

Those Left Behind

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Fandom: [Baldur's Gate \(Video Games\)](#)

Relationships: [Astarion & Wyll \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Astarion & Shadowheart \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Astarion & Gale \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Astarion & Dalyria \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Astarion & Tara \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Astarion & Jaheira \(Baldur's Gate\)](#)

Characters: [Astarion \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Wyll \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Shadowheart \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Gale \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Tara \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Dalyria \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Clive \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Gandrel \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Chessa \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Jaheira \(Baldur's Gate\)](#), [Violet \(Baldur's Gate\)](#)

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Those Left Behind

by [Gally](#)

Summary

What if the person who helped make Astarion into an at least semi-functional person was just suddenly... gone? What would he do then?

This is a post-canon exploration of just that!

It starts off not that long after the victory over the brain, sadly Karlach flipped a soul coin and decided to burn up instead of going on a romantic Avernus trip with Astarion, so now he's trying to figure out how to be a person all on his own.

Shit.

What will Astarion (and I guess the other less important people) left behind do now?

Especially when events conspire to force Astarion to re-examine his feelings about his not-siblings under Cazador and to stop pulling away from his traveling companions. They are only being nice to him because that is what *she* would want... right?

AKA We see how Astarion becomes the spawn you can meet at the epilogue party, if you did not romance him. Also he gets forced to admit he has FRIENDS. (Eventually.)

You can see the tags, he's not really on his own. This is a good thing, despite how much he whines about it.

Work complete!

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1: Friendship is a fucking hassle

Chapter Summary

It is only a couple of tendays after they defeated the brain above the city. Lae'zel is saving her people. Karlach is... gone. Astarion is rebuilding his life. Building it up for the first time? Not the easiest of tasks, it is going... not as badly as it could be. At least when he is left alone. Too bad his remaining friends from the great adventure know where he lives and need his help when Gale accidentally creates a magical storm in the city. This proves to be the lesser of two disasters Gale unleashes that day when he says exactly the wrong thing to our recovering vampire.

-or-

"I SLEEP DURING THE DAY WHY ARE YOU KNOCKING ON MY DOOR AT 3PM!?!"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A wild magic storm was whipping through the sky above Baldur's Gate. Purple gusts of wind violently swirled about, ripping various livery signs apart and sending them all about as the rain fell in disparate patches. One window might have enough water splashing against it that it seemed as if a waterfall had opened up above it, while its partner in the same wall enjoyed just the lightest misting of rain. Multicolored lightning arced through the sky, reaching down far lower than it should, occasionally striking a sewer grate. It was not only miserable to be outside in this storm, but downright dangerous.

Snuggled under a heavy blanket, enchanted to produce just a bit of heat, Astarion was instead downright happy as he marveled at the sight. He had never seen a storm like this before. He assumed he was safe in his top floor rented flat. He was in the Upper City after all. (Barely! But it counted!) The Watch would have let people know if there was cause to be concerned. Still, he should ask someone about this at some point. A wizard would probably be able to tell him the most about it. He resolved to instead ask Jaheira the next time he saw her.

For now, he was content to lay there and peer out his large bedroom windows. The western wall of his bedroom had two large windows, going from floor to almost ceiling. They both opened to provide access to a small balcony; the perfect size for brooding. He had installed thick curtains that could be dropped down easily if needed, such as with various thrown objects. Or even, say, with a very long stick that he could reach over to poke the bundled curtains as he carefully stayed out of the path of the sunlight. A stick that so happened to closely resemble the mysteriously vanished segment of banister from the building's stairs.

Currently, the windows were uncovered, the storm diffusing the sunlight enough that the most he had felt all morning was a mild itching that quickly faded. He knew he should draw the curtains soon; it wouldn't be good to doze off and be woken up by the burning rays of afternoon. But it was such a pretty sight, he was so comfortable in his blanket nest on the floor, and he was so drowsy. He *mmed* as he stretched out and then curled up again, allowing himself a huge yawn as he sank back into one of the many pillows he had incorporated into his nest.

Astarion was working on allowing himself many things lately. Such as sleeping instead of trancing. Sleeping lasted longer, which meant less daylight hours he had to try to fill somehow. Also, trancing tended to draw on real experiences, rather than invent new ones. His horrible nightmares persisted, no matter which method he chose, but he found it much easier to shrug off invented dreams compared to practically reliving what he'd experienced. Also, he just liked it better. It felt nicer. He barely remembered being a "real" elf and not just a vampire spawn with pointy ears anyway.

Some of those actual experiences were why one of his self-allowances was to sleep on the floor. He had a lovely bed; a fancy dark wood frame with a large plush mattress covered with silk sheets and an elegantly embroidered duvet. It would not have been out of place in any noble's house—the height of luxury and comfort. Astarion had not been able to sleep a single restful day upon it. He couldn't lay in it without anticipating hands reaching out for him, until it felt like those phantom hands were touching every part of his body. Trying to ignore that just led to worse and worse sensations bubbling up from his memories.

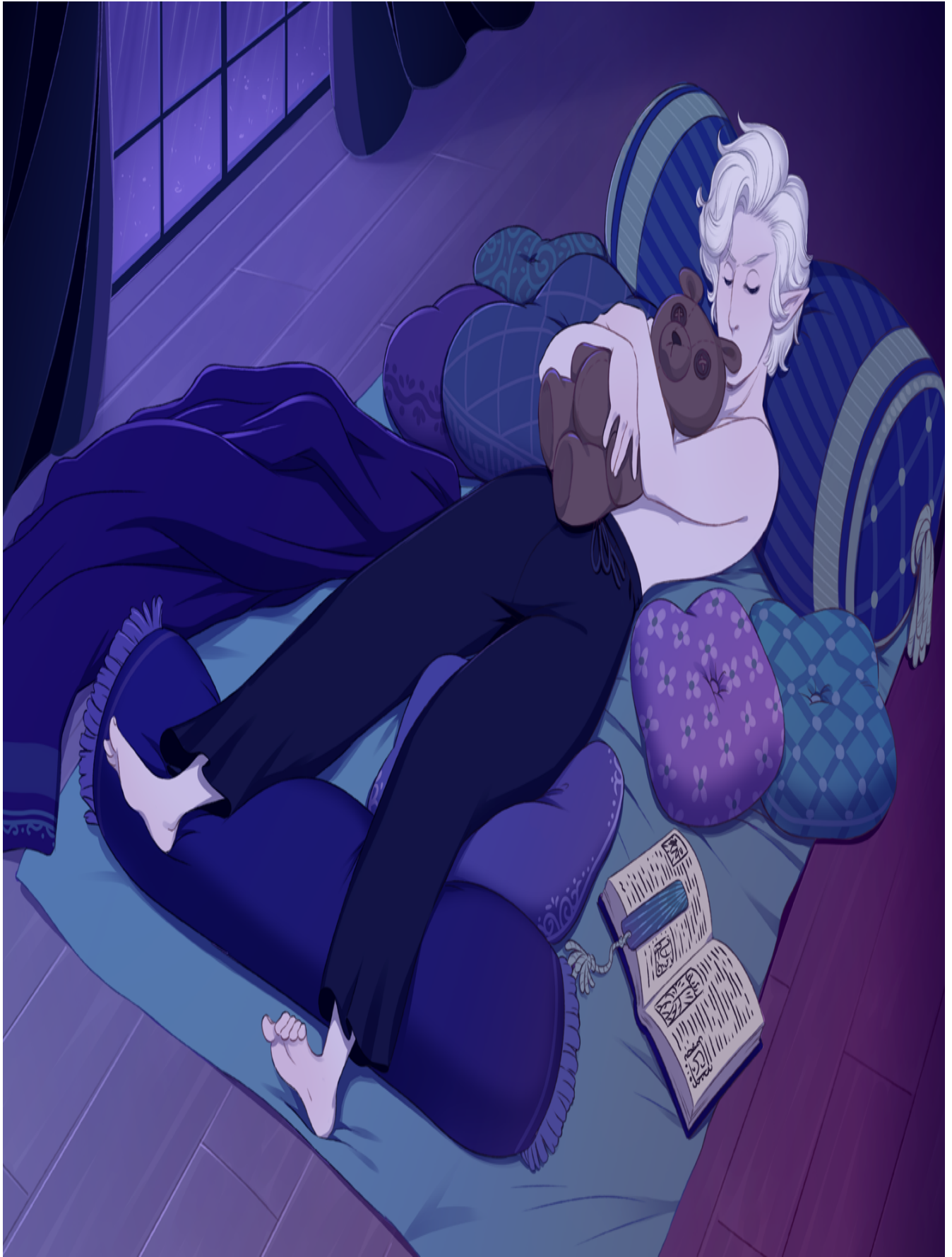
So! Floor. He used the bed instead as storage, laying out clothes, sewing materials, and books upon it.

He rolled onto his back and held Karlach's stuffed bear Clive up high with both hands, muttering to himself, "After all, we didn't really have beds on most of my freedom journey, did we? Not until the Elfsong. You were there with me and I just felt so... truly safe."

He sighed as he wiggled the bear in the air and then held it close, rolling over to look out the windows at the storm again.

"If I had ascended," he paused but decided to finish the musing this time, "would you have felt safe with me in the hells? If I was strong, instead of just this weak spawn?"

He squeezed his eyes shut. This was stupid. Stop it. Why did he have to ruin everything? He was happy just a few minutes ago, godsdammit. He opened his eyes again, looking out at the storm, trying to capture that contented feeling once more. He nibbled on the bear's ear just a bit, some of his few happy memories playing through his head. Eventually he succeeded, at least close enough, and drifted off. Mercifully, his sleep was dreamless.



A loud banging at his door rudely awoke him not nearly enough hours later. What! Was he being attacked? Wait. No. Knocking. That was just normal knocking. He groggily sat up and looked out the window again. Still purple. Still very overcast, but less magical. He *hrrmed* as he pondered if it was safe to leave the curtains open, then startled when the knocking happened again. He decided to ignore whoever it was and flopped back down.

"Astarion? I know you're in there!" Gale's voice. OK, fine, he will ignore this specific person that it was. Even easier. And more pleasurable!

More knocking occurred. "Please, I require your particular assistance in a most urgent matter!" His ignore field remained strongly deployed. He did not sound distressed; Astarion would not be fooled.

A heavy thud against his door. Gale falling against it with his whole wizard weight? "All I need is to use your domicile. I need a secure and private space to establish some critically important enchantments, and I do not know how long the storm outside will remain abated." The man loved to hear himself talk. And this was coming from Astarion.

Shadowheart then spoke, "Astarion, I know you don't like people just dropping by, but Gale said he didn't trust anywhere else we could reach in time."

He really had to contact the building owner to spray for these pests.

Astarion gave up, mollified somewhat by the barest acknowledgement of his wants, and called out, making sure to play up how drowsy he sounded. Not that he had to try very hard. "Let yourself in, do what you want in the vestibule, and leave me alone. Use that fancy unlocking spell you loved to joke could oh so easily replace me." He made a mental note to get some large heavy object that he could easily push against the door. Maybe he could just go in and out via his windows and brick up the front.

There was some muttering that he could not quite make out, but chose to interpret it as Shadowheart chastising Gale. Then, the magical unlocking spell echoed through the building and he heard the pair—no, trio—enter his front room. Who else was there?

He called out again, "You do realize this is the middle of my 'night' now, do you not?" He purposely wrapped himself up more in the blanket, making no move at all to get up and greet his unwanted visitors. He would consider this a victory if they left without ever laying eyes upon each other.

"Thank you for this, I will personally see you are compensated." Wyll revealed himself as the third invader, speaking as he tugged the front door shut.

Well, fine, at least he knew this third person. Wyll was safe, so he could relax again. Why did he sound so unsettled though? Why would he owe Astarion when Gale was doing something? What was that wizard up to?

Astarion knew Gale would be unable to resist explaining it in at least three different ways, so he just had to stay awake to figure out what the hells was going on. Not like he would realistically be able to sleep with other people here. He resisted trying to rile up Wyll by making some comment about his going hourly rate. He was too tired to workshop the bit right now.

Shit, they were talking too quietly! He couldn't make out what they were up to at all. Curses, they were respecting him trying to rest. He strained his ears and wished he had eaten more recently. He picked up the word crown about a dozen times, and stop the storm and—oh, it was Gale's fault. That explained it.

Oh, but I'm considered the 'bad boy' when I've not ever once in my unlife caused such damage to the city!

He decided he had learned enough and rolled over again, watching Gale's magic storm start to gather up strength again. He'd not bother paying attention to his unwanted guests any longer.

Until about five minutes later, when he was cruelly forced to acknowledge their existence once more as somebody stumbled over his fucking legs. Astarion yelled and jerked them back, sitting up again and glaring at Gale as the wizard recovered his footing.

"My apologies! It is rather dim in here and... Why are you on the floor?"

Astarion increased his level of Glare, breathing harshly out of his nose, not speaking for just a bit too long as he stared before stating coldly, "Why are you in this room."

Gale motioned to the windows. "I require knowledge of the precise current weave-influenced metrological conditions to ensure the utmost possibility of success for the enchantment that you are graciously allowing me to complete in your dwelling," he stated as he moved closer to the windows, past Astarion's position, holding up a softly glowing hand.

Astarion gave the fuck up and started pulling on clothes, selecting his white shirt with the ruffles. Getting it fully cleaned and repaired had been a bit of a project for him, and he was quite pleased with the outcome. Still sitting in the remains of his blanket nest, he tried to recenter himself as he peered over the rest of his ensemble options spread over his bed. He tugged a new pair of black silk pants down and slipped them on as he got to his feet. They were not tailored to him at all and thus rather ill-fitting and baggy. He had privately awarded them the title of favorite pair of pants.

What he had given the elevated designated of vestibule was in reality just the one of only two other rooms in his rented space. Its only real purpose was to give some separation from the main door to the bedroom, as it was too small to be a real lounge area, a glorified hallway really more than a proper foyer. He had flung a fairly gaudy high-backed red couch against one of the longer walls. He liked it far more before it was actually *here*, but he decided he'd rather be stuck with it than ask the eager Minsc for help in moving furniture again. The rest of the space was mostly empty, save for a few various boxes and a collection of now empty pouches in one corner.

He did not even give Gale another look as he slipped through the doorway. As soon as his less unwanted guests looked up, he silently waved his arms towards his bedroom, shaking his hands a few times to give the universal sign for 'What the shit is going on?'

Shadowheart was sitting on the far corner of the couch, leaning back with her feet upon one of the random boxes she had given a new purpose. She looked up from a book she brought with her and snorted at Astarion's sign language display. "I am never helping him again."

Wyll sat next to her but perched on the very front of the couch seat rather than lounging as Shadowheart was. He hung his head with a sigh. "I only became a part of this when the storm began, and I found these two at the epicenter."

Astarion blinked and brightened, standing up straighter, realizing he was on the majority side as Gale was concerned right at that moment. He spread his arms out, "Well," then brought his hands together with a soft clap, "welcome, darlings! It is... not much, but it is mine? I suppose..."

"These were to be student housing? It reminds me of where I stayed when I—well, the specifics do not matter," Wyll said.

Astarion made a mental note of the minor subject change. “The universities are not on a standard schedule currently, term start delayed, for some odd reason! So not much demand for these quarters,” he said with a shrug. “I wanted a nice view more than anything, and the lack of a personal kitchen is not really a negative for me.”

Shadowheart turned a page. “You’ll go insane if you’re here and it does fill with students.”

Astarion rolled his eyes. “Or I’ll just murder them all in the night. Some problems are easy to solve, darling.”

Wyll looked a mite uncomfortable at what he hoped was a joke. “I was a bit surprised to see you were on the dividing wall...”

“For all the aggravations inherent with...my former place of residence, the view was not one of them. Now, I can enjoy it whenever I want, sans a sadistic skeleton skulking about eager for any excuse to reveal my own bones.”

“That is an upgrade,” Wyll weakly replied.

Wyll always seemed so uncomfortable when his past torments were mentioned. Astarion decided to free the Duke of whatever. “I cannot help but recall, that when I told *you*,” he stalked over and pointed an accusing finger at Shadowheart, sticking it right in her face, “where I was staying, I distinctly requested *no* spontaneous visits.”

Shadowheart sighed, adjusting her book so she could keep reading around the pointing finger as she flung Wyll under the wagon wheels. “Wyll wanted to know where we were all ending up. I didn’t think you’d mind if he knew.”

Astarion retracted his hand and tapped his chin with the former accusatory finger, looking up with his lips pursed and head tilted as he pondered that.

“I sssssuppose you are correct,” he finally concluded.

Wyll sighed and held out a letter for Astarion. “I collected them all and was delivering these to everyone. Just so we’d know. Good security practices, in case. If one of us needed a place to go or needed help.”

Astarion snatched the letter and glared. “I mind about that!”

He opened it up and scanned it quickly. Yes, just like Wyll said, a list of everyone in his former traveling group with where they were currently staying. Astarion’s address was right up there at the top. Lovely. Alphabetical order betraying him again, the fiend. He noted he was the only one that did not have a last name listed. He was unsure how he felt about that. The conflict on his face must have been obvious, though misinterpreted.

“I’m sorry, Astarion, I should have checked with everyone. I am only now realizing,” Wyll said.

Astarion dramatically sighed and gave a little dismissive wave to Wyll.

“It’s fine, you’re forgiven. How could you have known you’d inflict a wizard upon me?” He made a thinkythoughts noise and worried at his lower lip with a fang as he looked over the listing again. “Though, I doubt these count as invitations...”

Wyll said “Oh!” sheepishly, then continued, “You are officially invited to my home whenever you wish to visit, Astarion. I assume that is sufficient?”

Shadowheart did not look up from her book. “Same,” she clipped out, then paused and continued after a moment of reflection, “I officially invite you, Astarion. In case it has to be that officially official. Officialness. I don’t know much about how the whole thing works.”

The vampire felt a lump forming in his throat that he was not sure how to deal with. He really had just been wondering. He had not *meant* to manipulate them into inviting him.

“Oh. I. Uh.” He swallowed, tried again, “Thank you.”

He then sat down on the free space on the couch, right at the edge, so there was plenty of room between him and Wyll. “You know many people would say you two just made...a very unwise decision.”

Shadowheart kept reading. Astarion was growing frustrated that her book either didn’t have a title or she was covering it with her hand. “Many people are utter fools,” she said.

Wyll nodded his agreement. “I am sorry, friend, I did not think about your limitations.” A soft smile played upon his lips. “Perhaps you should also give me a copy of that list you promised Shadowheart?”

Astarion was confused for just a moment and then barked out a laugh, “Oh gods. Right. That is enough support. It is...appreciated, but.” He cleared his throat and tried to sound aggravated again. “Why the hells are you here? Is *he* here?” He motioned towards his bedroom which remained Gale-infested.

Shadowheart distractedly said, “Crown.” She was spending most of her mental effort on her book still.

“No! Really?! Of course it’s the damn crown! I would like *some more* details to explain this rude, early-to-Astarion invasion.” He crossed his arms and *hmped*.

“He is...sending pieces as he finds them into some sort of private pocket storage dimension,” Wyll said with a cough. “He wants to assemble it himself, see if he can harness the power instead of giving it to Mystra. Something went wrong with this last fragment.”

“He’s back on the ‘become a god’ thing?” Astarion groaned.

Shadowheart actually looked up away from her book at that comment. “I am surprised *you* object.”

“If *I* don’t get to become an all-powerful vampire lord, *nobody* gets to become an all-powerful *anything*. We have to keep things fair.”

The cleric nodded and went back to reading, no longer surprised at all at the answer after a moment’s reflection.

He laughed bitterly. “Not that they are. Fair at all. Poor Gale, having to make the horrible decision to perhaps just go back to being one of the most powerful archmages in existence.”

Wyll chuckled. “He is the only one of us that will be more powerful than he was during the journey, no matter what his choice. I have taken to training with the bow again. No replacement for eldritch blasts, but...”

Astarion finished for the former warlock, “You’re free.”

Wyll smiled brightly at Astarion. “Exactly! And freedom feels wonderful, if a bit off-putting at times.”

“If you start explaining that to me, I’m going to drain you and fling your corpse out the window.”

Wyll laughed heartily in response at the same time Gale finally fucking stopped being in Astarion’s bedroom.

“Glad to see you are all in good spirits!” Gale said. “I have been successful! The storm outside is abating as I have successfully retrieved that tricky twice-lost fragment of the crown, and properly secured it in the desired location. It took some time to ascertain the resonance harmonics it was generating with the other claimed elements, and there can only be one primary prong remaining to retrieve, though I must not discount the possibility that—”

“Congratulations. Stop talking and get out,” Astarion said. He felt he deserved a medal for not screaming and instead using his words. With a sweeping bow, he stood up and motioned elegantly towards the door. He even did the little spinney flourish at his wrists. Gale laughed once more and moved to comply.

Oh, spinney wrists, you never fail.

As Gale passed Astarion he glanced at his nails and commented, trying to sound casual, “Oh, since you *are* here... Gale, where are you staying currently?”

Gale uttered a happy exclamation and smiled broadly as he assumed this meant it was all water under the bridge. “Why, I am staying in a room in the newly re-titled Rolan’s tower! You will find it easily, feel free to just drop in at any time. Tara has been making quite the number of friends and even has started doing her own redecorating!”

Astarion nodded and smiled once he got his “Invitation,” making a mental note to pay a little visit at roughly 4 AM that morning. And perhaps several mornings after that. He was just thinking the other day he could use a pair of cymbals.

Shadowheart laughed softly—while the cymbals were a touch she would not predict, she immediately realized what Astarion was planning. Wyll had done the politics thing enough, so he had no visible reaction as he got to his feet.

“Oh! One final thing, Astarion.” Oh, wonderful. Gale had something else to say. “I do appreciate you allowing me to just barge in like this. In the interest of repaying your minor contribution to my grand efforts, I could not help but notice the number of various objects on your bed; when I was in my tower, hellish year, I let such tasks get away from me. Do you require assistance in catching up with sorting chores?”

“No,” Astarion replied, through gritted teeth. Damn this wizard! Why mock him like this?

“It really would be no trouble at all! Why, you may not be aware, but there are *many* spells for organizing, why, an entire school of them—“

Astarion did not let him get going again, taking a couple of strides towards Gale so he could be sure his glare was noticed by this twit of a man.

“I am using the bed for storage. Because. I am not sleeping on it. I am sleeping on the floor. For a. Different. *Reason.*” He firmly stated it, striving to keep his voice flat and level. Well, he started flat and level, the rage within him crept in near the end. He thought he was slightly trembling, but he was not sure as he was busy focusing on resisting the growing urge to rip Gale’s throat out with his teeth. He leaned just a bit closer, his cold breath causing the most minor ever movement of the pathetic hairs of Gale’s rubbish beard. Who cares how vile his tainted blood tastes. Astarion had been made to consume far worse.

Gale fell silent and tilted his head slightly as he leaned back to better look at Astarion, really looking at him for the first time since he’d invaded his lodgings. His forehead wrinkled in thought, as he was now very confused, rapidly erecting and rejecting various hypotheses to explain this series of behaviors the vampire was displaying.

Astarion’s emotional pendulum moved steadily from cold fury to honest bafflement. He had been certain Gale was mocking him, so had turned aggressive, but the befuddlement on Gale’s face was making Astarion doubt that notion. The wizard had many talents, he would begrudgingly admit, but acting was not one of them. He took a step back, retreating to a more comfortable distance as he tried to understand what was happening.

Meanwhile, Shadowheart and Wyll both waited for the other one to do something, and by the time they realized that was not occurring, neither was able to act in time to stop the crash that was barreling upon them. Really, this was the sort of conflict that Karlach would have easily smoothed over almost as quickly as it began, but for obvious reasons somebody else needed to step up. The pair realized this too late, so all they were able to do was glance at one another before—

“Astarion, forgive me if I am making an inaccurate assumption, not that there is anything wrong if the answer is in the affirmative, mind. With the information provided... have you been the recipient of unwanted intimate activities? Is that why you are not using the bed?”

Astarion blinked. Replayed that statement in his head. Blinked again. Made sure he knew what words meant. Then, he began laughing. Softly at first but soon loud and strong. Next, he was holding his sides and doubling over. Soon he dropped to his knees, overcome with hysterical laughter. Finally, he just fell over onto his side, curling up as he laughed and laughed. If he needed to breathe, he would rapidly be in danger of suffocation, hitting that point of laughter where he was making no sound but still shaking uncontrollably with eyes squeezed tight and his mouth open so wide no one could miss his fangs.

Wyll’s eyes widened and he covered his mouth with one hand, staring at Gale in disbelief. Shadowheart carefully marked her place and then shut her book, her lips pressed into a flat line.

After it was obvious Astarion was not going to stop just laughing and laughing anytime soon, Gale chewed on his own lower lip and looked over at his other allies for assistance. Shadowheart caught his gaze and firmly nodded. Then slowly nodded a few more times, for good measure. She raised her eyebrows and increased the nodding rate and depth, her expression otherwise unchanging, keeping eye contact the whole time.

At that moment, Gale himself sent a tiny prayer to Mystra requesting he would burst into flames in order to escape the words that had just left his mouth.

I figure everything I post will be in the same canon universe but some is more stand alone than others and well content warnings follow Astarion around but sometimes are more serious than other times. I'm keeping the Karlach/Astarion tag going even though she is gone bc she is very important to how this version of him developed, something that'll be explored in the next chapter.

I do like Gale but I like making him the butt of jokes maybe too much bc he reminds me just of so many ppl I've known in my life. He's an archmage, he'll be fine.

But ye this fic series will explore how you go about putting your life back together when you never actually had one before. Everybody is telling you to do what you want but you don't have any idea what you want! People have to make so many decisions everyday and you've been in survival mode for 200 years and the person you had trusted to help you decide and even make decisions for you now up and died. Time to get some actual coping going on, sorry.

Spawn Astarion in the epilogue says he was a mess at first, and knowing Astarion that might translate to 'yah so like a month ago I got my shit together finally.' And there is no way for you to have a conversation at the party with a companion whose romantic partner fucking died, so we can assume in this version he's got a bit more of a hill to climb.

GALLY FROM THE FUTURE HERE, AFTER THE FIC IS OVER.

The lovely art is by my partner, check out their stuff! [Here!!](#)

I'm a mod at the Baldur's writers III server, come join! Talk about fanfic, the game, writing process, or whatever~

We have work in progress games and lots of super friendly people! I'm bad at adverts!

<https://discord.gg/aZzKHupvV3>

Chapter 2: Who made you?

Chapter Summary

You know when you play bg3 and there's some dialogue options and one of them you look at just like 'haha wow that would be the WORST thing to possibly say! Why would any person really say that?'

Today Gale is just confidently hitting that worst possible option over and over as he tries to figure out what is going on with Astarion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As Astarion contorted on the floor and sputtered out laughter, so many emotions and thoughts whirled throughout his mind.

How did he feel about this? How *should* he feel about this? *Why* was he laughing? Why should he *not*? Was it possible? Was it really possible?? Had Gale paid so little attention to him? Why did *that* upset him?

Sure, he didn't exactly stand on a box in the middle of the camp and give a speech about his past. He had only told Karlach about the most unpleasant aspects in any real detail. But everyone else had figured it out. He had been as open as one really should be about *that* aspect of his slavery.

*No one likes hearing about it. I don't like **talking** about it. I gave them all enough if they cared to listen!*

As Astarion laughed and laughed in bursts, Gale stepped back a bit, wilting under the flabbergasted stares from the others. He opened his mouth to comment, but then he realized. The laughter had stopped.

"You myopic magical moron!" Astarion leapt to his feet and advanced on Gale, his hands flying widely about as he ranted, "Too busy moaning about being tossed aside by your precious goddess and how great your life fucking used to be to look past your own miserable self! And I consider myself self-absorbed! I thought it was awful when Mystra told you to blow yourself up! Now I wish you had gone and done it. Would have saved us *a lot* of trouble."

