he could do it. He still fought, of course, he heaved and pried uselessly on one leg, then the other.

“What did you call me?” She growled through gritted teeth. When she said it she released most of the pressure, wanting an answer.

Barnett drew in a desperate breath and his streaming eyes, which had just been starting to roll dreamily upwards, refocused, searching around until they found hers.

“Puh-please,” he managed, “Foxy I didn't mrrnk-”

“*My name isn't Foxy!*” Cynthia shouted, cranking the pressure back to maximum as she did. She held him like that again, and a pitiful whine trickled from between his drooling lips. He swayed and tipped sideways. One arm moved sluggishly to stop the fall, but only managed to prop the pair up for two seconds before the arm buckled and they crumpled to the mats.

She released him again, and his eyes fluttered, his hand tried aimlessly to find a crevice to pull at, but at this point the simple *weight* of the fox's leg would have been sufficient to keep it in place.

“Sss-uh...Sssuh-in...” Barnett mumbled, his eyes mostly closed. He might have been trying to say “Cynthia”, to form some sort of apology. Cynthia wasn't in the mood.

She applied the pressure once more, still pulling on the back of the wolf's head. His expression screwed up into a semblance of concentration, rallying for one last attempt to fight back, his brain calling up all reserves in the battle to stay awake. It was a war his spirit waged for three seconds before his expression collapsed into a mask of desperate pleading. But Cynthia couldn't see the pleas, her eyes were screwed tightly shut.

*He called me a bitch!*

The only sounds in the silent studio was the pathetic slapping of Barnett's kicking feet and what few watery gurgles that Cynthia's strangling legs would allow.

*Why did he call me that?*

The wolf's hand drunkenly managed find its way up on top of the fox's hip, where it started to tap meekly against her side, a show of surrender. He hadn't forgotten his promise to his reflection that morning, but screw it, he needed to get out! he was willing to try anything.

She didn't let him go. Didn't even seem to notice. The tapping hand lazily gathered up a handful of her shirt, and held on for dear life.

*I thought he liked me, and then he calls me a bitch!?*

The rage began to subside, Cynthia took a deep, calming breath and opened her eyes. Barnett's face was purple, his eyes were rolled back and the hand clutching her shirt was shaking wildly, once again tapping out despite itself.

"Oh, God!" Cynthia said, letting go of the wolf and shuffling away from him across the sparring floor, finally pulling her knees up in front of her.

He lay there twitching and shaking, chest hitching spasmodically. Cynthia watched in alarm, ears back, wondering if she should get help. How would she explain this?

Soon though, the colour began returning to normal in his face, and he began to stir.

How long had she held him in that chokehold? How had she lost control like that? She crawled over to him on her hands and knees and sat beside him, watching his chest rise and fall, lungs drawing in air greedily.

Cynthia reached out cautiously and gently lifted one eyelid.

“Uh, Wolfie? You okay?”

Barnett snorted in response, and his body shook once, twice, then his eyes opened and he drew in a deep gasp like a drowning man breaching the surface.

He lay there, wide eyed, staring heavenward until his eyes snapped over to Cynthia. His mouth opened and he rolled onto his side, as if planning to log roll away and up the stairs.

“I’m sorry.” Cynthia said, halting him in his tracks. He turned (or more like flopped like a landed fish) back towards her.

“*You’re* sorry?” He asked incredulously, his voice a husky croak. “But I...”

“I lost control.” The fox said, silencing him, “I could have really hurt you, or worse. So yes, I’m sorry. I wish you hadn’t said what you did, but I’m sorry.”

He blinked gormlessly, but eventually found his voice. “Uh...that’s alright.” He said, stupidly, “I’m sorry too, for what I said to you. I didn’t mean it, really I didn’t! I was just-”

"I know," She said, "It's okay, I shouldn't have teased you so much." She rose to her feet, as gracefully after three rounds of sparring as when she was fresh.

*Hell, Barnett thought, she's still fresh now, isn't she?*

"Well, uh, I need to get this place cleaned up." She said, picking up her gym bag.

"How about one more round?" Barnett asked, sitting up now.

"I don't think that's a good idea, we're both a little riled up." Cynthia said, not looking at him.

"Well, can I help you-"

"I've got it." Cynthia said, "Can you find your own way out?"

"Yeah..." Barnett felt a heavy weight in his stomach. Him and his big mouth. He stood and quietly gathered his things. "Can I text you later?" He said, one foot on the stairs.

"I dunno, Barnett." Cynthia said, she was crouched on the floor facing away from him, and didn't turn when she said it. "I need some time."

Barnett considered saying something else, realized he didn't know what he *could* say, and walked up the stairs and onto the night-shrouded city streets. As he walked, occasionally rubbing his neck, which was again aching bitterly, he cursed himself for getting so heated. His temper had to stop getting the best of him like this.

Meanwhile in the basement studio of Ryland MMA, Cynthia sat with her back against the far wall, knees drawn up in front of her and tears threatening well out of her eyes at any moment.

Maybe she should have told Barnett why the word he had used burned her so much. When she had been a child, she'd heard it every day from a father who was two different men when sober and drunk.

*But why did he call me a bitch?*

Cynthia glanced at the cardboard box and slowly picked it up. Some of the cream in the centre of the éclair had burst out when she had thrown the box down earlier.

She shoved the sweet into her mouth angrily. Then she stood and reached into her gym bag. She strapped on a pair of gloves and began punching the heavy bag she'd used for sit ups earlier.

*No one calls me that.*

The sound of the fox's gloved hands beating the bag filled the room and started to intensify.

*I should have agreed to that final round, dammit.*