Gale's eyes widened and he held up his hands, trying to calm Astarion down. "Easy now, calm down. I knew you collected victims for Cazador. I did pay attention to you. I just did not hear this specif-

"Did you think I just winked at them and they happily followed me home?!" Astarion screamed out, advancing on Gale again, making him step backwards once more.

"Most people need a bit more... encouragement! Here's a tip, Gale, bed them *before* you jerk the line back and try to get them to follow you to their deaths! No way I can be after anything else if I've already gotten on my back and let them do whatever they want, can I? Or maybe I'll just go down on my knees in some filthy alley. Not needing to breath really helps impress there, I will add. You show

them a grand time, disperse any justified suspicion they have, and convince them you're just some desperate weirdo who is oh so taken with *them!*”

Astarion laughed manically again for just a moment, then slipped into his seductive voice, “Now, let's go back to my place, darling! It's a real palace!”

He put on a very obvious fake smile and tilted his head to the side. Astarion's voice rose considerable in pitch as he said, “Maybe! Sometimes, many times, it's still a no and you slink home just ahead of the sun's rays with no prey to show for it, just aches and pains and another stain on the tattered remnant of your soul.”

“You are so attractive I just assumed tha—” Gale softly squeaked out.

Astarion became even more enraged, which he honestly had not thought was possible. He hissed and lunged forward teeth bared.

Only to slam right into Wyll, who had moved between the pair *just* in time, determined not to wait too long again, allowing this situation to keep escalating due to his inaction.

Wyll grunted at the impact but managed to stay on his feet, keeping Astarion out of range of the wizard. The furious vampire struggled for a moment, reaching out past Wyll, trying to grab his target.

“Astarion! Stop!” Wyll barked out firmly, but with no anger.

In response Astarion snarled and then meant to follow that up with something to the effect of get Gale the fuck out, but he found the words just would not come. Instead, he whirled around quickly and punched the nearest wall so hard there was no doubt he broke multiple bones in that hand.

Who cares? It will heal anyway. My body always heals oh so very quickly.

Gale had gone almost as pale as the vampire's normal pallor. The rage he saw in his friend's face made him almost unrecognizable. Gods how could he have been so oblivious. He kept just making it worse too, making an assumption and never even bothering to re-examine it later.

Wyll softly said, “We will be going now. Come, Gale, we still need to see how much damage that storm did.” He took ahold of Gale's upper arm and began to guide him towards the door.

“Wait.” Astarion interrupted the evasion attempt, still facing the wall. His arms were limp at his sides, blood dripping down a couple of fingers.

“So attractive... oh believe me, I know. I can't escape my body, and the truths of it. There's nothing more desirable in the world than a vampire, is there?” He laughed bitterly and turned to eye the other two men, mostly gauging to see how uncomfortable he was making Gale.

“*Cazador's* alluring desirable captive spawn were such an open secret amongst his patriarch friends. I have no idea what fiction he spun to explain us. I'm sure he didn't need anything very elaborate. Who, after all, wants to push too hard and dispel the lovely fantasy? The tame vampire entertainment of the Szarr Palace.”

He started smiling oh so very brightly! “Why on a few occasions he even ran auctions! What fun indeed! So *creative!* Bid for control of our puppet strings! Oh look, on stage now, the one you have been waiting for! *Cazador's* prized courtesan – the pale elf!!!” he was shouting loudly at the end of his imitation auctioneer's call.

Astarion posed like he was on a stage, turning around and offering a flirtatious wave to the imaginary crowd, followed by a wink and a blown kiss as he popped his hip. He then quickly reverted to a much less sexually charged pose and frowned deeply.

“The things that were done to me by the great influential upper class of this city... all on the finest of sheets. So yes, Gale. The answer to your question? Yes. I was a godsdamn sex slave. Can you understand those words? Is that a good enough answer to your insipid inquiry? Or should I keep going? I can, you know. Tell you more. There’s always more. Two-hundred years, Gale!”

Gale stammered, not getting anything intelligible out. Wyll also looked thrown off his game at this new information, frozen in misstep, his hand still on Gale’s arm.

Astarion barked a laugh, “My gods, I shut you up! I didn’t know it was possible. Surprise! Look what you were really traveling with!” he held his hands up to either side, fingers fully spread as he plastered on a grin, beaming it directly at Gale.

“And you know the funniest thing? What I want still doesn’t matter! How many times did I ask you to go away? At least just to stay out of the room I was in? And there you went, trampling over me. Literally. Because what I want does *not* matter! You are more powerful than me so you just get to do whatever you want; my protestations be damned. I am *very* used to it, mind!”

He concluded, “You really will make a most excellent god!” giving Gale an approving nod as he leaned forwards still smiling oh so very brightly.

Gale ripped his arm out of Wyll’s grip and vanished. Teleportation of some sort most likely. Or maybe he just went invisible.

Astarion stomped on the floor. “Gods! You’d better be really gone! If I find you, *I am going to kill you, Gale of Waterdeep!*” He swung out widely randomly, just in case.

Satisfied enough he stalked over to his pile of random containers in the corner and started kicking the boxes, various valuables he’s stolen from the journey spilt on the floor but he paid that no mind as he picked up another box and flung it with a scream of rage, more trinkets scattering about as the box splintered.

Stop. He had to stop. He was not alone here. *Stopstopstop.* He forced himself to sit on one of the boxes, shaking a bit, starting to be overcome with shame more than rage as he intently studied the floorboards.

More secrets now out. He felt he had been doing quite well at imitating a real person, thank you very much. This had just been too much to handle, too quickly, sending his house of cards crumbling. Why in all the hells did he decide it was a good idea to share even more of his humiliating past? Why couldn’t he have just rolled his eyes at Gale and said nothing at his horrible question? That would have been easier. For everyone. *Why* did he let it upset him so very much?

Soon he realized Wyll was leaning down in front of him. How long had he been there? Not too long, he hoped. Astarion looked up enough to meet his eyes and gave him a nod to let him know that yes, he was back to himself once more.

“I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t make up for our intrusion here. I... would have had harsh words for him too. You do not have to answer now, please understand. I would like to know who of the nobility was at Cazador’s ... events. Who... hurt you. If they still have any political power I will-”

Astarion softly laughed and then and sighed, tapping the tip of Wyll's nose with a finger. "How cute... Gods. Look at you, devil's horns on your brow and what you took from that was an excuse to get on your white steed and ride to *my* rescue. Idealistic and foolish. It is... a sweet sentiment, Wyll. Really it is. Appreciated. But pointless. I have no honor left for you to try to defend." He smiled sadly.

Wyll did not push overly much. "The offer is there, if you are ever comfortable sharing." He stood up and added, "Are you busy two days from now? Around 8th bell? May I stop by?"

"I think my very expansive social calendar is empty then, dear, yes." Astarion was so exhausted he did not even have it in him to bristle against this or ask for details. He'd be prickly later, right now? Sure, he'd take some pity. Allow himself that.

Wyll began to reply, but then thought better of it, nodded once more and left, deep in thought over the words that tumbled from the vampire's mouth in the wake of Gale Says the Worst Thing Possible – round two.

After the door shut Astarion sighed, closed his eyes, and went very still, not even bothering to keep breathing.

"I'm still here. Do you want me to leave? I just want to make sure before I do. I can just sit here for a while if you want?" A quiet voice spoke.

Shadowheart. Yes, that's right, she was here too. Wow he really did lose his mind for a moment there. How did he forget about an entire other person?

"Stay. Wait until I talk," he replied. Then fell silent once more, trying to put himself back together again. He found the sound of her turning pages something to help ground him. After what felt like an eternity to him, but really was only a few minutes, he grumbled and got back to his feet.

"I didn't even fix my hair. Normally I like to do that before I threaten someone's life." He ran his fingers expertly through his hair, in a very well-practiced pattern as he turned to look at Shadowheart fully once more.

She blinked. "Wow. I always wondered how you fixed it without a mirror... but not even a comb?"

"Yes, yes, I am VERY impressive, I know!" He flashed a grin and then stage whispered, "I combed it before I laid down."

Shadowheart fake gasped at the shocking revelation!

He laughed, "Anyway. Breakfast time. I think I might even have something you'd like... if you want."

Shadowheart slipped off the couch and followed him into his bedroom. She looked around his room for the first time. There was the storage bed, the floor blanket nest, a desk with a chair, and a mostly empty bookshelf. With even some purely ornamental flourishes on the walls, and Astarion had only been in here for less than a couple of tendays! She shook her head slightly as Gale's comments ran through her memory.

He was honestly doing better than she was, she reflected, feeling slightly embarrassed. Her own room in the cottage she had found for her tiny family had nothing but the most utilitarian of items. Shadowheart was still subconsciously following the lady of loss's rules in so many minor ways.

Partially to distract herself she asked, "Is your hand, ok?"

Astarion seemed honestly confused. “What?”

“It sounded like you broke your hand when you punched the wall. And well. The blood.”

“Oh! Yes, yes, the wall.” He lifted his hand up and wiggled his fingers at her, “All better now. Just a bit sore. And messy.” He started licking his own blood off his hand as he shrugged.

She took a moment to reply, a bit stunned, “. . . . You do heal *fast* now.

“The *one* bonus I get with my affliction.” He laughed for a moment. “The first time I got sliced by some horrible beastie post-tadpoling I was quite scared that it did not heal almost instantly. Then I looked around at the rest of you and remembered that was *normal*. How ghastly!”

He paused as he noted Gale’s storm outside has almost totally dissipated. “Shadowheart, be a dear for me and close the curtains, would you, darling?” he requested as he started cleaning off more space on his desk, it was covered with various sewing materials, he was organizing them, but he resigned himself to restarting that process as he just pitched everything back into larger storage containers. Something else to pass the time with, at least.

She did as he requested and then started folding up his floor blanket to get it out of the way in this small space. She blinked in a bit of surprise. “This is much heavier than I was expecting. . . where did you get this from?”

Astarion shrugged. “Somewhere.”

“Oh. Too bad you don’t remember. . . I think my mother would like something like this.”

He winced with a bit of guilt and muttered, “Jaheira got it for me. You’d have to ask her. . .” he then hesitantly added, “She probably would. Your mother. The weight is. . . nice. How uh. . . how is she?”

“She has good days and bad days. . . now more good than bad, all in all, I would say.”

“Oh. Yes. That is. . . uh. . .”

“Astarion, you don’t have to say anything else. It’s ok. You said there was breakfast. . .?”

He leapt for the exit from this horrible conversation and tapped a specific pattern on the wall above his desk, causing a hidden panel to magically slide away showing a small space. There were few bottles of dark red liquid stored in there. It was blood. Obviously blood.

Astarion made a thoughtful noise and wiggled his long fingers over the row of bottles tapping the different tops before snatching one up. He swiped the side of the panel, causing it to seal shut once more

“And for yooou. . .!” He opened up one of the lower desk drawers and plopped a bottle of red wine right in front of her.

Shadowheart did a doubletake as she looked at the label and picked up the bottle. “Whoa. . . this is expensive.”

“Yeeeeees, that *is* whhhy I stole it. I have a few more. But. . . no glasses. Sorry. Or goblets for blood. We can both just drink from the bottle like savages.”

Shadowheart sat on the foot of his bed, then opened the wine and took a hearty swig “I always wondered about your wine collection... I though vampires couldn’t taste anything but blood? But you-“

“We can’t. Well. I can taste something. Horrible vinegar.”

“Oh,” she said, dropping the subject.

He sighed. “I felt weird just standing there while everybody else was eating... Soooo, I held a bottle of wine and mostly just poured it in my mouth and spat it back in over and over. See how charming and glamorous the life of a vampire is...”

“Oh, that’s why you never would share when I asked. I thought you were just a prick,” she said, dryly amused but not wanting to laugh out loud.

“Please, I *am* a prick. But did you *want* vampire spit wine?” He swirled the bottle of blood around and added, “If I drip some blood in it is ... better? Different at least. Still not how I vaguely remember it should be but...” he shrugged. “I think I’m done experimenting. It’s just depressing...”

Shadowheart took another hearty pull. “It’s not as good as one would think for how expensive this is.”

“I promise no there is no vampire spit in that bottle. So, that is not *my* fault.” He opened his own bottle and took a swig, rolling the blood around in his mouth before he swallowed.

“Hrm... it is, like pigeon but. Different?” He sampled some more.

Shadowheart looked very baffled at him, taking another big drink of the wine before she said, “You... don’t know?”

“Jaheira knows like a dozen butchers and hunters and ferreters and so on. I don’t know what she tells them, but she keeps me stocked up. She made a game of it. For some reason. Labels what each one is on the bottom.” His voice became quieter and quieter as he explained, losing the battle with his embarrassment. “She’s very old you know. We have to let her have her weird habits.”

“The blanket and blood too? She’s taking care of you, huh?” Shadowheart smiled.

“I guess she decided to make her next ward a grown vampire spawn in lieu of more children. The being very old thing again.” He held the bottle up to peer at the writing on the bottom. “Duck. That’s a new one.”

“I have never thought about blood as much before as I do now...”

“So happy to be the source of your new experiences,” Astarion muttered as he rolled his eyes.

“I wonder what I taste like,” she mused. “Somebody knows, after all.”

Astarion froze in mid-drink and sputtered out a, “O-oh?”

“Well yes, when your siblings attacked that night. One of them landed a chomp.”

He resumed drinking with a nod and relaxed.

Shadowheart started to take another drink of wine. Then she stopped, the bottle in mid-raise. She looked at Astarion and pondered for a moment. “Astarion. Did you bite me?”

Astarion made sure his priorities were in order and first finished off his bottle of duck blood. Then he stared straight ahead and held up one slender finger. “Just once.”

“*Astarion?!?*” She leapt up from the bed as she shouted, “*Why!? When!?*”

He leaned away from her and balled up one fist and hit at his own leg a few times in frustration. “No! You are *not* allowed to be pissed off at me over this! It was *forever ago!* I barely knew you! Please no, not after the day I’ve had, please. It was before we even found Halsin! The statute of limitations is expired!”

Shadowheart was still for a moment, staring at him, shocked by how rapidly he spun into panic again. She sat down on the edge of his bed again and said, “I just want to know details.”

“I was hungry! And I you wanted to put a bell on me! So, I decided that meant I was owed one feeding. To show you. I guess?” He shrugged. “You had enough to spare, you didn’t even notice! It was very early, a day or two after my... condition became known to you all.” He tried to play it off casually but could not totally stop the small tremors that ran through him.

She stared at him for a moment then shrugged herself. “Fair. That was not the nicest comment. I stand by that it was funny. You would look cute with a bell collar, you know.” He glared at her as she kept speaking, “I did try to kill Lae’zel in her sleep around that time. I guess it would be unfair to be mad about one bite.”

Astarion relaxed fully, letting out some stress with a chuckle, “And that murder would not have even been for food. Wasteful, really. Though... Gale was a culinary wizard so perhaps...”

Shadowheart rolled her eyes and then asked, “So? How *did* I taste?”

He hesitated and said, “It is hard to really recall. Everything was just so was overwhelming... you were my first, darling.”

Her eyes widened and she shouted, “What!?”

“Well, I could not feed from Karlach could I? Even though I was so muddled by both hunger and freedom and tadpole and, well, everything in my situation those first few days. That I somehow thought she would be the best choice?” He pondered for a second and then gave a small smile and raised his eyebrows. “Well. She was the best choice. Just not for biting.”

Shadowheart rolled her eyes and made a ‘get on with it’ gesture, taking another drink.

He rolled his eyes right back and with exaggerated slowness began, “Sooooooo, she helped me hunt that evening after I made a fool of myself to her, and it was the next day that we had the oh so super fun full camp meeting where the topic was ‘Surprise! Vampire!’ I was free to feed from any who opposed us after that, but we faced no suitable prey that day and you made that inane bell comment so... soooooooo...” He trailed off holding up two curved fingers with which he made a biting motion at the air.

She blinked and tilted her head to the side, narrowing her eyes at him a bit. “Well. I am not sure how to feel about that.”

“If it helps it *really* is not a big deal? Just some bit of trivia about me more than you. Congratulations? Nothing special,” he replied with a shrug.

She asked, “Did you feed from Lae’zel?”

“Gods no! I was never THAT poor on the decision-making front. *Thankyouverymuch!* I was terrified of waking her for she would have murdered me instantly.” He sniffed at her and then grinned.

“Besides. She was always very nice to me. In her way. I respected her, even then. Very honest and goal driven. We spent a lot of time grousing about how stupid it was we were not just heading to that creche-thing while she helped me hunt some evenings.”

“So. That means your only options were Wyll and myself. And you said you only bit me once...”

“We did have occasional guests. But. Yes. Mostly Wyll. The way he spoke to me infuriated me, so I was determined to show him he was not a very apt monster hunter once the monster was in his camp. Every time he did his blade of the frontiers thing, I added one bite. That horrid rat comment got two feedings added to his tally. I honestly cannot tell you how many times I bit him ... ten maybe?”

Shadowheart set the wine bottle down with a heavy plonk as she stared wide eyed. “... he *had* to have known!”

Astarion *hrrmed*. “I don’t think so. I could be wrong, it has happened before, after all, at least four times. But I don’t think he would have kept mum on the matter. In any case, my nocturnal nibbles did not persist long into our journey. Once we were more established it felt wrong. No matter how little opportunities I had to feed that day. The last time was...” He trailed off, acting like he cannot recall the last occasion in detail. This is what we call a Lie.

“Aww, Astarion learned about friendship!”

He rolled his eyes and replied, “It was,” he tapped a finger against a fang, “before the shadowlands, in any case.” He smirked at her and returns her mockery, “So Astarion learned about friendship before Shadowheart in that case.”

She laughed in reply to that. “I suppose...”

The vampire casually remarked. “Are you going to tell him?” The only hint of his returning anxiety was how his eyes flicked over her.

Shadowheart looked him up and down, and made some deliberating noises, playing up thinking it over. She enjoyed watching Astarion try to not show how nervous he was to be at her mercy.

“No, I won’t.” she finally released him, laughing as how he instantly slumped in his chair a bit. “Wyll did have quiet the superiority complex. And it was real. Unlike yours. I’ll wait for you to slip up in front of him one day, that will be much more amusing.”

Astarion rolled his eyes once more. “I’m pretty sure I fooled everybody at least a bit. You cannot tell me you could have possibly guessed the truth of my existence pre-kidnapping. I could even try to pretend that’s why I did not do a... fantastic job at hiding my vampiric nature. To distract you! But no no... I was not thinking nearly that clearly.”

Shadowheart made a confused noise as she picked the bottle of wine up again.

“Come now, you didn’t look at me and think ‘escaped sex slave’ now did you?”

She was a bit embarrassed at that, of course that was what he meant. “Oh. No. I did not. I thought you really were just some boring noble.”

Astarion preened a bit at that, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on the desk. “See, you had no idea how terrified I was. Every minute of the day! And night!” he laughed, “I spent the first

few nights of our journey ridiculously overly securing the entrance to my tent, to slow anyone down who tried to enter. Staring at the flap, doing calculations in my head to try to determine which of you were most likely to decide to try to... take from me.”

Shadowheart just stared at him, not finding the humor in this tale.

“What? Its funny! Laugh!” He rolled his eyes when she still refused to join in on the joke. “I mean, yeeees, also highly embarrassing.”

“You are my friend, Astarion, I don’t find the idea of you terrified amusing. Especially when it was because you thought one of us would hurt you... like that.”

He softly said, “Oh.” and looked away, intently studying an imaginary pattern on the wall instead.

There was an uncomfortable silence before Shadowheart spoke again, “You have really changed so much since the day we first met, on that beach.”

“Well, I would hope so. That wretch you first met was barely a person. Nothing but fear and trained reactions. I would find myself in the middle of doing something and not be able to understand why.”

He met her gaze again as he waved a hand in the air. “I thought it was a good idea to try to threaten Karlach with a dagger for gods sake! She was a foot taller than me and could, and honestly probably should, have just punted me right into the river for that little bit of stupidity.”

She laughed at that, “I *was* surprised she invited you to join us instead.”

“I was too. I think anyway? I mostly just remember I was determined to not fuck it up. Not to be left behind or cast out. Taking these little scraps that was all that was left of whoever I was, and trying to figure out what to discard and what to darn together into some scaffolding of a real person...”

“And how did I choose what to keep and what to toss? Why, all of you of course!” He flashed her a grin, then continued, “I would have become whatever those around me wanted, I was practically on my knees holding my leash out for someone else to take. All I could really conceive of was a *nicer* master at first ...”

Shadowheart was very glad at that moment she had drunk so much of the wine as she sensed he was talking more for his sake than hers. The pleasant warm buzzing that had spread throughout her whole body worked well to keep her from interrupting him.

“I couldn’t even imagine true freedom. Instead, I was oh so very busy molding myself to be whatever would make these nicer masters stay nicer. I was in that mindset for honestly so long its shameful to recall, really. But so much of my past is, isn’t it?” He mused.

“The somewhat less wretched thing I am now, well. He was built up on that journey. If that ship would have picked up different weirdos, I would now be a totally different Astarion... for better or, much more likely, worse.”

He thought Shadowheart might argue that point, with how long it took her to reply. Instead, she took her longest pull yet from the wine bottle. “It is just all so funny, really. A bit. I didn’t realize how truly similar we were...”

He was confused for half a second. “Oh. I suppose so... forgive me, my dear, I do not really think of myself as an amnesiac. I remember too many things. But yes. I suppose most of us had various paths

we could have wandered down.” He motioned between the two of them. “Perhaps the greatest potential variance sitting right here.”

Shadowheart said, starting to sound a bit tipsy, “As a cleric I suppose I am required to say the gods work in mysterious ways. But... honestly? I am surprised Selûne has not abandoned me for my true thoughts about gods.”

“She better not. She owes you. They all owe all of us,” he said bitterly. “Some reward we got. Saved the world and no god can even toss one miracle of sun resistance my way. ... or bother to save her.”

They were both silent for a moment, no mystery to Shadowheart who ‘her’ meant.

“No path but the righteous one for her. Karlach she... she g-guided us all,” his voice cracked as he raised his hands to wipe away tears, falling silent as he put his feet back on the floor and sat up straighter. After a moment he put his elbows on the desk and more firmly covered his eyes, just focusing on passing useless air in and out.

Shadowheart read her book politely, not bothering him and allowing him time.

He recovered enough to speak after just a couple of minutes. “I really do think of myself as the Astarion that Karlach built. Much better than the spawn *Cazador* made. This keeps some of her here, in some small way. I’m sure she’d argue with me but...”

Astarion trailed off and took a moment to regroup before continuing once more. “She’s not here so I get to win all our arguments now. That’s what she gets for not allowing me to just burn to death in the sun. *Anyway*. No way of knowing really how I would be different if someone else took point on helping me capture the fleeting parts of myself.” He paused for a moment in reflection.

“Well. I would probably say *fuck* less...” He winked at the cleric.

She laughed but then her tone grew somber, “I thought you were an odd pairing at first, I will admit. Later though, when we knew more about each other, it did make sense. Once I saw more clearly through your façade. Don’t you roll your eyes at me! You did complement each other well.”

She slightly smiled again at the memories. “You were cute to watch when you thought no one was looking.”

“I knew people were trying to spy on us! Voyeurs!”

“And cuter when you didn’t care if anybody was looking. I was impressed how much you managed to stay sitting in her lap at camp nights...”

“I get cold easy. I would like to stop crying now, thank you. Change the topic, what is that book you have anyway.”

Shadowheart wordlessly passed it over.

Astarion took a deep breath and centered himself, opening the book and reading just a few passages before bursting into laughter. “Well, well! Lesbian githyanki erotica... my, *my*, *my*. Volo is... prolific, if nothing else.” He handed it back with a grin and asked, “So, were you aware she was departing on a dragon or did you have your own lovely crimson surprise?”

“I knew if it was an option, she was going to leave. Lae’zel offered to take me with her, but I can’t abandon my parents! Not after all they went through because of me.” She swirled the wine around in

the bottle.

“I don’t think I’ll ever see her again. Which is fine, I really couldn’t imagine her putting down roots the way I think I want. I’ll always remember her though; she helped put me back together as well you know. After I rejected Shar...”

“If you ever want to pop off to uh... godstown and give her a good murder I’m down with that. Stab-a-Shar. Might be a weeeeeee bit harder than Cazador but hey. I do owe you one.”

“Not currently. But... I will keep you in mind,” she replied immediately.

Astarion blinked at that. He was kidding. But hey. Why not! With all he’s done why not kill a god next. But maybe a subject change for right now. “You know, there was that tiefling girl at the Sharran shithole. She was really ... into you, as they say, if you could not tell.”

“Nocturne? Wait. Was she?”

“Trust me. I have an eye for these things.” He grinned as he nodded a few times.

Shadowheart made a thinking noise, and then fell silent, slowly rocking the wine bottle back and forth, watching the liquid splash inside.

The silence extended on and-on-and Astarion searched for anything to break it. “I suppose really, we should have pushed our wizard and former warlock together. We did leave them off on the outside. I would say it’s not too late but. Really, I think it always was.”

“That would be a very... no, I cannot really see it,” Shadowheart said after a moment of pondering, broken out of her own thoughts.

“Well, there is *something* there, my dear. Both had their lives at one point dominated by magical women. They could have bonded over that...? In any case, while Gale could do far worse – and has – Wyll could do *FAR* faaaaaaaaar better.”

“I take it you are still mad at Gale?”

Astarion groaned and leaned back in his chair again, putting his feet up on the desk once more and searched his ceiling as if the answer was written there. “I have no idea. I was. I was *furious*. I truly was very close to losing control and...”

He made the two fingers biting the air motion again, still intensely studying the ceiling.

“Oh,” she said, before pulling together more useful thoughts. “I really do not blame you. That was...” she trailed off.

“It very much was that, my dear, exactly.”

She took another swig of wine, “You’re right, you *are* still a prick.”

Astarion laughed and then sighed. “Fine. To seriously answer the question that you actually meant to ask. I will not try to murder him the moment I see him next. Most likely. I am fine with pretending it never happened if he is. I am very good at pretending things did not happen, darling.”

“That is good enough, I suppose.” She corked the bottle of wine as she slipped down off the bed to her feet. “You are obviously feeling better, I need to get back. It’s getting late.”

He glanced over at the curtains and upon seeing no more sun trying to creep in around the edges, Astarion leapt to his feet and opened them so quickly that Shadowheart blinked in surprise, tilting her head as he stood there looking out at the view of the city at dusk.

“Do you have plans?” she asked.

Astarion shrugged, not turning around when he answered. “Just to wander around. See where my legs take me. But I always find something to do each night. Some small adventure. It’s nice sometimes, not to know.”

She hesitated for a moment and then asked, “Would you like to come spend the evening at my, well, our, new place? It’s a small cottage on the outskirts. My dad and I are working to start fixing it up. Get some animals. I saw yours; you might as well see mine.”

He considered for a moment and then smiled, turning around to reply, “Fair is fair, I suppose... a short visit, at least. Lead on, my dear.”



Hours later dawn was not quiet approaching yet, but it would be on its way soon, having hit snooze for the last time on the celestial alarm. Astarion was stalking around a random alley in the lower city, he had been at this for a while, with no firm direction in mind, just wandering. His plan was to be the bait and the trap both. He tried his best to look like an attractive mark, stumbling about after leaving a tavern, obvious purse on his hip. He had gotten no bites though. Which meant no bites for him.

When I was trying to find victims for Cazador some fool tried to mug me every other night it seemed, where are they now!

Before, when attacked he would have to try to fend anyone off with his pathetic worn dagger, as he was forbidden by the bastard from using his teeth. Forced instead to watch their blood pour out on the street, going to waste, causing the hunger in his belly to writhe almost like a living thing. It was so hard to turn away and slink back into the shadows, leaving whoever had made the last mistake of their lives as a surprise for someone else to find. But it was what *master* commanded, thus, he had no choice but to obey.

He supposed between the aftermath of the mindflayer invasion and the overhauling of the flaming fist (he gave it two months before they are back to being just as horrendous, useless, and corrupt as before) the city had not yet had its population of the criminal element replenished. He would have to complain to Wyll about this. It was unnatural! Monsters who are *trying* to be good boys need their prey, after all.

There was an alternative explanation, he mused, perhaps he no longer was reading as a target to people. He allowed himself a moment of pride at that idea before dismissing it completely.

He was just out here too late. That was the biggest blunder in his plan. It was too close to dawn, much of the underbelly of the city had stumbled to bed already. The ones he was hunting didn’t tend to linger this close to dawn. He gave up and starting padding back home, better blood would be nice but he still had a healthy reserve of animal blood waiting for him.

Shortly after Astarion departed the same alleyway was host to a gathering of nervous ne'er-do-wells. The biggest topic of conversation was why in all of the hells was some new unknown hero type stalking about here! Who did something to lure him here?!

Astarion had a remarkably uneventful journey back to his new home. He cleaned up and once again marveled at the *hot running water* that flowed out of the pipes. He had asked if the building included that in the amenities and they had looked at him *so* strangely. Must now be standard in new buildings in the upper city.

Fucking *Cazador*. Look at me I'm a fancy noble vampire I'm so powerful and I don't even have any running water in my horrible fucking poorly decorated ugly house because I'm... many centuries old and my idea of new technology is a curtain. Maybe he was dumb enough to think it counted as anti-vampire running water. Dipshit.

How old was the bastard anyway? Astarion realized he had no idea. "I hope that fuck was only five hundred at most," he curtly said. It would be hilarious if after all of *Cazador*'s scheming and careful plotting and rules and paranoia that he ended up dying far before a non-vampiric elf's lifespan would end.

That was always something that Astarion found darkly humorous about his situation, causing him to laugh silently into the darkness on many occasions as he laid on his hated dormitory bunk, aching from whatever torments had most recently been inflicted upon him. Oh sure, he suffered terribly but he had immortality and eternal youth due to this horrible curse. At least there was that, yes?

I was a high-elf. I practically already had both of those before he turned me!

Astarion would have to still exist for another 500 years before he really started reaping any tangible rewards. And that was... a long time, in a city mostly populated by much shorter-lived races than elves. Things were fine now but how long till some paladin or cleric got a burr up their ass about him? He was pretty sure it was technically illegal for him to even be in the Gate. Maybe he'd ask *Wyll* about that. Just so he could precisely calculate what level of horrible shit lay in his future. Fucking *Cazador*.

Why am I still thinking about him? Stop it.

He closed his eyes and focused on the nice hot running water instead. To never have to carry buckets and fill up a shared tiny bath again. The best thing maybe? Oh, sure not being literally tortured was good, and big positive reviews from Astarion for the whole absence of ... unwanted intimate activities. He chuckled, shaking his head as he recalled the phrasing. But hot running water? Now that's the real reward.

Soon he was oh so clean! He loved being clean. The best feeling in the world, next to being unconscious. And soon he would be clean AND unconscious. Marvelous!

He debated for a moment and then just closed one of the curtains. He was so tired and the sun had barely risen. He'd be awake before afternoon light, no doubt about it. Even if not, he had arranged things well enough, the far curtain being open wouldn't result in any direct sun on his skin. Also, he had admitted to himself (see how *good* he was getting at this?) that a room with all of the curtains drawn reminded him too much of the palace... or at his worst times, the tomb.

Astarion knew he really should not need to sleep as long as he had been. He read that in a book about vampires and their spawn. He had assembled a decent little library on the topic, kept hidden under his bed. The last thing he wanted was further humiliation from someone asking why he had that literature. He had thought himself paranoid but no! He felt very justified after invasion he suffered.

Hells, he shouldn't even need to sleep every day, according to another text. He figured the books must be right. They were words printed on paper and he was just a real undead example of what they were

discussing. Not even Astarion knew how much sarcasm was in that thought.

In any case, he was not following what was written in the books. He got so tired every day and could sleep for hours and hours. Possibly it was just the last two horrible centuries catching up with him. The worst sleep-debt ever seen. That was fine. Or maybe he was simply broken in this way as well. That was fine too, put it on the pile with all the other ways he was damaged beyond repair.

No matter. Sleeping was nice. Or at least laying in a blanket between attempts at sleep was nice. Sleeping was nice if he avoided nightmares. The open curtain should help. *Please?* He finished intricately arranging a massive collection of pillows around his blanket nest and retrieved Clive the bear from his special spot on the bed. Finally, he selected a trash romance book to mock as assistance in drifting off.

Astarion slipped into his constructed bed and snickered. “If you were here, you would have punted that wizard right off that balcony as soon as he started. That might have been better, really, come to think. It’s settled. Straight to violence in the future!” He allowed himself the small treat of talking to Karlach as if she could hear just for a moment before sleeping each day. No more than that though. No more.

He started reading the horrible book. Ugh, this writer didn’t even know how to properly use commas with dialogue. How delightful, this will be such fun!

A few minutes later, unseen by Astarion, a calico tressym was peering into his window. After a moment’s inspection she landed on the balcony’s railing.

“Mr. Dekarios, he is back now. Also, Mr. Dekarios, I am still very certain now is NOT the proper time. My decision, you clearly said.” Was what someone with the proper enchantment would hear. Most would only hear a series of meows.

She washed a paw as she listened to a response for her ears only.

“Mr. Dekarios. I will deliver your message when appropriate, no sooner. You get to sleep yourself; I know you have been up all night worrying.”

The tressym then spread her calico feathered wings and flew off into the morning light.

Chapter End Notes

Well! That could have gone worse. Or better! But ain’t that just the way of all things. I like angst and talking and explorations of what it means to be you, can you tell. Really, part of the dialogue there was inspired by like, all of the fics I see set post-game where Astarion is pretty fucking different from fic to fic but he still feels believably all like himself and shit. It really does make sense, that boy can be pushed in all sorts of directions and will do pretty much whatever you want. Even if you don’t ascend him, he’ll follow the evil path no question.

I also really like exploring stuff between the moments we see in game. I don’t really like to contradict stuff seen on actual screen but I’m sure they got up to tons of shit off screen we never saw because animation takes like. Money.

Regarding Astarion's past sexual abuse history, this isn't a smut fic, it's never going to be described in detail but well, it's a part of him, it will come up on occasion.

Where is it going from here? Idk. Places! Some clues were tossed out here. I might even follow up on one or more of them! The next thing I'll most likely finish up won't be ch3 of this, but instead what exactly went down to make Astarion stop biting his camp buddies. Mostly anyway. Sometimes ppl need to be bitten. Its just how it do be.

Chapter 3: Maybe he should have just stayed in bed

Chapter Summary

Astarion goes on walkies with Gale's not-cat and decides to loot some stuff from Casa del Cazador.

Then, two vampire spawn take turns triggering each other's PTSD.

Chapter Notes

This one got a LITTLE (lol) long and honestly should have been two chapters... the ~~~~~ is a great break point~

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Warmth. Safety. Love. Positive vague sensations were enveloping Astarion. He was just awake enough to know he was still asleep. His favorite stage of waking up. The only good part, he thought on his most cynical days. He didn't want to leave this serenity, wishing to stay in this liminal state, feeling full consciousness barreling close and closer.

Unable to stop the inevitable, he rolled over to find Karlach and nuzzle into her side once more. He then fully woke up, sighing as the truth of his reality washed over him. He hadn't dealt with this betrayal of memory in days upon days. He did not enjoy the experience. At least he had a pleasant dream for once, if vague and indistinct. He sat up and was surprised to see no sunlight streaming in. He had managed to sleep through the whole day with not a single nightmare! He *actually* felt rested, which amazed him.

Such a grand accomplishment deserved a reward. What would be appropriate? Ah, of course. Going right back to sleep!

Astarion grinned and curled around Clive the bear, pulling the warmth generating blanket over his head again. Just as he started to drift off, the ever-present ache in his gut decided to incorporate some burning pain, to keep things interesting. He could still ignore it, of course. He was great at ignoring it! However, he doesn't need to, so why torment himself? Well, he could think of a few reasons, but none were that appealing tonight.

He sighed very dramatically, for no one's benefit but his own, and extracted himself from his makeshift pillow and blanket nest. He retrieved a specific bottle of blood from his cache; he was pretty sure it was swine. He sat at his desk, putting his feet up on it as he leaned back in the chair. A sip from the bottle confirmed it. Breakfast bacon for him! Or close enough as he could manage, he mused with a smile.

He was still very much enjoying the novelty of being well fed and food secure. So much so he didn't feel the need to drink anything offered to him as fast as possible. Instead, leisurely sipping at the

bottle, even putting it down to get dressed and fix his hair, returning to it minutes later. He wondered if anyone but a fellow Cazador spawn would be able to understand how absolutely *wonderful* and amazing that series of actions felt. A wave of emotion that almost felt like guilt rose up within him. He quickly banished thoughts of the other spawn from his mind.

It was quiet in his flat, very few sounds of early evening activity drifting through his windows. He would prefer a bit more noise, a bit more life, but much of the upper city was still a wee bit of a wreck after all. Compounding matters, he was in the university district, which has not been as heavily damaged, but all of the institutions of higher learning were on emergency recess due to the attack.

Astarion meandered over to his floor-to-ceiling windows and started to step out onto the balcony. He hesitated, eying the bottle of blood in his hand. Maybe best not to advertise his condition so openly. Just in case. He was well aware he was being paranoid, but he had earned some paranoia. He finished his breakfast and tossed the bottle into his crate for the empties.

Once on his balcony, he reflected on how very lucky he was to find this flat. Unoccupied *and* undamaged? It was nice for luck to finally be on *his* side. Well, Jaheira's side if he was more honest about it. She was the one who located it for him; after a bit of an argument concerning the practicalities of finding lodgings when you cannot go out and about easily during daylight hours.

The high harper still had some difficulty finding him a place to stay, despite her myriad connections. Mostly due to him being, as she put it, 'a big picky vampire baby.' She had asked what it would take for him to get out of her basement already, the exasperated look on her face when he handed her his prepared list of specifications was a memory he treasured. He liked to think his gorgeous and elegant penmanship was what won her over in the end. She had managed to meet all his demands, even the ones he had thrown in as idle fantasies, such as hot running water and a balcony. He laughed as he leaned on the railing, enjoying the nice view and evening breeze.

Nothing really caught his eye down in the city tonight, no major events or late working construction crews. A few evenings ago he had sat here repairing clothing and been greatly entertained by a series of gnome misadventures. You would think somebody had greased the scaffolding with how many times they fell. One benefit of his forcible return to the shadows, nobody expected him to assist with any of the rebuilding process. Really, even if he could still be in sunlight without, you know, *burning to death*, it would be foolish for anyone to expect him to assist with such menial tasks. At least he didn't have to bother correcting them.

He owed Jaheira so much. It made him very uncomfortable when he started to tally up everything she had done for him. Even his breakfast was due to her assistance. The crate he tossed the empty bottle in had a harper symbol on the side. She had set up a *system* for him. He wasn't really joking with Shadowheart; she had taken him on as a ward all but officially.

It did not make him happy to be so dependent, but he forced himself to be realistic. He gave up his only real hope of true independence with the ritual. Her help was making his life *much* easier than it would be otherwise. She wouldn't demand repayment, he had to keep reminding himself. If you can't trust the high harper to be a ridiculous fool and hand out charity with no expectation of any return on the investment, who could you trust? As much as he had wanted to hiss and flee when she started laying out what she would do for him, he had swallowed his pride and accepted. It wasn't hard. The last two centuries had eroded most of it. It also had helped to imagine a big red tiefling being *very* mad at him if he refused Jaheira's aid.

He begrudgingly had to admit he had grown quite fond of the old harper. At least Jaheira had the good grace to mock him when they saw one another. He hates that they are members of the same shitty club that nobody wants to join. She almost never brings up the shitty club, but he suspects that's one

reason for her continued assistance. It all made so much sense when he learned her husband had died *so* long ago after such a *short* marriage... gods. There really *was* no justice in the world.

Astarion snarled at the air, frustrated with himself. His winding twisty thoughts had managed to once again cast a pall upon an evening that started out so well. He stalked back inside, pulling the window shut behind him.

He counted his bottles of blood. He had a very healthy supply still, all animal blood, but he wasn't complaining. Right now anyway. There was no one to hear him! He complained plenty every time he saw Jaheira. She had *so many* harpers at her command, surely she could set up some form of rotation donation for him, yes? Except so far no. He'd try again next time he saw her! He highly doubted she'd ever agree, but relished watching the way she blew air out of her nose as she attempted to ignore him whenever he whinged at her about the topic.

Two bottles a day seemed to be ideal, based on some minor experimentation. He had once started to try to determine how many rats it would take to fill one of the bottles and then quickly stopped. Cazador had starved him *brutally*. Beyond what he had even understood at the time. Knowing that was enough. He didn't really need to determine a quantitative value for his suffering. The answer would have just been equal parts infuriating and horribly depressing.

That was in the past! This was now, and now he had security. He wasn't going to be starved ever again. He counted the bottles again, just to be sure, and yes, he had enough for over a tenday. He grinned toothily.

Astarion was not going to settle for just security. He wants more, and he will get it! Tonight, he will hunt for better blood and he will not accept failure. A tiny taste, that's all he needs. To make him better than he is now, give him the clarity of thought and strength he deserves. He resisted counting the bottles again as he returned them all to their hidden compartment.

"What else this evening, mm?" he mused, plotting out an itinerary for his nighttime adventures. He should check on the bookshops, see if that one order had come in. He needed to leave soon for that, before they closed. Perfume reagents, he needed those too, he reminded himself as he held up his last bottle of his personally crafted fragrance and wiggled it back and forth. Not much left at all. He considered it almost as essential as blood.

If only he had the reserves hidden at his former residence. *Hrm*. He fiddled with the fancy lace at the end of his long sleeves, as he carefully considered his options. It had been many weeks since Cazador's death, why not return and see what he could salvage? It was all *his* after all. A spawn that killed their sire inherits everything. All the books he read agreed on that point, so it had to be true! Sure, they assumed the quasi-fratricidal spawn would have become a true vampire in the process, but Astarion failed to see how that mattered at all.

One final decision before he left: did he hate Gale too much to show up in the wee hours of the morning and bother him tonight? Maybe he should just do it. Get it over with. Signal they could both just fucking move on and never talk about it again. The wizard could pretend Astarion hadn't tried to murder him and Astarion would pretend he didn't still want to murder him just a *teensy* bit.

If Gale treated him any differently Astarion was going to *actually* murder him. The idea of that man trying to impart compassion for his past suffering sounded worse than being flayed alive. Astarion had experienced the latter enough times already. He walked over to the window, as if something outside would help him with this decision.

Tara the tressym was hovering right at eye level on the other side of the glass.

Astarion stared at Gale's flying not-cat.

Tara stared back at the not-alive elf.

After a few moments of staring Astarion decided to call the whole evening off and go back to bed. He turned away without a word and crawled under his blanket.

He knows how this goes. He'll try to ignore whoever is there and they just. Won't. Go. Away. Soon there would be scratching at his window and meowing and other efforts to get his attention. Whatever happened to letting the dead rest in peace?

It hadn't even just been the invasion of yesterday. Jaheira had intruded several times before, once even turning into a bird and coming in through his fucking window when he was really determined to keep ignoring her. He hated how everybody knew he *had* to be here if the sun was up. Where else would he go? He felt like a bird in a cage. He pondered for a moment and changed his mental image to a bat in a cage. There. More thematic. He had to find another place to spend his days, keep people guessing. Be less predictable.

Maybe leave a note for Jaheira. Just in case she did break in, so she wouldn't worry.

He surprised himself with that last thought and realized something else surprising. Nothing had happened. Absolutely nothing. No cat cries. No scratching. Not even any wizardy wizarding.

Astarion cautiously rose again and crept silently over to the window. Tara was sitting on the balcony railing, grooming herself. He opened the large window and cleared his throat, causing her to turn to look at him, but that was all.

"Good evening? You're Gale's? Yes?"

Tara flew over and landed at Astarion's feet, not crossing into his flat, looking up at him.

Astarion stared at her for a few more moments then smiled down at her. "Aren't you a polite creature? Your pet wizard could learn a lot from you, dear. Come inside." He stepped away from the cracked open window, moving back to his desk again.

The tressym made a *Prrrt?* noise as she walked inside, tail held high.

The vampire dug in one of his larger desk drawers, full of various enchanted jewelry that Astarion had decided would be better off with him than any of his traveling companions. Soon he pulls out a ring and inspects it, slipping it on after a moment and triggering its enchantment.

Tara jumped up onto his desk and said, "Greetings. My name is Tara and I have a message for you from Mr. Dekarios."

My my, so the wizard has a mortal name after all.

"Good for you. I do not wish to hear it," Astarion said as he shoved the desk drawer shut.

"Very well." She began to inspect the various items on Astarion desk, paying special attention to his spools of thread.

Astarion blinked and waited. He caught a spool of thread as she knocked it over and put it back, then the process repeated. "That's it? Just very well? ... you're not going to start badgering me to hear him out?"

“No, Mr. Dekarios said I was to determine when to deliver his correspondence. You are not receptive, so it is not the proper time.”

“Well!” Astarion was so surprised by this he was almost at a loss for words. Almost. He grinned. “Mr. Dekarios, huh? Gale Dekarios.” He rolled the name around in his mouth. Honestly, it sounded better than Gale of Waterdeep.

“And how shall I address you?”

“It is just Astarion, darling.”

Tara eyed him for a moment, then said, “Mr. Astarion.”

“Ugh.” He stuck his tongue out in displeasure. He did not like the sound of that. “Just Astarion is fine.”

Tara knocked the spool of thread over again and watched Astarion put it back.

“Can I pet you?”

Tara moved into prime petting position, and rubbed against his hands as he delicately stroked her fur, marveling at her feather wings. “Mr. Dekarios requested I stay with you, until you acquiesce to hear his apology.”

Fancy that, an apology? Was the little tressym supposed to give that much away? The somewhat little vampire grinned at her, “Well! Then I suppose you just have to come with me this fine evening, fair lady. Tell your wizard that we’re going on an adventure, make him worry a bit.”

She jumped onto Astarion’s shoulder. “Very well.”

Astarion grabbed a bag and hurried out of the building, then through the streets, sprinting down alleys and climbing over some walls in order to make it to the bookstores before they closed. His first stop was nothing special really, he just planned to pick up some more bedtime reading. He spotted the latest volume of a series that he had been reading and his eyes widened a bit. It was horribly written and plotted garbage following the adventures of an elderly woman, who just so happened to keep solving murders wherever she went. Excellent, he did not think that a new installment was due for a while. He is mystified more keep being churned out. Who is *buying* this trash?

The book went into his pocket while the shopkeeper was busy starting her closing duties. However, as Astarion turned to peruse other shelves he instead came face to face with Tara. He narrowed his eyes and tried to peer past her, but she moved to keep blocking his view no matter how he twisted. He grimaced at the busybody cat and blew cold breath in her face. This did not a damn thing. He sighed heavily and retrieved the book from his pocket, waving it at her with a frown. She nodded at him and perched on his shoulder once more.

His mood a bit soured, Astarion paid for the book and left the shop. Fine. Lesson learned, it’s not just shopkeeper eyes he needed to avoid this particular evening. Doable, now that he knew the parameters he was operating under. Not that he would get another attempt at his next destination.

The clerk at the academic focused bookstore didn’t even bother to look up from his own book as Astarion approached the counter. “We’re closing in five minutes; you’d better know what you want. I don’t have time to look up anything for students who couldn’t be bothered to check their requirements.”

Astarion instantly disliked the human. “Ah, no worries, *darling*. I’m very aware of my... desires. I am here to pick up an order, I was told it would be ready by today? Mmm?”

With a sigh the man shut his book and actually bothered to pay any attention to Astarion, managing to look down his nose at him despite being seated. “Oh, it’s you. For how much you wanted these you could be bothered to show up earlier. You’re damn lucky I didn’t close early tonight.” He set a bundle of books on top of the counter. The stack was bundled with a couple of leather straps, the titles still very legible. They included *Bloodlines and Lineages: An Anthropological Study of Vampire Communities*, *The Mythos of Daywalkers: Scientific Inquiries into Sunlight Resistance*, *Vampiric Physiology: A Medical Perspective*, *The Frailty of the Turned: Investigating Weaknesses in Vampiric Spawn*, and *The Psychological Impacts of Immortality: A Case Study of Vampiric Longevity*.

“My deepest apologies, dear, it can be so difficult sometimes to get moving in the evening.” When he was done speaking, he stopped breathing, becoming as still as the grave.

The clerk grumbled, looking up at him to say something else, but stopped short. He looked at the books. Then back at Astarion. Then at the books once more.

Astarion grinned *very* broadly, “Yes?”

The vampire was still the palest between the two of them, but the clerk made a valiant effort to match his skin tone. He stammered out the total, which was quickly paid, Astarion smiled all the while, knowing his fangs were on excellent display. He leaned a bit closer to the clerk than he really needed to as he picked up his books. “Thanks so much for your spectacular service, dear.”

The human just nodded back; his eyes very wide. Astarion dropped the grin and stalked out of the shop, with both his new vampire literature in his satchel and a good portion of the gold he paid for them back in his pocket again.

That might not have been the smartest course of action, but it was very fun. Give that bookworm something to think about. Besides, what story could he possibly tell that would amount to anything? Who would care about tales of a vampire buying academic texts concerning vampires. Astarion just made his life a bit more interesting.

“I saw that. You pilfered the coin you paid for those books.”

Astarion groaned, “Not all of it. I’m *not* giving it back.”

“I don’t care. He was overcharging for those. You should ask Mr. Dekarios if you want literature such as that, a bookstore catering to students will always be a fool’s option. Additionally, he will be *much* better at giving you advise on which selections are worth your time than anyone at such a shop.”

He gave a noncommittal mumble of an answer, which Tara accepted well enough.

Astarion visited one more shop, then with all his time sensitive tasks accomplished, he wandered till he found a tavern that was advertising live music. A barmaid informed him no animals were allowed as he entered, but he pretended not to have ears and walked right past her, taking a spot in the back. Tara jumped off his shoulder and loafed on the table. No one else bothered to try to enforce the rules.

The live music turned out to be some half-elven teens trying their hand at elfish harp music. They were competent enough. Unobjectionable. Astarion was already on chapter three of his rubbish mystery book. He was having a fantastic time, one of his top ten, no, top five tavern evenings!

Mediocre music he could easily ignore, he had barely said two sentences to anyone in the establishment, and he had an expensive bottle of wine keeping him company at the table.

He had told Shadowheart he had given up on making wine more palatable for his cursed tongue. At the time it hadn't even been a lie, but he had changed his mind. He was allowed to do that. No harm in experimenting more, he has plenty of blood reserves. Even if he made no progress, he found some inexplicable comfort when he held a bottle of wine. He'll take any scrap of comfort he can get. He always has.

A thought flitted through his head. "Soooo... do flying not-cats drink wine?"

Tara looked up at him, puzzled. "I have never tried it. Nor been offered."

Some salted nuts were in a bowl on the table, Astarion dumped them out, most stayed on the table, though a few rolled onto the floor. He wiped out the bowl and then poured red wine into it for her.

She sniffed at the wine, then hesitantly tried a sip, coughing and sputtering at the taste. After a moment she tried another sip then sat up wrinkling and licking her nose.

"Ah, well, not for everyone."

Tara crouched down and lapped up more of the wine, imbibing a good bit of the bowl's contents. Astarion stared at her, his smile growing larger as she kept drinking.

"I was not prepared for it at first, that was all," she said, washing again after she had her fill. "Thank you, Mr. Astarion."

He laughed and said, "My dear, I'm going to positively *ruin* you before you return to your wizard."

The pair left the tavern well before last call, a bit of a novelty for Astarion. He wasn't sure about hunting with Gale's pet, she might very well report on his activities in a less than charitable manner. So, he began to wander in what he thought was an aimless fashion before coming up short, realizing exactly where his feet were carrying him. "Oh godsdamnit."

"Is something wrong, Mr. Astarion?"

"Oh, no, nothing at all, dear. Never you mind." He was planning to go to the palace anyway, no need to examine how he had autopiloted most of the way there after leaving that tavern. This was just being very efficient. That's all it was. Besides, some of those blood concoctions Cazador had loved to taunt him with would serve just as well as fresh prey. Astarion was fairly sure they lasted for months, so there should be reserves still for him to purloin.

He walked up the private path to the main entrance of the Szarr Palace. Astarion had taken this route thousands upon thousands of times, but yet it all felt strange and novel. Glancing up at the facade he was amazed once again how it was exactly the same and so different at the same time. The windows were just as black as ever, offering no glimpse inside the mansion to the public, but no aura of foreboding emanated from their darkness now. The trees along the path even seemed a bit less dead! He picked the lock and slipped in the front door.

"I must say, I do not support breaking and entering!"

"Tut-tut! No breaking, just some entering. Besides, it's *my* palace now, if we want to be technical." Astarion grinned at the tressym perched upon his shoulder.

“People don’t pick the locks of their own homes, Mr. Astarion.”

“I do!” This was true, he had flung the keys to his flat over his shoulder the moment Jaheira had handed them to him.

He kept his gaze straight ahead as he walked through the foyer and followed the path of that horrible carpet, he refused to glance left or right — seeing the doorways of those bloody *pleasure chambers* out of the edges of his vision was enough. The hallway seemed very short, until Astarion disabled the damn enchantment keeping the illusion maintained.

The bastard oh so loved to watch victims flee from the ballroom once the true party began. Cazador would let them think they had escaped long enough for them to race down the stairs, only to find that the path now took them directly to what seemed to be a large bookcase in front of a solid wall. Considering the ballroom door itself was shut when Astarion, Karlach, and the lesser members of the party arrived, the bastard must have had the servants trigger the illusion for additional security.

After Astarion passed through where the wall had been he was right next to the main ‘guest room,’ where he had *entertained* so many souls who had been foolish enough to follow him back. A handful of times one of those poor fools had tried to slip the noose, only to discover that same wall.

He stopped and tried to steady himself, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth. Astarion often felt his body was very annoying in how it chose to be alive versus dead. He didn’t make his own warmth anymore, but yet he could get butterflies in his aching stomach, a dry mouth, and a tension in his chest. Even though he doesn’t need to breathe and his heart does not beat. How rubbish it all was. He had some notes for whoever it was that created the vampire curse.

Astarion straightened his back and firmly decided that now was the time to face the demons of memory contained in this house. Looting is fun and there is *nothing* here that can hurt him anymore. Cazador is *very* dead and none of his various minions can resurrect themselves without his assistance. This palace had many precious resources a vampire spawn could use, it made a lot of sense to avail himself of them. There was no risk.

His attempts to reassure himself failed spectacularly.

This was a stupid idea.

He shouldn’t have come here alone. He could have asked for help and gotten it. He was worse than alone. If he was really alone, without Gale’s damn winged cat, he’d just leave right then. But, no, Astarion was committed; he was not about to explain himself to a fucking cat. At least he had no pulse rate to give him away, and the not-cat didn’t know that he tended to stop automatically breathing when on edge.

It was so silent. Astarion looked around, licking his lips nervously. Was there any part of this house that didn’t hold some horrible flash of memory? He pursed his lips as he gave the notion thorough consideration. No. Probably not. Even if nothing specific came to mind wherever he glanced, there were general long running torments. Such as the times when Cazador decided clothing was a luxury Astarion no longer deserved. The parties that would spread through the whole house, incorporating *fun* games such as whoever locates the spawn first gets to have their way with him. The hundreds of times he had to somehow get himself from the kennels to the dormitory when his legs had not yet fully mended, least he risk an extended stay in the former.

“Ugh.”

He pivoted to face a wall, deciding to stare at the wallpaper a foot in front of his nose instead.

What horrible wallpaper. Hideous really.

Astarion decided he really hated red and gold together. Fuck that combination. It would no longer be allowed around him. Any clothing he owned that dared to pair those hues would be pitched out as soon as he was home again.

Home.

He thought of his new flat as home! Realizing this filled him with genuine courage. Cazador's horrible tomb of a house was *not* his home anymore. It never would be again. He was not going to be trapped here. He was just here to start reclaiming what he was owed. Really, a small pittance compared to what he was *really* owed, but he'll take whatever fraction he can scrape up.

I can do this. I have to do this. Dispel some of his shadow over me.

He had a plan. A very short plan, but a plan! Pick up the perfume bottles from the hallway cabinet. Go to Cazador's dining room, wish he was capable of pissing on that damn table, search for the blood bottles, and then *leave*.

It was time to follow the plan!

He turned down the hall towards the dormitory wing, admiring the evidence of his prior visit. Astarion took special joy in stepping on the remains of the paintings that had loomed over him for decades. He ground his boots into a specific one, smiling at the shattered frame and shredded canvas. Cazador would have been *furious*, the meticulous bastard. If only he could have drug him around this entire miserable house by *his* ears so he could see it all brought to ruin and *then* stabbed the asshole.

Ah well, every life has some regrets, does it not?

Tara was flying in little circles around him, "My heavens, what atrocious housekeeping."

Astarion whispered at her, "Don't worry, the servants have been disciplined."

Just as he walked through the wing's doorway, having immediately turn to head down the next short hallway - a truly rubbish design he had always thought, he heard a noise. He stopped and strained his ears to listen. Damnable tressym wings.

"Stop flying. Stop breathing! Wait no, go fly up higher, play with the bats, get away from me," he hissed out. Tara obeyed, flying up and away.

He hadn't imagined it. There was the sound of something, no, *someone* moving around ahead of him. Astarion swallowed and steadied himself, the fear settling into his gut once more. He crept forwards silently. Whoever it was, they were in the favoured spawn room, where the double door was slightly parted. Slinking ahead he peered into the open door of the dormitory. Things had been moved in there, he was certain. His group may have ransacked some of this hellish mansion, but he knew that the chests had been left flush against the walls, not pulled out as they were now.

Astarion had found freedom to be almost unimaginably full of decisions. For much of his time being free, the decisions had boiled down to— if he was *forced* to be honest with himself, such relatively minor questions such as: 'How much do I complain about this?' 'Should I hide at camp or interact with people?', and the reoccurring favorite 'How much do I bother to argue with Karlach about

something before I just give up and do whatever she wants?' Even that version of freedom had been exhausting and terrifying.

Now that he is *alone* and free it is so much worse. And better. He had to keep reminding himself of that latter aspect. Run or investigate? He stopped again and listened intently. It sounded like only one person was in there. Investigate. If he ran now, he *knew* he would regret it. Whatever was in there could not be worse than the possibilities his mind would offer up for him if he ran.

He moved forwards, silent as the grave, careful step after careful step, moving slowly to the side of the doorway. He shifted the last foot or so, trying to get the barest glimpse of whoever was inside. Success! The source of the sound was an pale elven woman, with white hair tied up in a bun.

“Dal?!”

Dalyria shrieked and turned to face the door, backing up a bit, almost falling into the wardrobe she had been searching.

Astarion stepped fully into the room, grinning broadly as he waved to his fellow spawn.

“Astarion?! Why are you here?” She ran over and threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

“Oh, you know, just was in the neighborhood. Decided to stop in and see how horrible and awful things were. Turns out? Still *very* horrible and awful. But! I am going to free some items from this rotten mausoleum. Let go. Stop touching me. That’s enough.” He awkwardly patted her back and relaxed when she let go and stepped back from him.

The two spawn stared at each other, the atmosphere growing more and more uncomfortable.

Astarion broke it with a shout, “Cat!? Tara!? Don’t get eaten by anything up there, get back here!”

Tara swooped down and flew into the room. “Oh my, Mr. Astarion! Another one of you.” She flew a lazy figure-eight around the pair of white haired high-elven spawn.

Dalyria stared at the tressym, looking between Tara and Astarion a couple of times, her eyebrows raised.

“I have stolen a not-cat. That flies. I might give her back, so I need to keep her not full of bat bites. That would just cause me inconvenience.”

“... a not-cat?”

“A tressym. Magical wizard created beastie. She’s not a bad conversation partner. If you can understand her.”

There was a soft glow as Dalyria cast a spell to do just that. Astarion didn’t know she could cast that. Or did he? Well, he’s not saying anything.

“I’m working with a group called the Society of Brilliance. In... In the Underdark. I’m picking up some spells I always wanted to know.”

He snapped his fingers and grinned, more in his element now. “Oh! I know that group. We did ... something? For them! Hobgoblin and mindflyer couple, right? Say hi for me.”

“... you sure seem to know a lot of people now.”

“Mr. Astarion has shown me a most wonderful evening!”

Dalyria blinked and watched the tressym flap about, tilting her head to the side when the creature lands on Astarion’s shoulder.

“Never let it be said that I do not know how to give someone, no matter how many legs they have, an entertaining night. Tara, this is Dalyria. *Doctor* Dalyria, not Mrs.”

Doctor Dalyria stared at Astarion as if she had never met him before, looking him up and down. Her eyes lingered on the clothing that she was not familiar with and the bulging satchel he carried. “You look well.”

Astarion *tsk*’ed and put on as if he was offended, “I *always* look marvelous, dear.”

There again was dead silence between the two spawn, before Astarion filled it with undead unsilence.

“Soooooooooo... how are.... thiiiiings?”

“We thought you must be dead!”

“I am dead, dear. So are you! Part of the nature of our shared curse and all.”

Dalyria gritted her teeth and glared at him. “When you didn’t ever come to join us. To even try find us at all!”

He tried to play off the guilt that swirled in his belly, scoffing at her dismissively, “Ah. Well. Now, why would I have bothered to do that?”

“To help us? There’s six of us and thousands of them! Many of them are yours!”

“Well! First of all, I didn’t think you’d *stay* there forever after things settled down up here! It was just safer down there to avoid the mind flayers. And the 13 flavours of cultists running around at the time. And the monster hunters! ... but now, the Gur are safe? I think? Hrm.” He waved a finger in the air and looked around, thinking, “They said they wouldn’t hunt *me*. I didn’t think to ask how broad that no-hunting promise was. Well! You look close enough to me, I’m sure you’re fine, darling.”

Dalyria stared at him still, narrowing her eyes. Tara had enough of this spawn vs spawn verbal altercation and was flying around the guest room, exploring.

“And... and anyway, I was busy! I was doing big important things up here, I’ll have you know. I was even a bit of a hero imitator. More than a bit! They had me traipsing all up and down this city after killing the bastard. Under it too. And over it! You heard about that enormous brain? High above the city? I was there! I even stabbed it. Take heart, it doesn’t matter how big something is, you can *always* stab it. I even delivered the final stabbing, as I recall.” He grinned down at her and posed, reenacting said dramatic final stabbing.

“And after? Why didn’t you come to see us after?”

Astarion’s grin froze then melted off his face. “What? Was saving you all in the first place not enough? I have to do *everything*? Why are you here anyway? You were *so* surprised to see me that I am sure *harassing* me for my lack of follow through on your predicament was not your primary reason for making the climb up here.” He crossed his arms and pointedly looked away from her. “So *why* are you here?”

“Supplies... we were getting so desperate that I risked coming back up here.”

The same reason he was here. More or less. “Of course. How... where are you?”

“We’re scattered. The caged spawn. The six of us are still together, and we’re looking for more of the other spawn. Lots of them are truly dead now, those are easy to locate. Some thousands are with us, in an abandoned Drow settlement.”

“Well. I came here to get some stuff too! Fancy that... let’s hope we do not have our eyes on the same prize, my dear!”

“Where are all the clothes, Astarion?”

Shit. “They took them. We took them.”

“*All of them?* Why did you take *all of them?*”

Astarion winced. “Well, you see, Dal, I made some offhand remark - do not even *remember* it honestly - about the only thing I wanted from this place, if pressed, I supposed, was some of the clothes. And... they took them all.”

“They? Who is *they*, Astarion!”

“The people I was with! You saw them! I didn't even know they were doing it. I was a bit... distracted after the *event*, dear. It’s a blur, honestly.”

Dalyria kept dragging more of the tale out of him, “And... where did they end up? Where are the clothes now!”

“Some are *mine* and you cannot have them. As for the rest I... I don’t know. I told people to avail themselves of the remainder. Maybe some are still at the Elfsong. You should go check, dear.”

She groaned, “We could have used those! I was depending on them.”

Astarion shrugged, “Well. They’re gone. Not my fault. I’m here to pick up some dinner!”

Dalyria blinked. “What?”

He grinned at her, “In the bastards dining room of course! This way!” He turned away from her and started walking down the hall towards the stairs at a good clip.

“Brother?!”

“I’m not your brother! Stop that. We don’t have to *do that* anymore!” He took a moment to pause at a certain bookcase and knocked some books on the floor. He picked up the now revealed perfume bottles and slipped them into his pockets.

Dalyria began following him, for lack of a better option. After they passed through the door back into the main house, she called out again, “Bro— Astarion? What happened in the kennels?”

Astarion stopped in his tracks, the kennel door immediately to his left. He hesitated a moment before opening the door. He never had seen the results of Karlach’s little *episode*.

His eyes widened and his mouth hung open just a little.

Everything that could be smashed was smashed. Everything that could burn had burned. There was nothing left of the wooden furniture and coffins except chunks of charcoal. The metal torture implements were melted slag. You would never know there used to be horribly stained filthy mattresses, no trace of them remained. Scorch marks were plentiful on the walls and pillars, along with huge gnashes in the brickwork. It looked like a bomb had exploded. Really, Astarion decided, in a way it had.

Dalyria repeats herself, “What happened?”

Astarion bit his lower lip, feeling tears start to well up. He did not want to cry in front of Dalyria. Not now. Not ever again. He was confronted with proof just how angry Karlach had gotten on his behalf. He always appreciated that, very much. Others looked at him with such *pity* in their eyes when he gave even the barest hint of his past, muttering words of how sorry were for him. She had burned hotter with rage and given a litany of suggestions for how the people who hurt him should be made to suffer. It was what he wanted. For someone to be angry for him, with him. Something more useful than shameful pity and then awkward silence. Gods, he missed her *so* much.

“Brother?” She was even more confused now, noticing his eyes glistening.

He didn’t bother to correct her this time. He swallowed once, collected himself, and then replied, “Well. It appears... a lot of fire? And smashing?” He pointed at a pile of bones that was now mostly dust. “Did you say hi to Godey, Dal?”

Dalyria kicked at the bones, stomping the few remaining solid fragments into dust.

“Very good. Well, off we go!”

“Brother, what happened?” she pleaded again. “At first I thought we had been looted in the aftermath of the battle, but nothing is missing. Except for the clothes.” She glared at Astarion as she followed him down the hallway towards the stairs. “But then, what is all this?” she motioned at the paintings on the floor, smashed vases, and damaged furniture.

“We just had a spot of fun after killing the bastard. We had the whole day blocked out, you understand, so there was time to spare. You cannot tell me you never fantasized about ruining his precious palace.”

“But you couldn’t have done all this yourself.”

“I could have! But no. I mostly sat in *that* chair feeling like my back was on fire. I’m sure you know the feeling. I just gave... suggestions! Anyway, this way, chop-chop.” He hurried up the stairs.

The other spawn hurried after him, still looking very confused, but not yet asking the questions she most wanted answered.

He rapidly stalked through the wrecked ballroom, wrinkling his nose at the smell. “Someone should burn the beasts,” he commented before making his way to the dining room on the left side. Once there he went directly to the back of the room to the wine rack. He began to peruse its offerings.

Dalyria stopped to check the wardrobes in here, making a frustrated noise upon finding they also were empty.

“There we go!” Astarion picked up a bottle and wiggled it at her. He planned to select another one after she took it, but was surprised she did not.

She stepped back from his offering, staring at him aghast.

Astarion boggled at her. “What?!”

“I don’t want to drink that! What if that’s someone we brought here?”

He opened his mouth. Shut it. Then tried again, “It *probably* is? Why do you care...?” he wiggled the bottle at her again, “Remember, the bastard had some way to mix wine and blood. I have not been able to replicate it.”

She lifted her hands up, palms facing him, and shook her head again.

He paused and considered the bottle again, a notion flashing through his head. “So help me if it was a damn farce... ugh, Cazador *would* do something like that just to torment *me*.” He made thinking noises as he tilted the bottle, watching the contents slosh back and forth, then looked to Dalyria for her opinion.

She just shrugged at him.

“Well! I’m taking some anyway.” He carefully arranged three bottles in his now quite full satchel. What a productive night it had been!

Dalyria was looking at him so strangely.

He studied her for a moment and then said, “Dalyria. What are you... how are you feeding down there?”

“There’s plenty of beasts. The area was abandoned and—”

“No thinking creatures?”

She shook her head, “No. Have you?”

Astarion was flabbergasted. His eyes widened and he shouted, “Of course I fucking have! I broke that *command* before a tenday was out! What even...” He muttered softly, more to himself than her, “Maybe you do need help down there...”

“But won’t we get in trouble if we... hunters will know or it will be too much and...” she trailed off, worrying at a loose thread on her top.

“Come on, Dal, let’s go get a bite! Or maybe several bites, mm? *Live* a little. A spot of hunting? *Proper* hunting! Not what *he* made us do.” He grinned and patted her on the head. “Now now, catch and release, don’t worry your pretty head, no luring anyone anywhere. Not draining them fully, it’s... *ethical*.”

“If you say it will be safe. Then... yes!”

He giggled and waggled his eyebrows at her. “I’ll help you out, it can be a bit.... difficult your first time. But! I believe in you.”



“Why are we going so close to the river, Astarion?” She asked him for about the third time.

Astarion sighed and answered her for the second time, “Beeeeecaaause, Daaaaaaaaaal, this is the good hunting for tonight. If you have another idea, I’d be happy to hear it? No? Then *hush*.”

Dalyria made a worried noise but kept following him down the stone steps, not feeling reassured by the various boulders and rickety docks she saw past them.

“I have a system! We are *not* going to get burnt by the river. See, there’s an old drunk that lurches over here after the taverns close on certain nights. He thinks he’s fishing! Very consistent in his delusion. I’m providing a service, really. He’d drown his fool self if I didn’t make sure he slumbered away from the currents.”

His fellow spawn just stared at him, causing Astarion to prattle on, “Hells, he *was* face down in a puddle the first night I encountered him. Burnt my damn hands extracting him. So! He owes me still. Tonight, my dear, I’ll oh so generously pass his payment onto you. Don’t fret, he has plenty of blood to spare.”

Dalyria still did not reply, creeping after him, terrified.

Astarion skirted around a large piece of masonry— it did not fall here, but was drug here to get it out of the road as the rebuilding progressed. It made an excellent vantage point. He peered around the obstruction and then waved Dalyria over to join him with a grin. She hesitantly followed his instruction, peering out from behind him.

Totally obvious to his observers, the elderly half-orc was living proof that it was possible to be too drunk to fish.

“Now, let’s see,” he whispered, tapping a fang with one finger as he ran possible strategies though his mind. How to lure— no, no, different word, please! — entice the man farther away from the water that once again hated Astarion.

The universe decided Astarion did not have to actually make this decision! A pair of sahuagin emerged from the river. The half-orc cast his fishing rod at the pair of fishmen, the hook bounced off one of them.

“Well, this is new,” said Astarion, his eyebrows raised.

Dalyria shrieked, drawing the attention of all three of the beings in the water.

Astarion called out to the half-orc, motioning for him to move towards them.

He was amiable to the suggestion and started to run over, but was bashed on the back of the head by one of the sahuagin before he got too far. Half-orc hardiness proved to be a real thing, as despite the blow he stumbled forwards a few more steps before he fell prone.

Astarion unleashed a quick blast of magical thunder, shoving the sahuagin away back into the surf.

He dashed forwards and started trying to drag the man farther away before they recovered. Half-orc heaviness was also proving to be a real thing.

Progress was made when Dalyria ran up to help, the pair easily dragging him backwards. Astarion let go after a moment, turning to face the sahuagin again, Dalyria had no issues dragging the man behind the rubble alone.

With that taken care of, Astarion grinned as he slipped his daggers into his hands, ready for battle.

The sahuagin seemed confused that he wasn't chasing them into the water, instead waiting for them to come to him. He'd use that to his advantage.

One charged Astarion, he dodged its claws and went in for a dagger swipe and a bite!

Both were hits. The fishman shook him off before he got more than a couple of mouthfuls of blood, but it was enough.

He giggled as he felt just, well, better in every way, he had just known he was going to have a successful hunt tonight!

Both sahuagin were more than a little surprised that an elf was biting them, allowing Astarion to get off another couple of great dagger shots off, though alas, his teeth clamped down on nothing but air as the fishman rudely dodged his next attempt. "Dalyria! Join in!"

Dalyria ran to assist, gripping a small knife in one hand.

What horrible form she had. Astarion was suddenly very worried that he was getting a glimpse at what his own technique was, right after he climbed out of his horrid little pod into the sun all those months ago.

He was distracted enough one of the sahuagin managed to give him a slice on the outside of his thigh for his trouble.

He swore and twisted, repaying his target with a slit throat. One down!

The other one was menacing Dalyria, who clumsily slashed out with the knife. What she lacked in technique she made up for in strength, each cut she managed to land was deep.

Astarion was very sure now she was showing him a vision of his not too distant past.

No matter, she was useful enough to distract the enemy such that he was able to get behind it and deliver a quick killing blow, right to the back of the neck, severing the spine instantly.

Dalyria watched the sahuagin drop like a sack of fishy potatoes. "You really did learn how to fight!"

He twirled his daggers and grinned at her. "Yes. Yes, I did. Not bad for the runt, hrm?"

Tara commented from her perch on top of the rubble. "Very nice, but you could stand to scratch them a bit more."

Astarion made a rude gesture at the tressym and said, "She's not wrong, you could have scratched *and* bit more, Dal. If you're going to have such a dinky excuse for a weapon as your only protection."

Dalyria ignored him, wiping her knife off. Astarion makes a show of licking the blood off his daggers instead before he stored them.

“In any case! One for each of us, what luck. Come, Dal, enjoy your first taste of the good life essence. What luck for you, not just a taste, the whole being!” He flipped over the sahuagin that he had not bitten, motioning at its neck.

Dalyria did not have to be told again, she dropped to her knees and bit down, making pleasurable noises that she was barely aware she was producing. Astarion looked away due to second hand embarrassment.

The half-orc wannabe fisherman sat up. “Whoa...” Astarion ignored him and drained the other sahuagin dry, taking pride in how silent he was during the process.

A giggle directed his attention back to Dalyria. Her eyes were wide, his pupils gigantic, her grin wider than he had ever seen before, and a generous amount of blood still on her chin. She stood, a bit unsteady on her feet, and turned towards the half-orc, licking her lips. Drool started to wash away the blood as she took haltering steps towards the drunk man.

It was now Astarion’s turn to stare at his fellow spawn. “... Dal?” he snapped his fingers. The half-orc flopped over again, passed out once more.

She did not respond, taking another step forwards. Astarion took her by the upper arm and tugged her away. “Dalyria!”

“Oh? Oh! Astarion!” She laughed again, “Where did you go?”

“Ah. Right. Well! Come on, dear, time to go. Thiiiiis way...”

She is very easily lead away, back towards the heart of the city. “That was... I feel... so... wow...”

Astarion tried to remember how he felt after his first taste of thinking-creature. It was amazing and wonderful and it made him feel so many things. Such as he wanted *more*. However, he hadn’t drained Shadowheart, a whole sahuagin should be a very different matter. Right?

“Only a couple of hours till dawn,” he reminded Dalyria.

Dalyria *Mmmmed* in reply, her eyes focusing once again on the delectable drunk.

“So, we should get going? Yes? You can see where I’m hiding during the day.”

He really hoped she’d agreed, or things would be very much more complicated for Astarion. Was he really going over his options for how he could stop her if she tried to attack the psuedo-fisherman? Gods, he was! But only because things would be easier with this man around to feed on later. He almost even believed his own lie.

“Oh.” She closed her eyes tightly and shook her head, wiping at the blood on her face. Astarion handed her his red handkerchief, which made the process much easier. “That is wise. I have other things I want to discuss in any case. With you. About us. About you.”

Astarion was filled with so much regret. There were plenty of drunk half-orcs in the city, what was he *thinking?!*

“That sounds so... fun. Well, Tara? You? Anywhere *you* want to visit before we head back? I’m afraid I rather monopolized this whole evening.”

Tara looked down at the pair from her perch, “Would you like to hear the message now?”

“What the fuck do you think?”

She took flight and landed on his shoulder again, “I have wanted to visit the upper city aviary. My lack of thumbs have unfairly kept me out.”

Astarion giggled at that unexpected answer. “My, my! Well then, madam, let’s go.” He started walking back to the upper city, tugging on Dalyria’s arm once to get her to start following him. She did, only looking back at the prone half-orc a single time.



There was a very satisfied sleeping tressym in Astarion’s arms. There would be very unhappy aviary staff in the soon to come morning. The vampires themselves had added a couple of exotic bird species to the list of creatures they had sampled! Only the ones Tara had slain first, they were not being *greedy*. It just made sense not to let the blood go to waste!

The pair were walking on one of the main upper city thoroughfares, it was all but deserted now, in the liminal time before dawn where the hour is so late, that is it now early.

Dalyria was more herself now, but her voice was still had a bit of a quiver to it, “It’s like I’m dreaming... I think? This feeling. I’m floating? I feel... happy? How much farther?”

“Not too far. I’m on the wall.” He petted Tara, smiling as she purred in her sleep.

“You always did say the only good thing about home was the view.”

“And I was right, as always. This way, a shortcut!” Astarion sharply turned off the main thoroughfare to cut through the grounds of one of the various universities.

Dalyria followed him through a tunnel in the grand hedge that marked the edge of campus. She laughed, “This night has been—” she stopped in mid-sentence and looked around, eyes suddenly very wide.

“Dal? What are you doing? The sun is *coming!*”

“I... went here. I ... taught here. Oh... I’ve... oh... he didn’t want me coming near here... in case... I’ve never been back!”

Astarion was confused for a moment, then realization washed over him. He had just led her right to the center of the premiere medical school in the city. She had been a doctor. He bloody knew this; he should have taken another route back.

Shit.

He hesitantly tugged on her arm, understanding all too well when she violently jerked it back and stared at him in fear. He gave her a moment, but when she failed to recover said, “Sorry, dear, the sun will not wait for us...”

Dalyria started trudging down the path once more, her hand going to her face as she tried to stifle her tears.

Astarion fell silent and started following his fellow spawn. He understood what she was going through. Academically, at least. Maybe he'd understand more if he returned to the alley he had fucking died in. One day he would. See if that awoke anything else. Currently he avoided that whole bloody district.

He *had* spent an evening wandering aimlessly around the law school's campus, a weird mix of hope and fear brewing inside him as he anticipated something feeling familiar. However, nothing had caused even a twinge of memory to tickle at his awareness. He thought about breaking into the registrar's archives to see if he had even attended that particular establishment of higher learning, instead he just left. What really would have been the point in knowing?

He both envied Dalyria and pitied her. He wasn't sure which feeling was stronger. Is it better to remember what you have lost and long for it? Or to rue that you have forgotten it all and been left with nothing but questions?

It seemed like they were both shit options, really.

Astarion was so lost in his own head that he walked past Dalyria before he realized she had stopped *again*. She was looking up at a building, tears starting to spill down her face. He snarled at her and stomped a foot, trying to break her out of this without having to touch her again. She startled and he quickly stalked away.

"Hurry! Before we burn to proper death." He could hear her following him, and pretended he could not hear her sobs.

They walked the rest of the way with no words exchanged, arrived at his building with some time to spare, though not much. Dalyria had recovered enough by then that she looked shocked at where he was staying, her eyes widening again after they scaled the stairs to the top floor and Astarion opened the door to what appeared to be just a normal flat. He held the door open for her, shifting the sleeping Tara to one arm. Dalyria hesitated at the threshold.

Astarion paused and grinned, "Oh, how novel." He then made an exaggerated motion for her to enter, "Welcome to my cage for the daylight hours. You can share its protections, enter."

"There's no one else inside?"

"No. Get in. You're invited." Astarion's patience was wearing thin. He was aware how hypocritical this was, but had run out of fucks to give about that.

She wrung her hands, "They don't make you check in with anyone to make sure you're here?"

"They? Dal, I don't have fucking *keepers*. I'm not anybody's *pet vampire*. The cage thing was a *joke*." He waved his arm again, frowning at her when she once again failed to move and then jerked his head towards the inside of his flat.

Dalyria fell silent and walked in, looking around very nervously as she passed Astarion and jumping when he shut the door behind her.

Astarion shook Tara, "Wake up you, we're back." She hissed at him, not pleased with the rude awakening. He hissed right back at her. They stared at each other for a moment, oddly matching expressions on their faces. Then some accord must have been reached; she flew out of his arms, landing on the back of his couch to start bathing herself.

Dalyria stared at the pair during the whole interaction. Once it was over she looked concerned, but none of her confusion ebbed away.

He locked the front door. Then he locked the second lock on the door. Then Astarion dug into his satchel and grinned as he retrieved a brand-new lock! It was a huge deadbolt, hard to pick from outside the room, and it claimed to be immune to magic unlocking attempts as well. The bloody thing was pricey enough, it better be true. Well, Astarion had stolen the lock, right under Tara's nose even, but it was the principle of the matter.

Dalyria stopped staring at Astarion and moved to boggle around the rest of the room instead. The entry room was still very much a wreck. Astarion had not even *started* cleaning from his tiny post-Gale destruction spree. Gold pieces and non-magical jewelry littered the floor, along with the various pouches, trunks, and crates haphazardly all about. Some of them were even smashed now.

"What? No judging now! I'm still working on this room. The other two are better." He waved the lock in her direction. "Look at me, Dal! Doing a little home improvement, of all things. This is a lovely flat, but it *does* have a bit of a pest problem. I just need... to... ugh." The deadbolt was a bit stuck, causing him to run into difficulties before even beginning the install.

He gave up very quickly and set it on a nearby crate with a shrug. "Later then." She was trying not to step on anything, still at a loss for words.

"Dalyria, would you like to see... something amazing?" he smiled at her and then lead her into his bathroom.

He motioned grandly, "Ta-dah!" and then gave her a very brief tour, excitedly pointing at the highlights.

The bathroom was almost ludicrously large, roughly half-again as large as the entry room. It was entirely tiled, the floor slightly sloping towards a large drain in the middle. There was a large roughly squarish tub with cute little claw feet. The shutters on the single large window were securely latched. Astarion had loaded a small army's worth of soaps, hair care products, and other bath amenities onto the small built-in vanity, which was divested of its built-in mirror. There were two sets of spouts on the walls, one higher up and one lower down. They were the best; thus, he had saved them for last.

Astarion scurried over and turned on the lower hot water tap and grinned at her, "Hot running water!!" He giggled as ran over his hands.

She nodded at him. "Yes, it is very useful. And nice? Yes."

He was already lost to her, laughing as he moved his fingers in and out of the flowing water.

"... Astarion?"

"*Hrm?* Yes? Oh. Uh..." He noticed she was not *nearly* as impressed as he had expected. "Right." He turned off the water and stood up, awkwardness descending upon the pair again.

"Well. Come on, lets finish off the grand tour."

Dalyria looked around his bedroom, relaxing at the normality, until she noticed the large windows, one of which was fully uncovered. She looked at him accusingly.

Astarion rolled his eyes at her, "We face west. It's *fine*. Anyway. Take that, favoured spawn room. I'm winning now."

She walked over to the window, gazing out of it, while Astarion plopped his satchel onto his desk and started unpacking his purchases and stolen treasures.

He was reminded of his other guest when the tressym landed on the edge of his desk. She gave him a moment then said, "With all due apologies, while I know what your response will most likely be, Mr. Dekarios has been requesting an update for some time. Repeatedly. Oh, there he is again..."

Astarion was confused for a moment before realizing that Gale of Stupiddeep was bombarding his cat-that-was-not-a-cat with sending messages. He waved a hand dismissively. "Tell him I still have no interest in hearing whatever drivel he wants you to convey. Can you send a rude noise at the end of that? Do that too if you can."

Tara nodded. "I shall do so at once."

He gave her time enough to reply before chuckling. "I'm surprised you have no problems with me disrespecting him so. A simple spawn not wanting to hear the great wizard's words."

Tara sighed and stretched before saying, "He deserves it, between you and me. His behavior in the year before he suddenly vanished... it was abominable! Detestable!"

Astarion's eyes lit up above his grin. All he uttered was a casual "Oh?" even though he was more eager to hear this than almost anything else in his unlife. Gale? Being... *naughty*?!

"He treated his mother so horribly!"

"Oh." His interest level plummeted through the floor, but he carried on. "Well... some details?"

"He did not visit her at all! Barely even contacted her! He just sat in his tower and sulked." The tressym was almost vibrating with rage at these horrible crimes. She batted one of Astarion's spools of thread off the desk in order to calm herself.

Astarion caught the thread and re-righted it, shaking his head. "Oh the poor dear. No more Mystra so what is he to do but sit in his *wizard's tower* and sulk. Bah, he was only *dumped*. I, meanwhile, am managing to leave my lair practically every night after... after. What weak rubbish of a man."

Tara went silent at that, flying away to sit on top of his bookcase and commenced ignoring Astarion fully, with an aloofness only felines could fully master.

Hrm. He wasn't nearly as churlish as he could have been about her precious wizard. Maybe there was a bit more to this Mystra thing than he had been privy to learn.

He waited till Tara glanced at him to make sure he knew she was ignoring him, before motioning at the window Dalyria was gazing through. "I'll leave it cracked a bit, you can just come and go as you please. I'll let you know when I deign to hear these words that Mr. Dekarrrrrios is so desperate for me to perceive."

Astarion evaluated how it felt rolling the R in Gale's last name. Yes, that seems like a good bit of mockery to add to his repertoire. He set a small bowl that he pilfered from the tavern on the desk and resolved to fill it with water before he called it a night. "Animals need water, don't worry, I do know these things."

He nudged past Dalyria to open up the window a crack, securing it so it would stay. Tara slipped out and took flight into the incipient dawn.

“Well! I think I upset her. I wasn’t even trying!” He buffed his nails on his shirt. “Just a natural, I suppose.”

“Are you going to close the curtain? It’s practically morning.”

“The sun doesn’t shine in for hours and hours, I’m not an idiot, Dal! I didn’t bring us up here to burn in private.”

Dalyria looked at him and then reached out to shut the curtain herself, her hand trembling. She froze far before her fingers even brushed the fabric. Curtain adjustments were one of the *many* things that were forbidden to the spawn of the Szarr palace.

Astarion sighed and shut the curtain fully, instantly plunging the room into almost total darkness. A moment later he secured the curtain open just a crack, letting some sunlight diffuse into the space. Dalyria looked at him oddly, but did not protest.

“Sooooooooo... how *are* you feeling? The initial thinking-creature blood exhilaration is long gone, hrm?”

“Yes. I still feel... good? It’s hard to explain...”

“Trust me, dear, I *understand*. It’s the best, isn’t it? So much nicer than animal blood, even clean animal blood... You’ll never want to go back!” He sighed. “Alas, you’ll have to, they frown on all people diets. Really quite cruel. But! Just a bite a day is enough really.” He grinned at her once more, “Honestly, how you have resisted all this time in freedom...?”

“I was afraid... that if...” she trailed off and he did not follow up, as he honestly did not really care.

He moved away from the window, sitting down at his desk and kicking his shoes off. He tossed the mystery novel onto his bed before stacking up the vampire focused texts, running his long fingers over their spines as he examined their titles.

“Do your new mast—”

Astarion slammed his hand down on the desk, cutting her off. He glared for a moment before speaking, “I’m *free*.”

“But... they know you’re a vampire! How could they just let you go off on your own, without watching over you?”

“Nobody *lets me* do anything. They’re *heroes* Dal, they aren’t like the people we’ve been around. They don’t think like that. They trust me.”

Dalyria just looked at him, eyebrows raised.

He flung his hands up in the air, “Well enough anyway. They’re dim like that. I’m not *killing* anyone they care about, Dal. That’s the rule. As far as I’m concerned anyway. I’m being good *enough*.”

She moved away from the window, starting to look around his room, she was just taking in his pile of bedding on the ground when she’s interrupted.

“I was meaning to ask... what is ... why the...” he motioned towards his mouth then at her, biting the air a couple of times.

She touched her pointy incisors, looking at the floor still, “After you vanished... and we could not find you for months Master—”

“You don’t have to call him that! You *shouldn’t* call him that.”

She looked up from the floor, startled.

“Bastard. Asshole. Son of a bitch. Or just Bitch! Fucker. Insane maniac. There’s *lots* of good terms. Or just Cazador. Since he hated us to speak his name and all. Just don’t call him master again. We all had more than enough of that. Never. Again.”

“... he granted us more powers. Not fully elevating us but...”

“Oooh, that mist thing you did. Not bad. Not as good as a bat, I suppose, but not bad... anything else?”

“We can sense each other and communicate secretly, but only over short distances.”

He narrowed his eyes, "That doesn't work on me, right?"

She narrowed hers right back at him, mockingly. “Could you have snuck up on me if it did?”

“He had all sorts of tricks up his insane sleeves... I bet the bastard made it hurt too, just because he could...”

Dalyria carefully stepped around his bedding on the floor to look over the various things stored on his bed. Astarion watched her like a hawk. She seemed to not be too surprised or interested in most of the contents, not paying much mind to the various books, clothing, or sewing supplies. A few things did surprise her though, such as a rubber ball. She picked it up, all examining it and startling herself as it squeaked when she squished too hard, causing her to drop it.

Astarion grabbed it out of the air before it hit the ground and shoved it into a desk drawer, slamming it shut quickly.

“... how did they keep you from attacking them? I... couldn’t tell. I’ve been wondering ever since I first saw you again.”

“Dalyria, what in the sweet hells are you talking about?”

“Those people you brought back with you. You were free from all his commands. The compulsions. You said you drank thinking creature blood, but that command was all that kept us from harming people. I saw you with them... more than you know.”

Astarion stared at her like she grew another head “What.”

“I was watching you. Between when you were in the flophouse and the night the mas— he sent the others to fetch you.”

“What?”

“In the evenings. You were easy to find.”

“*What?!*”

“Not you specifically, your group. It was easy to just ask around about a tiefling woman on fire. Or a githyanki.”

“...that’s fair.”

“Astarion, you were following the fire-woman around like a lost puppy.”

He looked away from her, deciding to focus on the new tear in his pants. He’d have to get these soaking today to make sure the stain didn’t set and he could mend them the next evening.

“You looked... Astarion, you looked so happy. I thought they must have some spell on you, their own form of compulsion, some form of charm, to keep your hunger in check.”

Astarion’s confusion overcame his other emotions and he looked back, meeting her eyes again. “No? I just didn’t want to bite them! Come now, you’ve had decades to control it. You don’t need his compulsion to seal your jaws. You can just... not? We’re not *animals*.”

“But... it can’t be that simple. The taste... it was so... divine...”

“Yes, it can! If anything it was easier after... oh. I see what this is. How could I have forgotten. You believe *Cazador*’s crap.”

“Not just that, tonight, I wanted to—”

“That’s fine, I believed him too. How could we *not*?” He rolled his eyes and ticked off on his fingers as he listed the falsehoods. “Turns out he didn’t have agents all the way up and down the Sword Coast, stakes are not nearly as common as you think, not every person will instantly try to kill you the moment they know you’re a vampire spawn, without his precious rules you do not instantly turn into a blood thirsty killer, uh... gods, I don’t know. Everything. Just assume everything horrible he said to keep us in check and miserable and afraid of ourselves was a fucking lie!”

“... really?”

Astarion groaned and stood up, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Dalyria. Listen to me. The only time I was really all *that* close to losing control was the first time I bit a thinking creature. It was just. A lot. I would be aware of the meals milling about me, but that was all. Yees, the longer I went without feeding the more *very aware* I was... but. You just. Don’t. Nothing takes you over. You are the one in control. Just stay fed enough and it’s fine. Animal blood still works for that. It’s a bit muck, is all.”

“It was just... you?”

He flung his hands up again, “Yes! I am done talking about this.” He looked past her at his bed, “I do have some clothes you can have, thinking about it.”

“Were you ever going to join us in the Underdark? To even see how we were doing? Would I have ever seen you again if not for today’s luck?”

He was going through the pockets of a red and gold shirt, “I mean I’m sure if I was starved for months like the bastard loved to do to me then—”

“Astarion, would I have?”

He opened his mouth. Shut it.

Astarion looked away from her. “No.”

He turned to meet her eyes and repeated, “No.”

“I thought you would come save us again! I was the only one. I believed in you! That’s why I thought you were dead! Because you abandoned us... you abandoned *me!*”

Astarion was stunned into silence with that.

“Everyone else said you’d abandon us to our fates... but I believed in you...”

“You... you did?”

She nodded at him vigorously, starting to tear up, “Yes!”

He was silent again for a moment, before quietly asking, “Why?”

“Brother, he’s gone, you don’t have to pretend we had no bond at all anymore! Not to protect me from him. You would be sweet with me when we were away... out from his eyes. Just the two of us.”

Astarion frowned and wrinkled his nose at her with a groan. “You call me ‘brother’ while alluding to when we were... *entertaining* various deranged patriars as a *matched set*?”

He leaned closer to her and quietly said, “*Sister* dear, I may have been there more than twice as long as you, but I think your concept of *family activities* needs to be re-calibrated.”

When she started to reply he draped the open shirt on top of her head.

Astarion laughed, watching her free herself, and continued on, “As if anyone, other than you — *I suppose* — would truly want me there. Even with Cazador keeping us all pitted against each other, really, it was the six of you, and then me. The *favorite*.”

“... is *that* why you didn’t ever plan to *help us?! You could still help us!*”

“So, you don’t want that shirt then? Even after all you were on about clo—”

Dalyria bared her teeth at him, “Why not just kill us all if you were going to abandon us?!”

He drew himself up to his full, not that impressive but still taller than her, height and glared down at her. “Right now? I have no idea. If you want to shepherd the *more* miserable wretches back into their cells and then have the lot of you assemble into a hovering torment circle again, I’ll set about correcting my *grave* error.”

“This is not the time for jokes.”

Astarion grinned coldly at her. “Darling, who is joking? Come now, let’s send a missive to Mephistopheles and discover if the offer is still on the devilish table, mm?”

“*Brother!*”

“Not your brother, Dal. Oh wait... wait... riiiiiiight. Silly me, we’d need a seventh. Ah well, call the whole thing off again, I suppose.”

“Please, answer me seriously... why did you save any of us?!”

“Dalyria, I don’t *know*! I didn’t have a grand plan. It was all so much. Learning they were alive... or close enough. And everyone looked at *me* to make the decision! My companions were all so determined to ask me what I *wanted*. Fools.”

“You did make it. You had the staff! I saw you...”

“Yes! And I let them go. I decided it was better than rotting in a cell. So what if they died? At least they’d die someplace else. Give them a chance. I thought, if *I* could make it... have these people treating me like a person... anyone could. Probably.”

“You weren’t alone!”

Astarion rolled his eyes and scoffed, “If it bothers you so much then you just can ditch them all too. Live for yourself. What do we owe them? Nothing. It wasn’t my idea to stack up vampire spawn to the godsdamn ceiling...”

“You... you always were so selfish. I don’t know why I ever tried to defend you, brother!”

“I don’t know why either! So. There we go! Agreement! You can go back there and tell everyone I’m a vile, arrogant, narcissistic, self-centered, egotistical, selfish, weak, worthless wretch and you can forget me and *all* seven of us will be happier!”

Dalyria stared at him. She was doing a lot of that.

“I have nothing to offer you and you have nothing to offer me. So. That’s that. Have a nice unlife.”

“Is that why you’re alone now? Did you get what you wanted from them? Was that Astarion I saw just you performing again, to lure them back? Just to kill Cazador instead of offering them up?”

Astarion glared at her.

“You looked so happy. I almost couldn’t recognize you. Clinging to that fire-tiefling, even sitting in her lap! I saw you act that way so many times for guests. Nobles we... we... entertained. I know all your routines! But how you moved, the look on your face, it felt so real. It was like you really wanted to be with her.”

He looked away from her, biting his lip where she cannot see.

“... that was an Astarion I didn't know existed. I didn't know he could exist... maybe he didn't. Did you abandon her too, after she no longer had anything to offer you?”

In a flash Astarion was looming over her. “Get the fuck out.”

Dalyria dropped the shirt she was holding and stared up at him, jutting her chin out defiantly.

He lunged forwards, hissing at her.

She stumbled backwards as she raised her arms to defend herself, tripping over her own feet. She fell against the side of his bed before slumping to the floor, curling up into the fetal position.

Astarion snarled at her then took a deep breath, closing his eyes. He sat down heavily in his chair, spreading the stack of vampire texts out and reading their titles. “How do you revoke an invitation? Are *any* of you any *fucking* use to me...”

He selected *Vampiric Physiology: A Medical Perspective* and began flipping through it, doing his best to ignore the shivering spawn on his floor.

It took the better part of half an hour, but eventually Dalyria was back on her feet.

“Thank you for the blood,” she said, as she raised a trembling arm to point behind him. “But. Um...”

Astarion raised an eyebrow at her, then turned. It was obvious even with the mostly drawn curtains; the sun had fully risen, the pale light of dawn long past.

Godsdamnit.

“Guess you’re stuck in my cage for the day.” He paused then said, “Don’t say anything like that again.”

Dalyria nodded. She then just kept standing there. Eyes straight ahead, back straight, legs together, arms at her side. Just like all the spawn would do after Cazador verbally abused them, but they had not been commanded to leave yet.

Astarion read at more of the book, not realizing what he had triggered in her at first. When he finally looked up, he frowned, slamming it shut. When that didn't work, he tried to desperately think of another tactic to reset her.

“Sooooo... how’s Aurelia?”

That worked. Dalyria relaxed, rubbing her arms and leaning against the foot of his bed. “After we first got there, she shut down, for days upon days. Then when she came back, when we could finally get her to feed again, she... it was like she forgot. She’s acting like he still alive. That we’re runaways, hiding from him. She won’t listen...”

Astarion said, “Lovely.” Then distracted himself by organizing items on his desk.

“How long was she there, before you?”

“Decades. At least two. Maybe three. She had to have been his very first...”

Dalyria pushed away from the bed and started to walk around the room again, taking it all in. Bed, desk, combination bookcase and wardrobe. It seemed just like any normal person’s dwelling. If she ignored certain aspects. “You’re doing well here.”

“Piss off,” he spat out, but there was humor in his retort, not malice.

Dalyria got the message and smiled a bit, walking past him to inspect the few items on the bookshelves, very aware that his eyes snapped to her when she started to reach out to his possessions. She picked up a small wooden trophy and was so confused by the inscription on it, she read it out loud, “Best at voices?”

Astarion practically leapt out of his chair to race over and snatch the wooden carving out of her hands, carefully putting it back right where it came from. “Don’t touch that.”

She shrunk back from him once more, raising her arms again to shield her face, trembling even harder than before.

He sighed, taking a step away from her as he strongly considered flinging himself off the balcony into the morning light.

Astarion couldn't look at her as he talked, instead running his fingers over various items on the shelf. The trophy, a scrap of leather, a couple of story books, and some small metal rings. "She died. The... tiefling woman on fire, as you put it. Her name was Karlach. And she died. Not like us. Died proper. Better at it than we are... managed to make it stick."

She gasped and covered her mouth. "Oh." She started to reach out towards him with her other hand.

He batted her hand away with a hiss and then snarled, "I don't need your pity or comfort or *anything* just don't touch her things!" He stomped a foot to emphasize his point.

"What is that?! Why are you acting like that? You're so well fed! I can feel it. You're better fed than any of us have ever been! Why are you growling, hissing, and snarling at me like a feral starved spawn?"

Astarion hesitated just a moment before spitting back, "Because you're pissing me off, I guess!" he hissed at her again for emphasis then stepped away, reiterating, "Don't touch anything on that shelf. I have more books... you can touch the books."

Dalyria looked at Astarion, really looked, taking a step forward as she looked him up and down.

He exasperatedly thrust his arms out to the side, "*What?!*"

"I want to examine you."

Astarion's tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

"I've been playing at being a doctor again. For spawn. Examining differences between us. Trying to understand this condition. It's another thing I wanted to talk to you about, one reason I followed you here..."

He started laughing "Ah, you need some data from the runt huh?"

Dalyria didn't take the bait. "Our fight, with those fishpeople, it confirmed for me. You're so well fed but still not as strong as you should be. As strong as I am. I always thought you were just... That it was because he specifically starved *you* more..."

Astarion sighed. "... me too. We were both wrong. *Surprise!* Fine. What do you need?"

"I have some equipment, in the Underdar—"

He wagged a finger her face and said in singsong voice, "No, no, no!"

She stared at his finger, pondered for a moment then conceded. "I can arrange for it to be transported to the city."

Astarion nodded at her. "Better. Fine, I'll agree to that. Sooooo, if you're down there trying to answer questions. Have you determined how *his* secret spawn were even able to be aware? Let alone walk and talk... Some of them were there almost as long as I was! Starved the whole time... it just doesn't make sense!"

“There was something special about the cages. They released just enough necromantic energy to keep them in some form of stasis. Some people we brought him, they weren't turned to spawn. He used their blood to power the cells.”

He ran a hand down his face. “Great. Lovely. Fantastic. I decided I was happier not knowing.”

“Astarion, do you still remember almost nothing from your before?”

“No. Nothing more than the last time you asked. I've tried since his death. Gone to ... likely places. Nothing.” He shrugged. “Oh well...”

Dalyria frowned and opened her mouth, but before she could say anything he growled and pointed at her. “No! I said no pity. *Not* from you. I've forced myself to accept it from others. But I don't have to take it from somebody who was also in that unending hell.”

“The other spawn, from the cages, all remember at least a bit.”

“Thanks. I really *needed* to know that.” He paused and then offered himself up for more punishment. “Let me guess, they're all as strong as they're supposed to be. *Mm?*”

Dalyria hesitated for long enough that she didn't even need to answer.

Astarion laughed and flung his hands up in the air. “*Fan-tastic!* Not just the runt of seven, the runt amongst thousands! No wonder you want to examine me, I'm a prize.”

“Do you have any idea why—”

“*No.* ... I bet *Cazador* did. He was fucking obsessed with *me*, Dal. Maybe he did this to me on purpose. ... probably did. It would be his fucking sense of humor to not even *tell* me and just *enjoy* watching the results.”

“I found his journal. Mas—Caza—... his writings haven't given me any answers. Just more questions so far... the little I've been able to stomach reading.”

“Tell me about it. I found his journal too. I was going to say more but. No. ... find the skull?”

“Yes... the skull of our grand-sire.”

“That's a horrid phrase never say it again.”

Dalyria laughed softly as she nodded.

Astarion stifled a yawn, “That's enough of that. You can tell me more about how horribly weak I am in the evening. Since you were not impressed by my glorious bathroom with hot water on demand, I get to be a most impolite host and make you wait.”

She looked like she was about to ask something else, but stayed silent. She raised her eyebrows when he dropped to the ground and scuttled halfway under the bed. Astarion quickly emerged, adding his other vampire books to the pile of the ones he acquired tonight.

He motioned at them, waving his hands, “Behold! Better reading than *Cazador's* insane drivel. My library of vampire literature.”

Dalyria read the titles for the first time and then laughed. “Astarion!”

“Yes, yes, laugh it up. I’ve been studying us too. Great minds, hrm? I must have been good at this sort of thing once, right? I *really* was a magistrate, you know...”

“I know.” She sat in his chair and started looking at the tomes, picking one up, her eyes wide. “You have... wow, Astarion these are... Some of these are very rare. I’m impressed.”

He preened a bit at the praise. “Nothing but the best! You’ll get more use out of them than me. They’re very rude books, you should know. The ones I’ve had the time to peruse. Obviously not meant to be read by spawn. We’re not *people*, after all.”

She nodded as she kept looking at the titles and authors, “No one would expect a vampire spawn to read them.”

“Somebody has to try to understand us more. I am starting to think nobody really has... make your mark, Dal. But don’t forget to give *me* credit too!”

“What true vampire would care? And what spawn would be allowed to study? No one to care for lost spawn...”

“We’re free, not lost,” he clipped out firmly. Then he tapped one of the older books and smirked at her, “I’ve managed to learn *some* things on my own. I had some clue before you showed up to insult me that I am rather... *unique!*”

“Astarion, please. Just tell me what you mean.”

“I sleep everyday. Even fed! I get tired just like a mortal if I don’t. I bet you are resting just every other day, mm?”

“Yes. I rested yesterday... .. wait. *Everyday?* For how long?”

He grinned at her, “Oh, all day, if I can manage it! Nightmares, you know, my dear. Daymares? Hrm. In any case, I was wondering who was right, me or the books! Turns out, they win, I lose.”

She scribbled something down in her notebook, then blinked and snapped her head back to him. “Have you tried to see if trancing keeps you rested for longer?”

He rolled his eyes, “Never made a difference before. I tranced plenty when we were surrounded by horrible beasties trying to eat us, was well fed then too, still needed to rest everyday.”

“Maybe you should try it again... just to be sure.”

“Not interested.”

“You were so many decades away from a century when...”

“I’ve been around longer than you. Shut up. It doesn’t matter. Not getting into this with you. *Again.*”

“Barely any more time! Not even a decade! Additionally, I was much older than you were when I was turned.”

“Yes, you love to remind me of that. I’m a bad sleepy elf, thank you, I am aware. Don’t say it too loud or they’ll come and relieve me of my pointy ears.” He smiled and playfully flicked her nose.

She rubbed her nose and said, “Trancing or sleeping, either way, it is concerning you have to rest that much when you are fed.”

“Guess I’m a bad vampire too. *Shhh*, don’t tell. They’ll come take my fangs! Strip me of all my points! Then where would I be?” He frowned exaggeratedly at her.

“Astarion! This might be serious...”

“*They* are serious! Very much so! *They* took the claws I’m supposed to have centuries ago!” he held out his hand for her to inspect and explains, “Bloody useless things still break off very easily, so I just keep them trimmed.”

Dalyria gently took his hand and examined his trimmed nails, noting the thickness and comparing them to her own claws, “I’m worried there’s something actually wrong with you. What if it gets worse? Now that we’re free, that he’s... gone.”

“Of *course* there’s something wrong with me! With you too! Who could go through what we did without ending up *wrong*.” He leaned over her and grinned. “Siiiiiiister, deaaaaar, haven’t you wondered why I have so much bedding on the floor.”

She shrunk back slightly but kept his gaze, “No.”

His grin vanished and he stepped away from her. “... right. Bath. Read the books if you want.” He gathered up some clothing and left.

He peeked back in. “If you touch anything besides the books I’ll murder you.”

Dalyria sat there very still, waiting. When she was sure he was really gone to bathe she sniffled and wiped her eyes, taking a few minutes to herself to try to decompress.

She started looking through the books, being very careful not to touch anything else on his desk. At one point she knocked over a spool of thread onto the floor and gasped, staring at it for several minutes before putting it back on his desk with a trembling hand, hoping she recalled correctly where it had fallen from.

Almost two hours later Astarion finally returned. He’s not bothered to style his hair, a curly mess of bangs hanging over his eyes and a sleepy smile on his face. He swapped to a loose undershirt and silk pajama pants. “Daaaaalyriiiiiiaaaa, you *have* to use the bath. It’s *heavenly*...”

She nodded a greeting at him, eyes darting over to the spool of thread she knocked over earlier.

He stifled a yawn and peered over at the desk. “Mm? You were busy... look at all those marks on paper you made.”

Dalyria had time enough to take copious notes and sort the books into three piles. She looks up at him and taps on each pile in turn as she explains, “These ones are useless. These ones are very useful. These ones are fine in parts. I’d like to take the good ones with me. I want time to delve into their contents in detail, beyond what I can write down.”

Astarion stared at her, pursing his lips as considered. “Fine. I suppose. If you want to properly document my uniqueness you have to come back anyway. No books no scan! Write down what you’re taking.”

She nods. “A tenday... I’ll contact you to let you know where.”

Astarion *mm*'ed and ambled past her to shut the curtain fully. "Sure. I might even remember you said that..."

She fell silent again, watching take Karlach's stuffed bear off the bed before he plopped down into the pile of pillows on the floor, tugging the blanket over him.

"Have fun not *trancing* and being bored trying to fill up all the daylight hours. Use the bath. You'll love it. Don't wake me up unless the building is on fucking fire. Even then, it better be a big fire."

"...is it really safe here?"

"Yes. Dalyria. We're safe here. No one will hurt you. They might show up and *annoy me*, but nobody is going to hurt you."

"...I ... are you sure they are not watching you? Keeping track? They won't be upset you didn't ask to let me—"

Astarion screamed into a pillow before sitting up to address her, "I don't have to ask permission like a child! They are not *watching* me waiting for me to *get in trouble*. Why do you keep circling back around to this?"

Dalyria stared at him as if he should know perfectly well.

He stared right back at her. He did not. Not anymore. If he wasn't so tired and thought back to the first few days of his freedom, he would.

"Come on, Dal. I was always the most... paranoid. I was *also* the most *correct* when *Cazador* was getting up to even more heinous activities. If we get staked you can say you told me so." He waved her off and flopped down again. "*Sleeping now!*"

He waited a moment, listening to see if she would object again. When nothing came, Astarion pulled the heated blanket up more, hiding himself from sight in full. Dalyria had seen enough of him over the decades.

Weakest of *all* the spawn? He chewed on Clive as he pondered this new information. Gods. Maybe he was the weakest vampire spawn... *ever*? If so, it was a very good thing he didn't know that *before* storming Cazador's palace. He never would have been able to resist if he had known... which would have been a bad thing. Everybody kept telling him so, after all.

He was filled with the same numbness he felt after the monster's death. All the *many* times that Cazador had laughed as he called him weak played in his mind. The bastard knew. Dead for *months* and Astarion was still discovering things that fucker had done to him. Taken from him. He hadn't been content to just take away Astarion's life, he took away what should have been his in undeath. The precious few benefits to the cold, dark, hungry existence of a vampire spawn.

Astarion was thankful he was numb. Dalyria must have been expecting him to throw a 'fit of temper' at these revolutions. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction. Well, at least this should get her off his back about helping them down there. Really, what *could* he offer them? Let them all forget about *the runt*. Petras and Leon could laugh about Astarion some more. It always had been one of their favorite pastimes during the day in the dormitory, they can keep up the tradition in the Underdark.

A very very *very* small part of Astarion thought it was a shame freedom had come when it did, and not a decade or so later. Petras most likely would have cracked and found his way out into the sun any

year now. Astarion had developed a sense for predicting that, with how many fellow spawn he saw escape via true death during his two centuries of torment. Leon could have stood a few more decades of slavery, see if he called Astarion a lick-spittle when he better understood the depths of Cazador's cruelty.

The numbness was turning into anger. So! Astarion decided to Stop Thinking About This and actually try to sleep. He hadn't been lying to Dalyria, he was *so* tired. His accidental nap in the bath had only made him more tired, if anything. Another part of his weakness, he knew now. He found he truly wasn't upset about this aspect.

He really did like sleeping.



After Astarion retired to his nest Dalyria continued to read for some time, having no issues seeing in the darkness. When she was completely sure her brother had fallen asleep, she made her way to the bathroom.

She firmly shut the door and started manipulating the faucets. Medical facilities serving the ruling nobles had running hot water decades before it became common in even the wealthiest of noble houses. Thus, she was way more familiar with indoor plumbing than most souls would be if they had been plucked from society and cast into darkness 70 years ago.

As she waited for the large tub to fill up, she looked over the great quantity of soaps and other bath products Astarion had tried to show her earlier. He had quite the collection. She smiled as she made her selections.

Dalyria was once physician general to the first parliament of Baldur's gate and a highly recognize medical researcher, with her own publications. Now, after decades of slavery, she was currently the leader by default of thousands of vampire spawn. She managed to refrain from weeping openly until she was rinsing off her hair.

After she dried and dressed, she cleaned up the bathroom. When she was done it looked even nicer than when she arrived. She started to head back, to read more, but was stopped when she accidentally stepped on a necklace that was just laying on the floor. She picked it up, inspecting it to make sure she had not broken it.

Dalyria looked around at the utter mess that was Astarion's front room. She carefully stepped over the other jewelry, coins, and assorted objects on the floor and started looking for the most likely container the trinket in her hand belonged in. She opened one and then another, inspecting their contents. She realized they could easily be combined, which would allow her to move some other objects to safer locations. Before she quite knew what she was doing, she was in the midst of completely organizing Astarion's treasure hoard.

I had an apartment once where the bathroom was bigger than the bedroom. They say write what you know.

Cat bonding! Shopping! Looting! Spawn sleep over!!

This became a lot of words!! Originally in my drafts this chapter KEPT GOING even but I cut it off here for some sanity.

Spawn time! Spawn time!

I think I have consumed every bit of text on the entire Internet about the other house spawns and have determined how old they all are and stuff for this ficverse. Sorry Astarion, you'll get to see all your not-siblings.

Next time: Do you remember Wyll told Astarion he'd come back to see him in two days? Astarion might not recall, but Wyll is a man who keeps his word!

Lemme know what you think~ I think more of the plot can be seen now. Maybe??

I'm always down to chat about my ideas or just bg3 in general! Hit me up in comments, discord, or tumblr~

Chapter 4: Old Traumas, New Powers

Chapter Summary

Two vampire spawn take turns flipping out and also there's a Wyll

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He was in trouble. He had been a naughty boy. Again. Cazador was dragging him by his hair down a seemingly endless hallway, moving so fast Astarion could not hope to get his feet back underneath him in order to regain even the pretense of control over his fate. Streaks of blood marked the path previously trodden; he had already been punished, but there would be so much more to come.

“Master, no please, Master, I’m sorry! Master, I can be a good boy, Master, please!” he whimpered. A horrible loop of futile pleading as he thrashed in vain. His master kept an iron grip on his forelocks despite his best efforts. Astarion was too weak, far too weak, he might as well have been a real child for all that his efforts amounted to. He clawed at the floor, the only result his nails breaking off, causing him to whimper out wordlessly now, as he was pulled and pulled, all by his hair, deeper into the darkness.

A voice he couldn’t identify came from nowhere and everywhere all at once, “Astarion, you’re dreaming! It’s not real.” Everything else suddenly stopped; the pressure on his hair vanished and Cazador dissolved into nothingness. He was dimly aware of a presence near him.

That didn't make any sense. His dream brain knew this was in no way a dream, but maybe this confused person would rescue him anyway. He groped out blindly towards the presence, wrapping his arms around it and drifting away into full unconsciousness once more.

Thus, when Astarion woke up fully, he was embracing a fully clothed Dalylria in his blanket nest.

He wordlessly yelled and pushed her away, scuttling quickly back himself, yelping out when he smashed his head into the edge of his bed frame.

Dalylria firmly said, “*You* grabbed *me* and would *not* let me go!” as she got to her feet, crossing her arms and glaring down at Astarion.

Astarion groaned and slumped into his pillows again, rubbing the back of his head. “What are you talking about?! Why would I do that?”

“You were talking in your *sleep*. Saying horrible things. I tried to wake you up and you grabbed me!”

“Oh.” He can recall the barest hint of the nightmare, and does not feel like spending one gnat fart of energy on recalling additional details. “Thank you. It was *not* pleasant. But still, you are stronger than me, how could you have forgotten? You could have easily extracted yourself.”

“You fell asleep again quickly... you looked so peaceful. I didn’t want to wake you...”

“Ah. Well.” He coughed. “For future reference. Would greatly prefer to be woken up in this particular set of circumstances. If there somehow is a next time. Which I have no idea how there could be...”

“This is one reason *trancing* is better.”

Astarion grunted and threw a pillow at her. “I am rather *very* awake now.” He thought about apologizing to her. He wasn’t going to actually apologize to her, but thinking about it had to earn him some points, yes?

“The sun set some time ago. You were out for hours.”

“Finally, some good news!”

Dalyria looked worried and asked, “... it was about him, wasn’t it? Your dream.”

“Of course it fucking was. He’s dead, but the scars remain.” He tugged his undershirt off and flung it into the washing-up pile, very aware his back was facing her as he selected tonight’s shirt. “Literally. You’re a doctor, Dal, any idea how to get these things off our backs?”

“It’s not been my top priority.”

“Well, fine, understandable. But do put it on your list, dear.” He chose a light blue ensemble. He knew it did not really do his skin tone much favors in the ‘looking less like a walking corpse’ department, but Karlach had liked it so the rest of the world could eat shit.

Dalyria laughed, “I’ll see what I can do. I think I know the first step in figuring it out...”

“So. Did you have fun not sleeping, oh excuse me, not *trancing* all day? Before I trapped you, I suppose.”

She flung the pillow back at him, “Your bathroom is nice. I read more of the books... they were... interesting. I focused on the less useful ones, to leave them here.”

“Is interesting code for discovering more things to insult me about?”

“Can I have your claw clippings?”

“Weirdo. Sure. That’s not odd or anything.”

“How often do you clip them?”

Astarion tried to recall, battling against his horrible sense of time, “Twice or so a tenday, perhaps.”

“Toenails too? All the digits impacted equally?”

“... can we not? Can we, just, not? Please.”

“Very well.” She looks over her notebook, musing, “The books were helpful, in a way. Most are just gathered reports with no attempt at vetting them or cross correlating their authenticity, even when they have egregious discrepancies. That being said, it did introduce to me the idea, that I had never considered before, of variations in the vampiric curse, such as race and sire-specific traits and aspects.”

Astarion made a mental note to *never* let her meet Gale. He clapped his hands together and smiled brightly. “That’s nice!” He then motioned to the window, and said, much flatter, “The sun is gone. Get the books you want, make your list, and get the hells out.”

She handed him a list she already prepared and picked up her stack of three books. “Astarion, I’m glad we encountered each other at our... I’m glad we found each other yesterday.”

“Let me get you a bag, so you don’t damage *my* books.”

He stopped dead in his tracks, partially blocking the doorway between his bedroom and front-room.

Dalyria stopped next to him and offered up a shy smile. “You said to find something to fill up my tranceless night.”

The room was completely transformed. Gone were the scattered items littering the floor and haphazardly placed boxes. Instead Astarion was confronted with a very well-organized stack of crates and trunks, with carefully removed notebook papers attached to most, labeling their general contents. The broken storage containers had been fully dismantled and carefully placed in a corner near the door for easy disposal. She had even set up an empty crate as a makeshift table for his uncomfortable couch.

Astarion knew, on some level, this was a nice thing that she did for him. He should be grateful. This room was an utter mess and he had already broken some delicate objects by stepping on them. He knew it would have been days until he started cleaning it, as the mere notion filled him with shame. These thoughts, however, had no chance of making it to the surface, as they were drowned by the sudden torrential downpour of pure panic that flooded his mind.

He wasn’t safe. His things. His things were not safe. She touched his things. She moved his things. Did she take his things? Everyone always took his things.

He felt like he couldn’t get enough air, which was absolutely moronic, as he didn’t need *any*, so to show his body who was boss, he would just stop breathing entirely for now.

Anything he had could be taken from him at any moment, by anyone; Cazador, his siblings, even strangers on the street. They were all stronger than Astarion. He had nothing that was truly his, nothing at all, for so long.

His hands trembled, until he grit his teeth and forced the rest of the body to be as still as his dead lungs. However, he could not stop his eyes from watering as the fear played over his mind.

Did she take anything? She had all day to take whatever she wanted. How *much* did she take? Did she also take things from his other rooms? The more precious things?

He *finally* had things again and *Dalyria* was taking from him.

After he had *helped her* feed properly. *Sheltered her* from the sun. He had *trusted her* as he slept.

How dare she!

What did she take?

His vision started to dim at the edges as he clenched his fists. He was vaguely aware Dalyria had kept talking, but he had not processed any meaning from her words.

As she passed by him, his hand shot out, grabbing her upper arm tightly, his fingers digging into her flesh as he snarled, “Give it back!”

“Astarion!? Give what back?” Realization washed over her like a bucket of cold water and she stammered out, “oh-oh gods... no! Astarion, I just tidied up!”

“Turn out your pockets.”

“Let me go!” She easily wrenched her arm out of his grip and ran a few paces away before turning around to face him again.

“Turn out your pockets!”

Dalyria flipped her pants pockets inside out, showing she had nothing in them but her knife, notebook, and some pens. “See? I didn’t take anything. I wouldn’t, Astarion, I wouldn’t...”

Astarion ran his tongue over his teeth, his head tilted up a bit as he stared down at her. There were other places to hide things besides clothing pockets, he was very aware. He took a step forward, “I don’t believe you.”

She matched him step for step, retreating, still facing him. “Astarion, no. I didn’t. I know all these things are *yours*.”

He dashed towards her trying to grab her again, growling when she dodged.

She backed up farther, gulping when she thudded into the wall. She smiled up at him and said with forced cheerfulness, “Astarion! I... the bath was *so* nice, you were right! The hot water is *so* wonderful!”

He lunged at her, her words not soothing him one iota.

Out of sheer instinct Dalyria turned away from him and went right up the wall with no effort, as if she was a spider.

Astarion desperately stretched out and caught her ankle!

His moment of triumph was very brief, as his reward was being kicked right in the face. He yelped as she jerked her foot free and he fell down like a lanky sack of bricks.

Dalyria was not about to stop putting distance between herself and Astarion. She kept climbing higher and higher, pausing only when she reached the ceiling. She hesitantly reached out, testing to see if she could transverse that just as easily.

He growled again as he scrambled back to his feet, wrenching his jaw back into place, then tried to follow her up at the wall, with no success.

Dalyria marveled as she stuck to the ceiling with no effort, staring at her own clinging hands. She tensed up and haltingly shifted to a sitting position, relaxing when she did not fall. Her hair and clothing were still trying to obey gravity, even if the rest of her was not.

Astarion looked up at her, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed, snarling out, “Oh, decided not to tell me about this new little trick of yours, *hrm?*”

“I didn’t know! This is the first time I’ve done this!” She marveled at her hands, flexing her fingers.

“What?! Why are *you* getting more powers? Maybe...” He tried to scale the wall in the same manner she did once more, but his hands just slid off, rather than lifting him.

Dalyria ignored his attempts, busy considering the origin of this new ability.

Astarion grumbled as the only thing he gained for his efforts were some splinters. He kicked the wall out of frustration, hissing at nothing.

“The blood!” she gasped.

“What blood? ... did you steal my reserves too?”

“*No!* I didn’t steal *anything!* ... you have blood here?”

“No.”

She ignored his obvious lie and gathered up her hair, tucking it into her collar to better look down at him. “It’s because of the thinking-creature blood. It has to be! It awakened this in me.”

“But I’ve had *so much* thinking creature blood!” he whined. He kicked the wall once more, as if it was to blame for his problems.

“I think we both suspect the reason you cannot...”

Astarion blew air out of his nose before thrusting a finger up at her and shouting, “You are *not* allowed to sit on *my* ceiling if I can’t! *Get down!*”

“Not until you believe that I didn’t steal from you!”

“Sounds like what somebody who stole from me would say!” He shouted as he jumped, trying to grab any part of her. She flattened out and easily avoided his attempt.

“*I didn’t!* Please look at what I did, check for yourself. I just organized it for you, I was stepping on your things, I wanted to protect them for you! Pay you back for everything!”

Astarion stomped back to his bedroom, returning shortly with his stolen length of banister. A useful long tool he used to shut his curtains on days he has tarried too long on the task.

He grinned up at her, wiggling the stick in her direction for a moment, before swinging at her.

Dalyria gasped and scrambled about, very much like a spider, successfully avoiding his attempts. All he managed to do was put some scratches on his ceiling.

Astarion steadied himself and thrust the stick forwards, just ahead of where he thought she would scramble to next, but she avoided his attempt at the last moment.

Just as he was lining up to try to scrape her off from the side with a wide swipe, there was a knock at the door.

Both spawn frozen in place and their heads snapped towards the door, fear and confusion filling their guts.

Then Astarion remembered. He dragged a hand down his face and suppressed a groan.

He called out, “Just a moment!” forcing a cheery tone.

He shook the stick at Dalyria once more, frowning at her, before leaning it against the wall.

Dalyria scurried across the ceiling, shoving herself into a corner that would be hard to see from the doorway.

Astarion hurried to quickly make himself a *bit* more presentable. He rolled his sleeves back down all the way, straightened up his ruffled collar, and fixed the couple of buttons that had come undone. He tugged on a lock of his untamed curly bangs, going a bit cross eyed as he examined his hair, which was also was obeying gravity, free of all product, simply hanging over his forehead. He chewed on his lip for a moment, before deciding it was too late to do anything about that. He had been so discombobulated the previous morning, processing the night's events, that he had skipped some of his routine.

Mostly satisfied he did not *look* like somebody who was just trying to hit another person with a large stick and then... do whatever it was his plans were if he had managed to catch Dalyria, he went to open the door.

Oh. She had *also* installed his new lock for him. He sighed and steadied himself once more. He was doing so *well* at first, but now he's had two 'fits of temper', as the bastard loved to say, in the past few days. How wonderful.

But what if she did take something?

He felt as if he had gone rather mad and pushed that thought down and away, to be dealt with later.

Astarion opened the door to reveal Wyll standing there, patiently waiting, backlit by the hallway wall sconces. He was casually dressed with a decent sized parcel in his arms and a smile on his face. "Good evening!" Astarion motioned for his not technically surprise guest to enter. Once Wyll was inside he slammed the door shut, a bit harder than intended, wincing at the noise.

As there was almost no illumination in the room, Wyll's confident gait slowed to uncertain shuffles.

Astarion was confused for a moment at his friend's behavior and then flung his hands up with a groan, "Ugh! Too dark for you, *hrm?*"

Wyll laughed, "Just a bit, I must admit."

He put his hands on his hips as he lectured Wyll, "You invited *yourself* into a vampire's lair at *night* and didn't arrange some manner of dark-vision?" He *tsked* at him and shook his head before quickly scurrying off into his bedroom.

Astarion soon returned and began arranging some candles and prattling away, "Come now, missing that eye has given you the perfect opportunity to upgrade, darling. Toss that tired ugly gray rock out and procure something better than your, quite lacking, human baseline. If you don't want to do it for *yourself*, for some blasted reason, then do it for me, dear. You like doing that, don't you? Helping others? You harm yourself to help others, well improve yourself to make *my* life easier." He grinned as he lit the final candle and winked at Wyll. "A much better bargain, you'll find!"

"Your advice is most appreciated and duly noted."

Dalyria looked very intrigued by all of this, her eyes flicking back and forth between both men during the whole production.

Astarion coughed and pointed up. “Dalyria. Spawn.” He then pointed at Wyll, keeping eye contact with Dalyria. “Wyll. Not Spawn!” he paused and then added, “He’s safe.”

Wyll blinked in surprise and exclaimed, “Oh!” He recovered very quickly and nodded his head at Dalyria in greetings. “Hello! Nice to make your acquaintance again, under better circumstances.”

Dalyria slunk away to the farthest corner, her eyes wide as she hunkered down.

Astarion relocked the door and pointed at her. “No sneaking out!” He turned to Wyll and said, “Ignore her until she comes down off my ceiling.”

Wyll did not question any of this, and cheerfully said, “It looks great in here, Astarion!”

Astarion started laughing a bit manically.

At Wyll’s very confused look, he waved him off with a sigh. “Do not mention it. *Please.*”

“Astarion?” He now looked concerned as well as confused.

“Don’t worry, I’ve already gone quite mad once this evening. I have a policy of just one event per night. So, that is my quota fulfilled.” He crossed his arms and looked away, then peered back at Wyll out of the corner of his eye. “You invited yourself over. What do you want?”

“I must confess, I do not anticipate this will be a short visit, I have made sure to clear my schedule. I also come bearing house warming presents!”

“Right. Well, back in there.” He pointed at his bedroom door. “You can have the only chair.”

The pair started to move, and then Astarion stopped and glared up at Dalyria and firmly pointed at the doorway, not leaving until she spider climbed her way to where he could keep an eye on her.



Soon enough Astarion was rearranging his pillow nest to be configured more for sitting in, rather than laying on, making a large pile against the wall, and then spreading his blanket over the whole mess. Wyll sat in his chair, pondering how this evening was already not going according to his expectations. As if to emphasize the point, when he looked up he saw the second white haired elven vampire spawn in the room staring down at him.

He smiled and waved at her. “Hello!”

Dalyria narrowed her eyes at him and then pointed at the desk, “Red book.”

He tossed it up to her, she caught it and promptly scurried away to a corner to read.

Astarion evaluated his creation, nodding in approval after a moment. He stifled a yawn. Nothing like going briefly insane to make you want to just give up on the evening and go back to bed. As he could not do that, he instead treated himself by reactivating the warmth enchantment on his blanket. He sat down, leaning against his mound of pillows with his legs stretched out. This was not half bad, he

determined. What if he just got rid of everything else and filled this room entirely with pillows... no. The whole flat!

“So. You want something? I assume. Or did you arrange this little ‘check in’ to just make sure I wasn’t gnawing holes in the wall? I would have thought Shadowheart would have informed you I managed to make it through the rest of her visit without incident...”

“I have not crossed paths with her since that evening, in truth,” Wyll replied, somewhat awkwardly.

“Oh. My apologies, I rather envisioned the lot of you frolicking together in the sunlight, I suppose...”

“We are not in the habit of having gatherings without you, Astarion.”

Astarion scoffed, “I never truly thought you were!” he lied.

“This brings to mind! I would like to host regular social gatherings at my new residence for us all, so we do not lose connections with one another! I have a great number of rooms, many of which my father let lie quite fallow. Why, some of them have furniture that has been covered in sheets since I was a child! Great hide and seek locations, I do recall.”

“I *suppose* I could be convinced to attend some such scheduled activities, with proper incentive... after all, I know you’d all be dreadfully bored if my presence was lacking, darling,” he said after a moment, successfully fighting against his initial impulse to decline.

“My advisers are filling my evenings with so many social obligations, agreeing would be honestly doing me a great favor. It would be most welcome to have at least one evening a tenday where I can relax, instead of attempting to recall all the various minutia of the various participants alliances and positions on issues.”

“I trust we’ll be doing more than hide and seek... though, I would be the champion.”

Wyll casually broached the next subject on his mental agenda, “By the way... I was reviewing the overnight reports from the Flaming Fist, and an very inebriated elderly fisherman claimed to have a very exciting early morning, or well, late night, depending.”

Astarion equally as casually inspected his fingernails. “Hm?”

“He flagged down a patrol to turn in two sahuagin corpses for bounty, while he at first tried to claim he was the only one involved, soon his story transformed greatly! He admitted he was not the one who slayed them, rather he reported it was a pair of white haired elves.”

By complete coincidence the white haired elf not sitting on the ceiling started plotting an escape route.

Wyll, after waiting for a reply that would never come, continued, “White haired elves, who did quite a lot of biting, both before and after the altercation. Examination of the bodies confirmed they were exsanguinated.”

The window was probably a better choice than the door, Astarion finally decided. It was farther away but he didn’t have to pass Wyll if he ran for it. He was not completely sure why he was plotting an escape route, but it was good to have the security of a plan, in any case.

“How odd.”

Wyll let the matter drop, with a laugh and a shake of his head.

Astarion narrowed his eyes, preparing for the other shoe to drop, as that was too easy.

“I don’t suppose you know anything about another event, much earlier yesterday evening, a silver haired elf, *possibly* a vampire, attacked a bookseller?”

He looked offended and tilted his head to the side, raising one arm in exasperation. “What?! Come now, do I have white or silver hair? Can your little stories not be consistent?”

Wyll laughed, “So, did you?”

“No! I did no such thing! ... and I am telling the *truth!*”

“Your side of the tale?”

“There’s no tale to tell! I put in an order, he was unpleasant when I was picking it up, but I was a perfect gentleman, smiled at him the whole time.”

“Your order?”

He sighed and waved a lazy hand at the books on the desk behind Wyll. “I even paid for them! I won’t make *that* mistake again...”

Wyll examined the books with a chuckle, then turning his attention back to his vampire friend. “Sorry, Astarion, in truth I knew it had to be a lie the whole time. I was just curious as to what you would say. Trust me, I have full confidence that if you were trying to maim that man he would have been... well, beyond maimed.”

Astarion smugly smiled and relaxed again, putting his hands behind his head. “Before he even knew what was happening. Trust me, darling, there would be no report to worry your handsome little head about. ... why did he even bother to file one, what was he hoping to accomplish?”

“I tried to make you realize they had to be tracking you,” Dalyria said from above.

“Ugh, he is not! He is just reading the reports that come in... about vampires...” he trailed off.

“How is that not keeping track of you? Monitoring you. How is this not a ‘check in’? What would happen if you did something he didn’t like...”

Astarion sat up straight and looked at Wyll, frowning slightly and knitting his brow.

Wyll addressed Dalyria directly, mostly keeping the irritation out of his voice, “I am here to talk to my friend, not to scold him as if he was a pet. We are both navigating new lives. And I did tell him I would be keeping an eye out on reports to the various guards, in case I could assist.”

“Refresh my memory,” Astarion said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I’ve left explicit instructions to forward any report remotely related to suspected vampire activity to me, personally, before any action is taken.”

The confirmed vampire eyed Wyll, pursing his lips as he debated, then visibly relaxed again. “I believe you. Sooooo... is there still a bounty on vampire spawn?”

“For now.”

“I do somewhat remember you telling me about this now that I try to think on it. You rather framed it more as protecting me? Forgive me, darling, anything said to me the first few days after... the tadpoles left us... I was a mite distracted.” He swallowed and then hurried to add, “You really are a terrible monster hunter. Do you need a refresher on your job description?”

“Monster hunter?!” Dalyria scrambled away back to the other side of the room.

Astarion leaned back fully and said in a sing song voice, “Back to ignoring yooou until you get down off myyyy ceiling.”

Wyll smiles and said, “Retired monster hunter. It will be an easy task indeed to protect you considering your behavior to date.”

While it would have been much easier for everyone in the room if Astarion just nodded and smiled in response to Wyll, he found that, for some bloody reason, words started tumbling out of his mouth.

“Before you get any ridiculous thoughts lodged in your head that I have become some sort of positive force in this world? You should be aware. That fisherman you mentioned? I was there planning to feed on *him*. For some reason he is enamored with trying to drown his body at that location after drowning his sorrows at the pub. He just happened to have another pair of predators in his proximity on that particular predawn...”

“...you have?”

He laughed and grinned up at Wyll, “What, no report crossed your desk about this? I am normally better at covering my tracks, dear. That evening was... aberrant. You do not *have* to leave fang marks, you know. But still, nothing you need to worry about, I’m a catch and release vampire nowadays. ... mostly.”

Wyll squeaked out, “Mostly?”

Astarion smiled. “Mostly.” He waited for just a moment before elaborating. “I’ve managed to sink my fangs fully in a mugger or two. Fair game, my friend! Not surprised those reports did not cross your desk, I doubt the Fist has enough manpower currently to examine burnt corpses in the sewers.”

Wyll took a moment to examine his entire life up to this point.

He was no longer smiling as he dropped his voice an octave, “I do not need much ‘thinking creature’ blood. But I *will*, dear Wylliam, make sure I acquire it.”

“You can’t just kill people, Astarion, even if they try to mug you!”

“Excuse me? *Why not?! I am following established precedent!*”

“That was different. We were fighting to save the realm. You cannot kill people just for food!”

He flung his hands up in disgust, “Ugh! I’m not murdering people *just* for food, Wyll! I’m murdering them for *fun*. Wait, what are those words people use to pretend it’s not for fun...” He feigned having to search for the term, tapping his nose. “Ah yes, self-defense! I’m murdering them in self-defense. The food is a happy bonus!”

“You could defend yourself without overly harming any mugger who attacked you and we both know it.”

“You were going to praise me for those sahuagin, I could tell that was your plan.” He stage whispered, “They are thinking creatures too, I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Yes, but—”

He talked right over Wyll, back at normal volume, “Plenty tasty in their own right. Why is it bad to murder and feed from one of the unwashed masses that comes at me with a knife but praise worthy when I do the same with a fishman? You could even argue they were trying to defend their territories! Maybe? Maybe they are just mad? Maybe pickled half-orc is their greatest delicacy? Does it matter? I know I do not care.”

He looked uncomfortable at this torrent of words, “It’s—”

“Is it because there’s a bounty for sahuagin and not human ears? If so, I don’t care about that either. After all, there is a bounty on my lovely self, we have already established!”

Wyll did not even bother trying to reply, not only did he (correctly) predict Astarion would talk over him again, he was finding it difficult to think of a counter argument that stood up to any scrutiny.

“Also, I admit I am being even more of a... delight than typical for even me, but I am honestly confused and wish to know the answer. If you had journeyed with a sahuagin that had a tadpole lodged in his skull, would you now be setting up an aquarium? Lecturing someone *far* less attractive on how to be a proper person?”

Wyll waited a moment to see if Astarion was actually done talking and asked, “Are you going to let me talk long enough to sufficiently answer?” He found himself hoping that the answer would be no, as he was, in truth, not sure how to really go about sufficiently answering *this* line of questioning either.

Astarion just barreled on to his next point instead, which really, was an answer in and of itself. “What are you so upset about anyway? I told you I am not *killing* anyone that matters. Is next on your busy agenda a symposium on alternative diets for mosquitoes?”

Wyll pinched the bridge of his nose. “You are not a mosquito.”

“Mm? Pointy, drinks blood, dies if impaled by a wooden stake, makes annoying sounds...”

Astarion was suddenly *much* closer to Wyll, having lunged forward from his prone position, closing the gap between them in an instant. He buzzed right in his ear for a moment before the other man pushed him away. “Vampire spawn, mosquito, same difference. We just need a liiiiittle.”

Wyll did a fantastic job of pretending to be unamused by this little display. His only reply was to raise one eyebrow.

Unnoticed by either man, Dalyria had been watching them intently for some time. She looked very panicked when Astarion lunged forwards, then puzzled when nothing violent occurred. She silently crept a little closer.

“I have to eat!”

“Astarion, we both know you can subsist feeding on only animal blood.”

“We also both know *you* can make do with nothing but bread and water, but I don’t see you jumping with joy at that notion. These pointy ears are not *just* fashionable, I heard you all complain plenty about meals on our little journey!”

Wyll took a moment to reply and said, “I will not deny, I can see your point, your concerns and wants are valid. However—”

“If a Grand Duke of Baldur’s Gate subsisted only on meager prison rations, I *suppose* I could limit myself to beasts...” Astarion grinned, leaning into Wyll’s personal space bubble again, looming in from the side, his forehead butting against the curve of a horn.

He once again gathered his thoughts before responding, looking away from Astarion’s amused gaze. “Well... it would not be fair to you if I requested something of which I knew naught myself—”

Astarion erupted into peals of laughter, cutting him off once more. He pushed against Wyll’s shoulder, distancing himself again as he shook his head and said, his voice still full of amusement, “Oh, stop it, darling! No need to consider. I can assure you I would *not* hold up my part of any such bargain. You really are *so* eager to get into pacts with monsters.”

He tapped a finger against his lips as he looked thoughtfully down at him, “Does the notion get you going, my dear? You really should examine that, what with all the political power at your fingertips now. Don’t want to think with the wrong head and realize you’ve given oh, I don’t know, a mermaid exclusive harbor rights...”

Wyll put both hands over his face, pressing his fingertips against his eyes and groaned, “Astarion...”

“*I’m* a predator. *You* are my prey. But I am *attempting* to not cause undue strife or hardship. For myself mostly, of course.” He put one hand to his chest with a smile.

His smile quickly faded and his gaze shifted from Wyll to some point over his shoulder. “...and all those people out there who will not wonder why some fool they cared for just vanished into the night. Never to return again...”

He shrugged and flippantly added, “Unless their loved one was the type to come at me with a knife, then well, I think they will rather *know* instead of wonder.”

“Your efforts are appreciated,” Wyll said. His mind churned as he tried to think of some suggestion to counter with in order to avoid giving the impression of supporting Astarion snacking on random citizens. Nothing was coming to mind, and he was leaning more and more to admitting this whole matter needed to be sorted into his Later Problems pile. It was not something he could go to his advisers about, unfortunately.

“You should know. I am not being a spoiled connoisseur in my preferences. *Yeeees*, your blood is infinitely more palatable than that of beasts, but there is *more* to it than that. It is what I am *meant* to have.” He fiddled with a sleeve cuff, continuing a bit less confidently, “I... I don’t like how I feel when I have been off better blood for days. A fog descends upon me, it is as if my brain is wrapped in cotton. The state I now realize I was in for 200 years, at the best of times.”

Astarion straightened up again and firmly said, “I am not going back to that detestable existence. Do not ask me to willingly put those shackles on once more. It will not end well; for either of us.”

“I will not ask that of you. My apologies.” Wyll accepted he was not winning this debate tonight. Honestly, he no longer sure he even *wanted* to win. Astarion truly had made him reconsider his views.

Again. On occasion, he really could see the traces of a magistrate in the vampire. It was not difficult to imagine a living version of his friend, waving his arms around just as animatedly, explaining the intricate logic behind his latest ruling in court. Explaining it for some time, most likely. Really, he was better at articulating his point and the underlying support than some of Wyll's new advisers. A notion started to develop in the novice politician's mind.

Astarion blinked, put a bit off balance by Wyll's acquiescence. He recovered by prattling away further. "Cazador forbid us from drinking it for reasons beyond just cruelty. Not as if that wouldn't have been reason alone for the bastard, but he kept us weak and ignorant both. Hells, you most likely know rather more about vampire spawn than we do!"

He pointed to Dalyria and continued on exasperatedly, "Look what her first taste of proper blood has allowed her to do! Neither one of us knew this would occur, and we have over two and a half centuries of vampire spawn experience between us!"

Dalyria, who was directly above them again, addressed Wyll, "Do you know how weak Astarion is? He has something wrong with him." She paused and then added for clarification, "Physically. Magically?"

"Hey!" Astarion shouted, waving his hands back and forth. "Shut up! Why are you telling him?!"

She replied, "If he wants to protect you, then he should know. As your new—"

"Friend. I am his friend," Wyll quickly injected.

Astarion glared at his fellow spawn. He reflected on some of her earlier comments, then hissed at her too, for good measure.

Wyll puts a hand on Astarion's shoulder. "I was not going to be the first one to address the point, but I must admit I have been curious. I had assumed you were lacking the powers that I had seen in other vampire spawn due to our shared unwanted guests. However, it was obvious that you still lacked them even when you regained the standard weaknesses."

Astarion flicked Wyll's hand off his shoulder and rolled his eyes. "Fine. How could you tell, anyway?"

"I suspect if you could climb on walls with ease, I would not see you on the floor again for at least a tenday."

"My dear, I am not confirming or denying that assumption."

"His lack of any significant living memory is part of this condition too, I think. That is not typical. He's not even the oldest one of us, but he remembers the least."

Astarion groaned, "Dalyria, *please* stop!" He dramatically flopped back down onto his pillow pile, putting a hand to his forehead.

"We can talk about this later. If you wish," Wyll softly said.

"I don't." He rolled off the pillow pile to end up face down on the floor.

"Then we will not."

“Stop being nice to me, you’re going to give me hives...” he muttered into the floor, then slunk under his blanket again.

“Wyll?” said Dalyria. As he looked up at her, Astarion groaned again, confident nothing good would follow.

“Did you place a charm on him? To keep his bloodlust under control? Is it still on him?”

“That’s *it!* Get out!” only his hand emerged from under his blanket, pointing first at his windows then the door. “Pick one and get *out!*”

She did not move, waiting for a response. At the silence Astarion growled as he poked his head out. He asked Wyll, “So, Mr. Monster Hunter, how do you *uninvite* a vampire?”

“No. We did not. There was no enchantment on him.”

Astarion scrambled to his feet and threw a pillow at Dalyria. “I told you so!”

She moved to the side slightly, the pillow arcing back down the floor, its path uninterrupted. He started looking over his bed for something else to throw at her.

“I swear, brother, I did not take anything from you. If I come down are you going to attack me again?”

Astarion took a moment to quickly look around the room, eyes darting to his most precious objects. “No.”

She promptly scuttled back down to the floor.

Wyll whispered to Astarion, “Is everything alright?”

He grumbled, “I’ll tell you when she’s gone...” surprised that he meant it.

Dalyria nervously passed by Wyll and started once again gathering up books.

Astarion put on his best grin and clasped his hands together, “Wonderful! You can *leave!*” He made aggressive shooing motions and promptly shooed her right into the front room. “Now that you’re off my ceiling we can take *a minute* for better introductions.”

Wyll followed, hiding his quiet laughter behind a hand.

“This was not planned, just so you’re aware. We both just so happened to be looting the palace on the same night. She’s um, still down there. In the Underdark. With the other spawn, of course. And the uh... other-other spawn? Lots of other-other spawn...”

“Oh. Of course...” said Wyll, a bit ashamed. He had let them slip his mind, there were so many in need of aid in the city; refugees, evacuees, newly made orphans... the list felt endless.

Dalyria is silent, clutching the books tightly to her chest, standing near the door. If either man bothered to really look at her, they would see her jaw is clenched tightly.

“As I used to be a magistrate, she was a doctor. Pretty important one too, much more so than I was in my vocation. Feel honored, you’re in the presences of two of the bastard’s collection of former respected professionals.”

“...I see.” Wyll had questions, but felt it best not to ask them.

“Really, I suppose it’s more accurate to say she *is* as doctor. As she *bragged* about, she has the audacity to *remember* her mortal life!” Astarion scoffed and rolled his eyes. “You’re the leader, aren’t you? Down there?”

Dalyria twitched a bit when he addressed her.

“What? Don’t give me that, who else would it be? You’re the best choice, the rest are... the rest.” He grimaced as he evaluated the leadership potential of the other five spawn.

Astarion was jerked back to the present when the books Dalyria was carrying thudded to the floor, as she lost control and lunged at Wyll.

While he lacked strength, his speed was not diminished, if anything he was faster than most of his siblings. He grabbed her from behind managing to restrain her, at least momentarily.

If she was thinking straight, she would have instantly shrugged him off with no effort, but if she was thinking straight, she would not have been trying to attack someone in the first place, so instead she whipped around and turned her fury on him.

Astarion screamed as she bit his forearm several times in quick succession, “Dalyria! Stop for hells sake!!!”

She raked her claws across his face in reply, causing him to howl in pain.

He managed to somehow get a hold of both her wrists and snarled at her, “*Now* who is acting like a feral starved spawn, *hrm?*”

“Astarion, let her go!” Wyll shouted.

That sounded like the dumbest fucking idea possible to Astarion, but as he was not the one she was trying to eat, nor a grand duke, he ignored his instincts and released Dalyria.

She sped towards Wyll, teeth gnashing at the air.

Just before Dalyria would reach him, Wyll dodged to the side.

She sailed past him, into the bathroom, skittering across the tiles.

He slammed the door shut, almost instantly Dalyria was flinging herself violently against the door.

Wyll braced himself against the door and called out to Astarion, “What should we do?”

“How should I know!? You’re the bloody monster hunter! I’m the monster!”

“I don’t know how to temporarily deal with her, my methods were always more permanent!”

“When we lost control the bastard just let us rage out till it was over! Spawn heal, why would he care if we tried to eat each other! It would only stop if he commanded it or... oh! Oh, shit!” He quickly ran towards his hidden blood supply.

Between his hand shaking and the blood spilling down his face blocking his vision (he did take a moment to check and make sure he still had two eyes), it took Astarion multiple tries to punch in the

proper code on the wall in order to open his hidden cache.

He felt rather stupid. What was it that his first taste of *good* blood made him feel most strongly? That he wanted *more* of it. In some ways it made the hunger stronger than it had ever been. It was almost a full day since she had fed! She was most likely still running at a horrible deficit, barley eating more than Cazador had given his spawn. Still, though, the most that had Astarion had gone thorough after his first taste of a proper vampire's diet was finding himself very distracted when people were talking to him. He had not even come close to what was happening to her. He was not to blame for this. He wasn't!

He grabbed one of the blood bottles and raced back, arriving just as Dalyria burst through the door, sending it's shattered remains raining down over Astarion and Wyll both.

Astarion shoved the open bottle right in her face, she snatched it away and started messily drinking, blood running down her chin and down her front. She growled now and then as she fed.

"More! Bring more!" Wyll shouted.

"... more?"

"Yes!"

"... one more?"

"A few more!"

"But they're mine!"

"*Astarion!*"

"No! They're mine! I need them, I've been more than generous!"

"We can always get you more blood!"

He growled at Wyll, baring his fangs, "*Mine!*"

The now empty glass bottle clattered to the ground.

Dalyria stared up at the pair of them, her eyes unfocused. After a moment she groaned and started to raise her hands towards Wyll.

Wyll thought of the headlines in the paper. *Young Grand Duke Ravengard Slain in Vampire Spawn Attack!* No, that was silly, Astarion would never let that happen.

He would burn Wyll's body and pitch his corpse into the sewers. The headlines would instead read that he was missing.

Astarion made a very frustrated noise and dashed away.

Wyll resolved to, at the very least, find the nicest thank you card in all of Baldur's Gate.

Before Dalyria had time to do much more, Astarion was back, laden with four more bottles from his precious reserves, as much as he felt confident carrying while dashing around. He handed her one, narrowing his eyes at her as she gobbled it down just as greedily.

Wyll grabbed a bottle, he opened it and set it down for her, before she had even finished.

Astarion held the final two close to his chest, glaring at Wyll. “Rude. Do you lose all your manners when you get a fancy title?”

“Somewhat,” said Wyll, snatching the other two bottles out of Astarion’s clutches.

“Careful with those!” Astarion whined as his precious reserves were ripped from his arms.

Dalyria was already downing her next bottle, drinking a little slower.

Wyll whispered to Astarion, “She’ll be sated soon, I trust.” All he got in return was an exaggerated shrug.

She sat down this empty bottle, rather than just dropping it. She held out her hand and took the next from Wyll, backing away and then climbing up the wall like a spider again before she opened it and started drinking.

“Enjoying taunting me with that are you?” Astarion snapped out, glaring up at her.

Wyll wiped his forehead off and smiled up at her. “Glad you’re feeling better. Do not worry, no hard feelings. All is forgiven.”

“I’ll have hard feelings enough for both of us!” Astarion shook one arm at her as he whined, “Just *look* what she did to my sleeve! Do you have *any* idea how difficult it is to mend punctures like these?” She bit him at least half a dozen times, deep too, judging by how much of his own blood is now soaked into the fabric.

Wyll finally had a moment to realize the extent of the damage she did to Astarion in those few seconds. The slashes on his face had bleed heavily, coating not only his face some of his torso. He winced as he said, “You’re healing fine, I trust?”

He waved away his concern, “Oh yes, just fine. She only *almost* took out one of my eyes.” He pointed at her and shouted, “You were there the last time my eyes got poked out! Not something I think either of us want to go through again!”

Astarion snickered and addressed Wyll again, “Remind me to tell you about that at some point; one of the few times I suspect *Cazador* thought his cruelty might have gone a *bit* too far. I was quite a lot of trouble for a while, you see? Well, I didn’t! My eyes took their sweet time growing back.”

“Ah,” Wyll replied, most eloquently.

“Ugh, stop it! Stop leaving smudges! How am I going to clean up there if you touch it all with your grubby little hands! Get back *down here!*” He frowned and pointed at the floor. “Right *now!*”

Dalyria slunk back down to the floor, her shoulders hunched, she gathered up the dropped books, not able to bring herself to look at either of them.

Astarion rolled his eyes and stepped through his ruined bathroom door, shaking his head at the wreckage. When he returned, he threw a towel at Dalyria, “Clean yourself up, for gods’ sake!”

While Dalyria began doing just that Astarion started in on her, “Why did you do that!?”

Wyll tried to intervene. “Astarion, shh, let it go. If anyone should know why between the pair of us, it’s you.”

“*No!* I’m not shushing! I didn’t end up out of control fangs deep in anyone’s arm and I hadn’t eaten for over a tenday when we first met!”

Wyll put a hand over his mouth. “...really?”

“Yes really! That week I was a ‘bad boy’ and so no rat for me! But Cazador sent me out to go pick up dinner anyway! You *have* to be eating better than *that* in the Underdark! You ate yesterday! A full fishman! It was just a bit larger than a single rat.”

Dalyria whimpered, “I... my apologies.”

“Just let it go, Astarion. Here, you should have breakfast too. It’ll help those scratches on your face heal quicker.” He tried to hand the last blood bottle back to him.

Astarion crossed his arms and made a big show of *not* taking the bottle back. “She’s giving us all a bad reputation. Come on now, Dalyria, you’re not a young spawn anymore!”

He knew he was being overly cruel to her but didn’t care. She had honestly frightened him. Not for his own safety, but Wyll’s. If he had been grievously injured or worse it would cause Astarion *so* many problems. Such as transporting a corpse from his flat to the closest sewer access point. It felt like they were every three feet out there till you needed one! Also, fine, yes, he would be *sad*. Who wouldn’t be sad at the idea of a young man who just clawed his proper life back, after being toyed with by evil forces of great power, up and dying in a senseless attack by something as weak as a vampire spawn. Astarion did *not* need anything else to be miserable about. He had such a rich tapestry of things to be actively miserable about, he really did not have enough hours each night to devote to each properly. Some of his worries were assuredly being neglected and not getting their fair amount of fretting.

“Please, Astarion, stop it. She made a mistake. She is well aware of this. There is no need to continually berate her. I am sure she is feeling horrid enough already. Show a little compassion for someone who is struggling at something you are fortunate enough to not find difficult.”

He took a moment to just stare at Wyll, then dramatically rolled his eyes. He inspected his poor sleeve, not caring as much about the flesh beneath it. “Do I even have darning needles here? This is going to take *forever* to repair.”

Dalyria finally spoke up again, “I should go. I need to go.”

Wyll quickly said, “Before you depart, madam, oh! Excuse me, Doctor was it? I have a few questions about your current situation in the Underdark. The more practical matters, I am curious as to your current strategies dealing with some aspects of your situation.”

“Oh... I. Um. I can answer...” she was not sure at all why this man was interested in her plight, but she felt she owed him this at least, after her behavior.

Astarion groaned, this conversation was going to be very boring, he knew it. And uncomfortable. For him. But he is going to pretend it is the boredom that is most concerned about. “If I leave you two alone are you going to try to *eat him* again?!”

“No.”

“Great. I’ll get you some damn clothes, Dal. Wyll? Scream if she tries to eat you again. She’d better not, she’s full of *my* blood rations.”

With that Astarion took one of the empty trunks into his bedroom and started filling it with clothing he supposed he could possibly maybe part with, if they *really* needed it. He had half a mind to just dump his current *literally* bloody outfit in there, but refrained. He tuned out the conversation they were having in the other room, with some effort. He did not want to hear about the poor fools turned to spawn right now. Later wasn’t looking great either.

Ugh, there were cat hairs on his bed. Oh, excuse him. Tressym hairs. And feathers. Where is that damn flying cat anyway? Wasn’t she supposed to badger Astarion nonstop till he agreed to hear this important message? Maybe the wizard gave up on him. Astarion felt a surprising pang of sorrow at that notion. Well, it would be his own fault if so. How long could he really expect someone to chase him when he had said to leave him alone? Karlach had been *so* patient... he was a fool to even dream anyone else ever would treat him near as kindly as she had. Understand him so well. Put up with his myriad ... complications. He deeply wished he was just a bit less complicated. If other people felt it was tiring putting up with him, just imagine how it was from his perspective! At least they could take a break from the Astarion Experience.

Just as he figured that was all the clothing he was willing to give them, removing a couple of items from the chest as he thought better about giving them *that* much even, another explanation for the missing tressym occurred to him. He shut the trunk and casually speed-walked back, interrupting their discussion. “Dal, you didn’t eat the flying cat, did you?”

She looked away from him, and Astarion dramatically dropped the trunk on the ground, “For fucks sake!”

“I didn’t eat her! I just... frightened her off.”

“Ugh. Maybe you lot *should* just stay down there.”

“Wait, are we talking about Gale’s tressym?” asked Wyll.

There was another knock at his door.

Astarion wagged a finger at Wyll. “If you summoned the wizard I’m going to rile Dal back up and tell her she can eat both of you.” Then opened the door.

Standing there was Petras, probably the last of his pseudo-siblings Astarion would have ever chosen to see.

He slammed the door shut as hard as he could, shouting, “*No! I refuse! I will stake myself before I let him in here!*”

Dalyria said, “I felt him approaching. That’s one reason I was in a hurry to leave...”

Astarion groaned, “Godsdamnit, you told me you could track each other. Whhhhhhy did I let you stay here? I was barely okay with *you* knowing where I was staying, I didn’t want anyone else finding out!”

Dalyria opened the door again over Astarion’s objections. Petras said, very smugly, “Hello, *brother.*”

Astarion moved far away from the door. “I am not inviting him in. I know how it works! You won’t trick me! I do that to other people!”

Petras looked Wyll up and down, then cast his gaze back to Astarion. “So, well, well, well. It’s true! You’re not dead. Shackled up with a new master already? Earning your keep being as... entertaining as ever?”

Astarion wordlessly snarled at Petras from behind Wyll.

“Aww, what’s the matter? Not so brave now that you can’t drag me into the sun? Back down here in the shadows with the rest of us. No better than we are. Worse, from what I hear.” He paused and then grinned. “Runt.”

Astarion jabbed at finger at Dalyria. “*Stop telling people!* Especially when I can’t even hear you do it! Stop talking to each other in your heads!”

At first Wyll had thought the best route would be to just let the spawn work things out among themselves. He did not think this any longer. He spoke up, motioning at Petras, “Now, that seemed rather uncalled for. There’s no need for such words. Just, as I trust, there’s no need for me to summon my bodyguards from downstairs in the lobby?”

“Uh... no. No need for that,” Petras replied, much less confidently. He must have passed by the guards on his way up.

Dalyria packed the books inside the trunk of clothing, she tried to give Astarion a hug goodbye, but he deftly avoided her.

“No touching. You tried to eat my other guest and made me perceive Petras with multiple senses. No hug for you.”

Despite everything, she laughed. “I’ll be in touch soon, within the tenday. For the scans.”

“Whatever. *Go. Away.* Take him away. Get out of my hair, if you won’t stay out of my unlife.”

Wyll bowed at Dalyria as she departed, “It was a pleasure. Again, no grudge held, at least on my part. I wish you safe travels.”

Petras looked rather weirded out by this, Dalyria obviously filling him in via their mental link as the pair started down the stairs.

Wyll shut the door and securely locked it. By the time he turned around, Astarion had vanished into his bedroom.

“Astarion?” Wyll called out before following him.

Astarion had already made it to his balcony. He rested his elbows on the railing and held his head in his hands. “Well, that was horrible.”

Wyll joined him and said, “Spectacular view. Better, honestly, than the one from my own bed chambers.”

Much of the lower city was visible from the building’s perch on the wall, the streets were lit by a variety of street-lamps as well as various glows from windows, the latter diminishing steady as people ended their days.

“Rather nice for a bat in a cage, I agree,” the vampire replied, not looking at the other man, keeping his gaze on the city stretching out below. He partially was trying to spy Dalyria and Petras to confirm

they were *leaving*, but had no luck.

“I was surprised to see your curtains open when I was here in the day. I thought even the non-direct light hurt your eyes.”

“Oh, it does!” Astarion laughed as he waved a hand out at the drowsy city, winding down below. “Between dawn and dusk this is just all, well, a bright hazy glow, a *glorious* muddle of colors. It’s still sunlight, after all, and detests me once more.” Wyll winced.

“But I had rather forgotten what the sun was like at all, truly, so... it is not that bad. If I know anything, it is that things could be *much* worse, after all.”

“Astarion, I’m sorry, that was not the kindest question to pose to you.” He ignored the eye roll that comment received. “I do wish I knew a way to help you with that aspect.”

“You have bigger problems than one mopey vampire spawn, sad he can’t go in the sun,” he replied with a shrug.

“You are very correct on that account. Such as several thousand distressed vampire spawn in need of aid. Most, if not all, Baldurians, and thus, my responsibility.”

That statement finally earned him Astarion’s full attention. “You do realize you have horns and not a halo, *hm?*”

“Would you like to see the gifts I brought for you?”

“Do you think you can cheer me up with foolish baubles?”

Wyll looked a bit sheepish, “Well...”

“You would be correct, my friend! Let’s see if you procured proper tribute for your visit to my lair...” He paused and then added, “Also maybe I should *not* be standing out here covered in blood, now that I think on it.”

Chapter End Notes

In case you’re wondering how Petras got there so fast - he was in the palace too that night. Dalyria didn’t make the journey alone! She told him to stay where he was and not let Astarion know he was there; he was shadowing them a bit the whole time. Vampires is good at being sneaky, even if its other vampires they’re sneaking after. He just finally had enough and went to fetch her himself after enough time passed - I figure he spent the night in one of the empty flats on the ground floor. Don’t have to be invited if nobody lives there!

I had originally had a few lil sneaky hints they were being followed but I killed them bc I think 100% surprise Petras is funnier. Astarion really should have asked her if she was alone! She wouldn’t have lied to him if asked, but she was not going to volunteer it!!! Just because he’s the type of idiot to wander around places solo doesn’t mean everybody is.

Petras is so having a thinking creatures snack and climbing on the walls before the night is out, he’s done listening to her about that! At least Astarion will have a rock-solid alibi, can’t pin it on

him!

NEXT TIME!

Wyll and Astarion TALKIES? Do you like lots of talkies? I'm a huge slut for lots of talkies.

Chapter 5: Prattle, endless prattle!

Chapter Summary

Wyll and Astarion talk for 16k words because I have lost control of my life.

Job offers, promises of retribution, and revelations!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Astarion dumped his bloody clothing into his tub, soaking them in cold water. He hated it when *he* was the one that bled all over, it was so much easier to remove fresh living blood. He fixed his hair, snickering as he reflected that his hair had been most unkempt both times when he, justifiably, went just a wee bit violent in his flat. It must be the link, the only thing keeping his mind together was his impeccable style! He blinked as he seriously considered his facetious thought, then muttered, “Really, probably did not *help* matters.”

If Cazador laid eyes on him when he was not fully prim and proper, it would *not* be a good evening. Of course, any evening Cazador laid eyes on him was a bad evening, but everything would be even *worse* if he was unkempt. Perfection in all things at all times, after all. He growled at the bastard’s voice echoing in his head as he made sure his bangs were set in their proper place, tapping them a couple of times. He’ll defeat this particular demon some other time, it is simple enough to stay well groomed. He can lose his mind properly coiffed next time, like a civilized person.

Wyll stood on the couch in the living room, cleaning the bloody hand prints, knee prints, and other assorted part prints from the wall.

“You missed a spot to your left,” Astarion helpfully commented

Wyll chuckled as he corrected his egregious error, then climbed down. “That was fast, I thought I’d have time to mount this in here before you finished,” he said as he picked up one of his gifts; a fancy looking metal wall lamp, old magical tech, but becoming much more available outside arcane institutions recently; it did not need a candle, instead it would glow when charged gems were inserted and the connection was activated.

“I am very experienced and efficient at cleaning blood off any and all surfaces, myself or my luxurious apparel,” Astarion said with a smirk. “No matter, I don’t care about that particular bauble right now.”

“Are you sure? It won’t take long and is no trouble.”

“My dear, two vampire spawn have gone insane in this room today alone. I fear it is cursed. Hopefully only temporarily! But in any case, I would quite like to quit this space for the rest of the evening. Thus, now I shall.” With that he twirled through his bedroom doorway.

Wyll quickly followed. “Shall I arrange for the door repair? I’m sure I could find a contractor willing to do the installation at night. When would be good for you?”

Astarion was sitting on the foot of his bed cross legged. “Such an eager boy... What, do you think if you do not do arrange such tasks for me, I’m just going to let it remain in the current shattered state?”

“Yes,” Wyll replied with no hesitation, grinning broadly.

“You’re not supposed to agree with me! You’re supposed to become flustered. Stop it, no adapting to my barbs,” he squawked back.

“So, tomorrow night?”

“... I don’t *know!* Stop badgering me.” He crossed his arms and huffed as he looked away from Wyll and then blinked in surprised. “Oh. You *were* busy.”

The wall above his desk now held a fancy clock, in the same design as the wall lamp. It was activated; emitting a soft cool blueish light. The room was still fairly dim, but easily navigated by those without dark vision, no candles required.

“That’s not all, I have two more gifts for you.”

“If this is a bribe to get me to stop biting people, I’m telling you right now it’s not going to work.”

“Our discussion of that matter is tabled. For now.”

Astarion was placated and made eager grabby-hand motions at Wyll.

He held out a necklace with a roughly walnut-sized triangular gray stone pendant.

“A rock on a chain? ...what, am I to brain myself the next time I feel overly upset?” He stared at the item, not moving to take it, his hands frozen.

“It’s a sending stone, Astarion. Linked to my own ugly gray rock. If you need anything, you can immediately reach me.”

“Oh.” He took the necklace, inspecting the sending rock. “... you can use these to track people too, I *am* aware.”

“I’m not requesting you wear it. It is custom to put them on chains, so they are harder to lose. Mine is non-standard. You can leave it here, in your flat,” Wyll patiently answered.

Astarion muttered, “Thank you,” as he slipped the stone into a pocket. Dalyria really managed to crawl inside his head and give new power to some of his various worries.

“Don’t let her words bother you. I’m going to give Shadowheart one as well. This is not a scheme to secretly keep tabs on you, Astarion, I swear.”

Astarion growled out, “Stop that!” He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “That transparent, am I?”

“Only because I know you very well, at this point,” he diplomatically said.

“I’d best not see a special addendum to the vampire spawn section in the next bestiary, submitted by an anonymous contributor, revealing all my specific secrets.”

“Don’t worry, you still manage to surprise me plenty, Astarion. Such as right now! I am surprised to see you wearing that shirt again, and equally impressed you managed to remove all the stains it gained when Karlach dropped that stew on you.

“*Ugh!* It smelt of onions for too many washings... But I wouldn’t pitch it out for that. This shirt is like me, a survivor! Why, it is over a century old. Gone in and out of fashion at least twice now, it’s time is coming once more, I can feel it on the winds of high couture!”

“A garment a century old? I’m impressed!” He chuckled, “Everything that is mine is far younger, nothing older than five years, assuredly.”

“What, nothing?” Astarion was most aghast.

“My father could not afford to allow me time to collect anything when he was forced to exile me from the city. The clothing on my back was quickly outgrown, I was but a boy of 17, after all.”

“Yes, yes, and now you’re an aged man of 24.” Astarion paused, then leaned forwards, resting an elbow on one of his pointy knees. “Wyll, darling, correct me if I’m wrong... but aren’t parents supposed to at least pretend to love their children?”

“He had his responsibilities to the city. His duty. He did what he thought was right, personal matters such as love could not be allowed to enter into the situation.”

Astarion looked at Wyll for a moment before clucking his tongue, then saying, “In any case, I highly recommend tightening your grip on what is yours, now that you can. You will discover objects can be very precious indeed... though I do also suggest trying to keep your head on straight if someone commits the horrible crime of tidying up your possessions.” He sat up again, dragging his hand down his face with a groan.

“I detect a tale you might wish to tell?”

He sighed, most dramatically. “You asked what happened before you arrived to cause an... altercation. Dal cleaned up my front room.”

Wyll was obviously waiting for more than that and looked very confused when Astarion paused.

He grinned broadly wagging a finger at the much younger man. “Ah! You don’t know me as well as you think you do! You see, that was enough for me to lose my damn mind. I was fully convinced she had spent most of the evening stealing from me, naturally. I proceeded to chase her until she ran up my blasted wall and onto my bloody ceiling. When you arrived? I was trying to knock her off with my curtain prodding stick.” He tilted his head to the side, waiting, a genuine smile on his face as he gauged the other man’s reaction.

“I see...” he said, not seeing any of the thought process in what Astarion had just related.

“You asked about this shirt? Perhaps curious why I even had a change on clothes on me? Why, the same reason I had any sewing supplies! You see, if I left anything behind it would most likely *not* be there upon my return. I had *nothing* beyond what I could continually protect. And even that could be taken from me oh so easily! It’s not as if there’s a competition for which of Cazador’s spawn had it worse...” He paused and inspected his fingernails. “But if there was one, I would win.”

“Ah...”

Astarion changed the subject, if that hadn't been enough for Wyll to understand, he was beyond all hope. "Speaking of the other spawn... I must confess, I am still baffled why she attacked you. I was not lying. I was *starving* when we first met. I didn't mindlessly attack anyone! I haven't lost control since I've been free!" Visions of chasing Dalyria and lunging at Gale flashed through his mind. He corrected his statement, "I have not lost control and tried to bite anybody."

He paused once more, looked off to the side, revising his statement a final time, "I have not lost control and tried to bite anybody *because* I was hungry. I've just lost my mind because I was asked a question or someone tidied up my flat as a surprise. You know, like a normal person!"

"I'm afraid I can give you no firm answer, but I can say you have a very strong sense of self and willpower." Wyll paused and shook his head with a soft smile, "When you want to, at least. Different people have different strengths."

"Maybe Dal was more on the mark than she thought. Not a charm spell from any of you, but the blasted tadpole. Perhaps it kept me on a tight leash... now I'm at just as much of a risk as the rest if I miss too many meals." He flopped over onto his side once more, fiddling with a random book on his bed.

"Astarion, I don't think that is something any of us have to fear with you."

"*Hm*. You are probably right. I do not *feel* as if it is any harder to keep control..." he trailed off, then dramatically groaned as he purposely rolled off his bed and thudded into the pillow pile on the floor. "It is just disconcerting, I suppose, realizing there's some truth in one of the bastard's controlling lies..."

"Just something to keep in mind if we encounter any of your—"

"Other spawn," he firmly corrected, sitting up and fixing his gaze on Wyll.

"Any other spawn."

"At least she didn't get her teeth in you. I'd probably have to fill out some *paperwork*. That's what happens if somebody important gets mauled in your flat, right?"

"Ah, I am not that easily felled. It would not be my first, second, or well... maybe even my tenth time being bitten by a vampire spawn." He tapped the scars on his arm, giving Astarion a knowing smile.

Astarion did not reply for a moment, looking at Wyll out of the corners of his eyes before giving up, flatly stating, "You fucking know don't you."

Wyll laughed as he answered, "That you bit me while I was asleep? Several times? Yes. The last time was the day before we moved to the shadowed lands, if my observations were accurate."

Astarion shouted wordlessly in fake rage and flung a pillow right at his head. The fancy lace pillowcase managed to get stuck on Wyll's horns, much to Astarion's great delight.

While Wyll focused on extracting himself without damaging anything, Astarion kept talking, "Really, I *poooooossibly* helped tip her over the edge. What with letting it slip you are a monster hunter, albeit a terrible one. Trust me, fear makes the hunger worse. *Cazador*, ugh, he *loved* his power over us, all the better if it was compulsion free. He would constantly tell us how dangerous the world was for us poor fragile spawn, how everyone would try to harm us, he was *protecting* us, you see, for no one would ever see us as anything but monsters. All the world would be our enemy... that poison poured in your

ear for decades seeps in deep, no creator-creation bond required.” He stretched his arms and cracked his back, then asked, “Can we kill him again somehow?”

“That I cannot give you, however, I have one more actual gift.” He handed Astarion’s pillow back, the former blade of frontiers triumphantly emerging from another epic battle unscathed.

“Oh good. More gaudy glowing things to disrupt the aesthetic of my walls or additional ugly rocks on chains?”

“I can take the other items back, if you do not want them.”

He waved him off. “No, no, I’ll make do *somehow*. Don’t want you to trouble yourself.”

Wyll took a pair of fancy crystalline goblets from the parcel by his feet. “I trust these are more to your liking?”

Astarion tilted his head to the side in confusion for a moment before laughing, “Gods, you’re gifting me goblets.”

“I heard you often lament not having any on our journey,” he said with a laugh. Wyll opened up the bottle of blood that survived Dalyria’s feeding frenzy and poured a little less than half of it into the goblet, handing it over to Astarion. “Serviceable for blood or wine, but, but I confess, I forgot the bottle I was going to bring for myself.”

He sighed and lugged himself back up onto the foot of his bed again before accepting it and staring down into the full glass, “It would be stupid not to drink this, as *somebody* went and *opened* it, dooming it to spoil shortly. But I confess it is... a bit of a difficulty, knowing I lost so much of my supply today... and I am not *that* hungry.” He chuckled and added, “By my standards.”

“Astarion. We will not allow you to be in the distress you knew before. We will not let you go without. No one wants you to go hungry, let alone starve. We want the opposite for you.”

The vampire looked away as he started drinking, having no response to that. He was slightly saved when he discovered a weird button on the base of the goblet. He ran his finger over it and laughed as the bowl started to warm slightly, “What the...” he raised his eyebrows and looked at Wyll. “You had to get these custom crafted. Thank you.”

Wyll laughed, “I think our personal enchanter thinks I’m crazy.”

“Well, you are a bit mind-touched. These are not suitable for wine, my dear, I hope you didn’t say that and horridly embarrass yourself. The shape is all wrong, the ratio of the rim to the bowl is just all off, there is an art to this, you should know - something more akin to a chalice would be suitable for both blood and wine.”

“Astarion, please, tell me, how are you doing? I am concerned about you being all alone here. I mean no offense and do not wish to push you too much, please understand, this is not because you are a vampire. It is because you are my *friend*. Who has suffered a horrible loss.”

“Sure. Sure, that’s why. And not because I’m a vampire spawn in your precious city who has lost his mind twice in a few days. That you know of. Maybe it is far more! Don’t check the sewers.”

“Astarion.”

Astarion stared at him for a good while before grumbling, “You can stop saying my name now. I’d accuse you of getting that from your how to be a politician books but you did this to me before, I

recall.” He grumpily took a drink. “I’m a survivor, remember? I’ll survive.”

He sighed and continued, “I have been... better. I admit. I was not really prepared to return to the shadows. Mostly as I didn't think I would be doing so. What with there being no sun in Avernus and all.”

He clenched his jaw but kept talking quickly to get his mind on something else, “At least I stopped holding my hands in the sun beams coming through my windows... Oh gods, shut up!” he held a hand up and flipped it back and forth quickly. “I heal! I’m *very* experienced in knowing how much is too much. Ugh, you say you want honesty and then you react like that. Shall I age restrict my speech for you?”

“I didn’t say a single word!” Wyll protested.

“Your eyes did!”

“Then I apologize for how loud my eyes were.”

Astarion stared at him, his mouth a flat line, trying his best to look very displeased in order to disguise the debate he was having internally. He could almost hear Karlach telling him to be more honest and talk, but she was not *here* to frown at him. However, Wyll did almost get *eaten* today and one could argue it would have been Astarion’s fault. A clearly fallacious argument, but still.

“I am somewhat lonely, sometimes, I must admit. My prior existence was not one that afforded me much privacy, and it was a very suddenly shift from our adventure to... this. The random intrusions are, in truth, not *entirely* unwelcome. If they are wizard free, I suppose. If you repeat this to anyone, I will disavow all knowledge and have oh... Violet eat you.” He blinked and raised a hand to his lips muttering through his fingers, “Oh gods, Violet able to climb walls...” he stared into the middle distance.

“Remember, there will always be a room for you at my family estate, no time limit on that offer. Please know you can always ask me for help, Astarion.”

“Ugh. No.” He rolled his eyes and forced himself to explain more, a bit less rudely, “Then I really would feel like your pet vampire. I am barely able to convince myself I am not *Jaheira*’s pet vampire. At least with my own flat I have the illusion of being somewhat independent...”

“I might be able to help with that, in another fashion. I’d like to offer you a formal position as one of my advisors.”

“Why? Doing what?!”

“Advisor and liaison to the vampire spawn in the Underdark; chiefly advisor on the initiative to provide them with aid. Also, to be very honest, I would appreciate your... frank opinion on other matters.”

Astarion stared at him for some time, taking a long drink, before answering, “You’re going to go down there even if I say no, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Without question. They are Baldurians, undeath did not negate my responsibility. They have been failed by the former leaders of this city, some for centuries. I want to give each of them the same chance you had.”

“What, are you going to place each and every one with five to six random overly trusting fools?”

Wyll laughed, “Perhaps? I admit, I do not have much of a plan yet.”

“If you were anybody but *you* I’d think you had to have some ulterior motive. Building your own undead army...”

He pointed at Astarion, “And that *excellent* point is precisely why I want you to be an official part of this endeavor. You may have some strife with your kin, but there is no one else in all the realm who could possibly vouch for me, with any hope of convincing them I do *not* have ulterior motives.”

Astarion took another drink, accompanied by thoughtful sounds.

“Annnnd as you were just telling me, you are the expert on what lies we will need to detangle, what pitfalls to avoid. You will be compensated, of course. An official employment contract.”

“You’re not wrong. They won’t trust you. Fine. If you get eaten it’s your own damn fault. Just so we have that *firmly* established.”

“Excellent! Now, there will be nothing soon, there is much I need to—”

“Such as negotiating my payment! Hourly rates, yes? Please don’t tell me you are expecting me to work so many hours I would be salaried. Now, I am not precisely certain what I would bring in for Cazador, but I have some idea, Dufay left his account ledgers out on a fairly regular basis. I’ll even be nice and just charge you the solo in house rate, with no travel fees. I’m sure there’s enough in the city’s coffers to at least meet that.”

Wyll’s smile left his face, he looked most uncomfortable as he nodded.

Astarion grumbled in frustration, aggressively wagging a pointed finger at Wyll, “First thing, as you advisor or liaison to vampires or whatever! You *cannot* freeze up like that every time I refer to my past! Not if you want to help clean up this mess *Cazador* created. He was an insane bastard, Wyll. Cruel in ways I never even told Karlach about. It was a horrible and awful two centuries but it *happened*. You will hear about it if you deal with them... with us.”

“Yes. Yes of course. I am sorry.”

He wagged his finger more, “And I *will* make jokes about it!” he *hmph*’ed as he turned his head away.

“Yes, that is fair.”

“Jam another pillow on your horns for me, that was fun to watch. Sooooo, how is this going to work anyway? My working for you. I can’t exactly just walk my delightful self in each morning. The whole *burning to death in the sun* thing. I refuse to do something insipid such as dashing from sewer entrance to door and waiting to heal. And I doubt you want to traipse over here laden with documents...” He took a sip as he pondered, “Where is the current room where it happens? I’m sure not even all of the funds in the city could have rebuilt High Hall this quickly.”

“The default temporary meeting location is my father’s residence, which is now also mine. I was thinking that you could journey there before sunrise, two or so workdays a week, then be present for business hours. We’ll keep the shades drawn, of course. Arrange specific meetings on days you do not need to rest.”

Astarion grinned brightly at Wyll, “On days I don’t need to rest?”

“...Oh.” Wyll sometimes thought the only thing worse than not understanding what Astarion meant was understanding perfectly what he meant.

“Oh! He says. My dear, I rest every day! Much like you!”

“How long?”

“Oh, eight hours, at least. I know, so luxurious. I’ve managed twelve before.” He smiled and took a long drink, “Bliss! My record is sixteen hours, but of course that was not solid rest, but really, even the eight hours are rarely uninterrupted. Nightmares plague me, for some *mysterious* reason... oh, daymares?”

Wyll took a moment to collect his thoughts before he responded, “Astarion, that’s not-”

“*Yes! I know! I went through this with Dal already!*” he shouted, then snarled out, “I know its part of my weakness!” He hissed at Wyll for added dramatic effect.

“My apologies, your knowledge of vamperic matters is a bit... unpredictable.” He decided to not correct Astarion’s assumption. Hearing he was sleeping that much worried Wyll for reasons entirely unrelated to vampirism.

Astarion rolled his eyes as he slipped off the bed. He held his close to empty goblet out towards Wyll and bowed theatrically.

“Hello, darling! Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Astarion, famed runt of Cazador’s kennels! Weakest of the proverbial litter... in *so many* ways! No vampire strength, sleeping every day, and now I’ve learned I should be able to skitter on the walls like an arachnid.” He took a drink and flashed a grin that did not reach his eyes. “What fun it is to discover and learn things about myself! I’ll be *sure* to let you know when I discover other ways in which I am lacking. Oh, wait, wait, my apologies! Claws are a bit rubbish as well. You lot were saddled with a most inferior spawn on your journey. You really should have asked for your money back, honestly. Just think how much more useful and palatable Dalyria would have been. Though, you *could* have had Petras... ugh.” He took another sip as he pondered his siblings’ various attributes. “... Violet would have been interesting... you’d all have died, but it would have been a *fun* time!”

“I would not swap out the spawn we had for another.”

“Ah well, the spawn you know versus the one you don’t and all. *I am* the most beautiful. Really, my looks are *more* than enough to outweigh all the rest, so yes, my darling, you really did end up with the best option, what was I even thinking...!”

Wyll waited until he was sure Astarion had finished before saying, “I have heard of this condition before. Would you like me to tell you what I know? It is not much, I’m afraid. Or we could table this discussion.”

“I’d rather hear it from you than well, anyone else, I suppose. If I *must* know. And I suppose I must, the veil of ignorance has been cruelly ripped away,” he said after giving it careful consideration.

“You’re a...” he trailed off for a moment, wincing when he finished, “broken spawn.”

“Lovely. It has a name, of course it has a name. I hate that it has a name. That is an objectively horrid name. Insulting.” He sighed and dramatically flopped back onto the foot of his bed, holding his goblet in the palm of a fully extended arm. “I suppose it having a name means I’m not the only one, at least.

Another poor sod out there as unlucky as I.” He poured the last of the blood in his waiting mouth, not spilling a drop.

“Unfortunately, I can’t tell you much else, I’ve never encountered another myself, as far as I am aware. But it is known that on occasions vampire spawn lack abilities they should have and rarely display powers that should be restricted to a true vampire.”

“What, are those vampire-vampires? Did one prey on me and take my strength?”

“No, typically those with aberrant powers are lacking another standard ability.”

“*Hrm*. Of course, I get only the negative aspects. I should not be surprised one iota. Nothing fancy hiding here, the only thing the tadpole took from me was how fast I healed.” He sat up and motioned at his face and held out his arm “As you can see, already back to devastatingly gorgeous.” He had his empty goblet in his extended hand, which he wiggled at Wyll.

Wyll laughed as he gave Astarion a refill. “I’m glad. She did quite a lot of damage in those few seconds. It’s very interesting to see exactly how fast you do heal.”

“I imagine in the past it has been more of an inconvenience for you, yes? Those dastardly spawn, how dare they regenerate as you hack away at them!”

“Well, yes...” he coughed out.

“My dear, don’t let it trouble your handsome little head, I spent *many* hours of my slavery fantasizing about some hero riding in to slay us all, you did them a favour, no doubt.”

Wyll decided now was not the proper time to tell Astarion that his situation was not typical for vampire spawn. Instead, he asked, “You’re not getting worse, are you?”

“How in the hells would I know?! I was kept horribly starved, then I had a bloody worm in my head.” He took a drink and some time to pout before saying, “I don’t think so? I don’t *feel* like I’m sick, if that helps? Just tired... but to sooth you *again*, I already agreed to let Dalylria fully examine me, at some point. So, if I’m going to wither away to nothing, I’ll be sure to inform you.”

“Please do, I’ll lend you any aid I can.”

Astarion rolled his eyes, taking a long drink, this conversation had gotten way too ... supportive. “So, Mister vampire expert, would you say this entire flat would be considered a den or a lair? I’ve already decided which part is the nest...”

“You don’t have a nest.”

He gasped indigently and pointed at his pile of pillows and blankets on the floor with a *hrmph!* Wyll laughed as Astarion explained, “I killed my sire, I get to decide what is and isn’t a nest, thank you *very* much. It was den versus lair I was inquiring about.”

“I’d say more of a lair. Dens tend to be more organic.”

“Well, at least I was not embarrassing myself with my nomenclature...” He leaned back and plucked a red bandanna off his bed, “So. If you want to *help me* so much, there is another thing I could use assistance with.” He tied it around his neck and motioned to the right side, “Does this cover them?”

“Ah, no, it’s too loose, let me...” He started to reach out to adjust it.

Astarion batted his hands away. “No touching.” He untied it and flung it back on the bed, “That’s about as tight as I can have it without wanting to claw it off... ah, well, so much for that idea.”

“They really are not that noticeable in dim lighting.”

“Noticeable *enough*. I do not wish to be so... obvious. What if you are busy saving some other damsel in distress and one of your little Fisters wants to act on some report of a vampire who is minding his own business?!”

“Don’t call them that!” Wyll laughed, despite himself.

Astarion smirked for a moment and then flung his hands up. “Ugh, I do wish there was some way to get his damn bite off my neck. And this fucking thing off my back. I admit, it is a bit difficult to free truly free when I’m still so... marked.”

“I know how you feel.”

Astarion looked at him, incredulous, raising an eyebrow.

Wyll tapped a horn.

He laughed, “Oh! Yes, yes, of course, forgive me. Remember, sweet Wylliam, I only knew you for what? A day? Two maybe? Before,” he vaguely motioned at the other man, “... all of that. You would look so *strange* without horns now. They improved your overall visage, if you ask me. And I know you were dying to do so.”

“That is refreshing, really. I am constantly reminded of my alterations; my days are full to the brim with meeting people who remember a 17-year-old boy who did not have any devilish taint upon him. Who was pure.”

“And you’re soooooo corrupted and tainted now, my dear, mm? Mister oh no now I have to save *all* the vampire spawn! I’m just unable to be satisfied anymore by only lavishing the loveliest of them with luxuries.”

“Yes, that is exactly my motivation. You have figured me out, Astarion.”

“Why are you *here* anyway. I know you didn’t come here to offer me a job, this whole misguided project is something you spontaneously decided to embark on because you’re not saving enough mewling orphans or the like.”

“You are correct, but I was a bit derailed by the events. I didn’t want to bring up my original purpose while your sister was here.”

Astarion growled, “She’s *not* my sister. We are *not* family. I am *not* happy to discover the rest of them have continued the nonsense that *Cazador* forced upon us.”

“Trauma does bind people together, stronger than the bonds of traditional family.”

Astarion was suddenly standing next to Wyll, slamming his hand on the desk, “*Shut. Up.* You don’t know what he made us to do each other. *With* each other.”

“Oh.” Wyll was more surprised that he kept forgetting how fast Astarion could be, than by the vampire’s movements themselves. “Sorry, Astarion, I should have followed your lead.”

“Yeeees, you *should* have. Just assume whatever you are curious about? Of my past? Think of the most horrible option possible and you are *probably* correct.” He *ugh*’ed! as he pushed away from the desk, meandering over to look out his window.

“I’ve escaped Cazador’s pleasure chambers physically, but their spirit still clings to me. Maybe it *is* an impossible dream to have a new life after all of *that*. There’s just not much more to me than what other people did to me...”

As Astarion was looking out the window when he spoke, as he did not see Wyll lose his carefully crafted neutral expression at the phrase Cazador’s pleasure chambers. The young man rallied and said, “There’s so much more, Astarion...”

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” He turned around, leaning against the far wall.

Wyll froze and laughed nervously, “Well...”

Astarion tilted his head to the side, confused at first, before he laughed loudly then beamed a grin right at Wyll. He drained the rest of his cup while he stalked over, then wiggled it out once more. The grand duke obediently poured the remainder of the blood into the vampire spawn’s cup.

After taking a moment to inwardly curse the conversation path that led him here, Wyll spoke, “I wanted to address what you revealed last time I was here. How you suffered at the hands of the city’s nobility. I will not push again if you tell me to drop the matter today, but I could not in good conscience fail to ask you to provide me names again, after giving you time to reflect on your decision.” He hoped Astarion could not tell he had rehearsed this little speech.

He grinned at Wyll for a few more seconds before saying, “So, there’s more to me than my terrible past, now, is there?”

Wyll winced and tried to lighten the mood. “Well, there is your hair. Very appealing, both styles! I quite liked the more natural look you were sporting earlier in the evening. I’ve been thinking of letting my own curls be a bit more free myself, the braids aren’t needed as they are in the frontiers, but I’ve been busy with the rebuilding efforts.”

He giggled, “Ah, you are mistaken! Even my hair is like this because of Cazador! He would demand perfection in all things, at all times! He decided this was how I should keep it,” he motioned at his oh so perfect coif, “or else. Trust me, you never wanted to experience his elses.”

“I think both styles are very perfect...?” Wyll managed after struggling to think of a something beyond another single word response.

Astarion smiled at Wyll and bowed slightly. “It is fine, my dear, the spirit of your words is appreciated. Now, as for your inquiry? I’ll be honest, I have been reflecting.” He pointed towards his windows. “Enough of being in here. Outside! So I can fling myself off the balcony if I so desire.”

Before Wyll could say another thing Astarion chugged the rest of his breakfast, tossed the goblet at him, and was out on the balcony once more.

Astarion was sitting on the edge, legs between the bars of the railing, kicking his feet slightly as they dangled out over the city far below. He was leaning back with his arms extended out behind him, hands flat. He didn’t look back as Wyll stepped out into the night air; the chill of night working diligently to erase the remaining warmth of day.

“I’m not stupid. I know there is... speculation about the matter. It takes me time to process information, more than it should, really. So, often, I panic and spit out some abrasive nonsense, to try to buy myself that time. You’re in luck, I have thought about this particular topic an *awful* lot since you first offered.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid, Astarion...”

He waved him off. “Hush, you. Besides the point. I was just giving the preamble! Setting the stage. *Tch!* Youth of today, no appreciation for theatrics.”

Wyll sat down, somewhat mirroring Astarion’s pose, but leaning forwards to grasp the railing instead. “Not many playhouses in the frontiers.”

“Ah, but now you are back in actual civilization! Or what remains of it, in any case. So, your dukeness, long or short answer?”

“At risk of being here till dawn... long.”

Astarion laughed, “Ah, well, at least you know what you’re getting yourself into.” He gazed out at the city, very thankful he could not see the Szarr palace from his new home, and took a deep breath, holding it for couple of seconds before he began.

“Many attendees of his blasted galas I ... interacted with, truly had no conception that I was there of anything but my own lascivious or avaricious desires. Even those who knew we were vampires, in truth and not just fantasy, happily swallowed some fiction of how *nice* Cazador was to provide these lust-crazed monsters sanctuary. That was part of the charm for them, you see! And part of Cazador’s torment for me. We had to act *willing*. We were bribes and blackmail both. I lured so many husbands and wives away from their spouses into the chambers...”

He took a moment to just stare out at the city again before continuing. His balcony gave him a nice view indeed, not of just the city, but the River Chionthar in the distance, ships cruised up and down the waterway at all hours of the day and night, mostly just boring moving shapes off in the distance, at least as far as Astarion was concerned, but something to focus on at least.

“I could be very charming and persuasive *indeed* if a tenday in the kennels was awaiting me if I failed at being enticing enough for a target to betray their marriage vows...” He shook his head, “Sorry. I am rambling. Will ramble. I promise you I had this more rehearsed but, ah, well.” He grinned and held his hands to either side for a moment before putting them back behind himself. “Freedom has loosened my tongue even more. I did not think it was possible!”

The ships became much less boring to watch when a large transport vessel turned sharply and crashed into a smaller sailing ship. The response was rapid, lights illuminating the scene to such a degree that even someone with weak human senses would have no doubt there was a collision. Astarion smirked at this development, while Wyll looked worried; making a mental note to follow up on this at his earliest opportunity.

“But those are not the ones you’re here to discuss.” He waves a hand, “Just part of the general blur of psuedo-lovers in my past... the endless parade. Not worth our time to mention really, I just felt... it was somewhat important you properly understood the insidious circumstances.” He awkwardly coughed, “Or maybe I’m just trying to delay talking about the rest, as that means I have to *think* about them”

“Take all the time you want.”

“I think if I took all the time I wanted you’d die of old age before I was ready. Just like many of those who *did* know we were not ... willing. 200 years remember? You mortals oh so love shuffling off ever so quickly. And a good number shuffled off recently *not* from old age! At the slaughter we missed out on at Wyrms’ Rock. You may not remember what with the whole *father* thing, but I was *quite* jumpy the first time we were there; hiding behind Karlach for most of it. Ugh, I would have crawled inside her damn engine chamber if I was capable. At least no one recognized me... not showing enough skin, I suppose.” He clapped his hands together. “Ah, but our return was much more delightful, a number of the slain patriars would have been on this little list you would love for me to make. So! One point for Gortash. Don’t worry, he’s still far in the red.”

“...that does explain why you were kicking some of the bodies.”

Astarion giggled, “Look at you, putting some pieces together! So, the amount of people you have to rail against is far less than you might have first thought. Buuuuuut, let’s suppose there is somebody who is alive, still in power, and I can name...” he leaned forward to rest his forehead on one of the vertical bars, “What would you do if I pointed the finger at someone you knew and trusted?”

Wyll started to answer and Astarion cut him off with a hand on his lips. “Ugh. You’re *you*. You’re getting ready to tell me right now how you’d believe me and act. Are you so sure? Even if I named someone such as... Councilor Florrick?”

“... Really?” Wyll mostly hid the shock at that name, but a keen eye would notice his hands gripping the bars *much* tighter.

Astarion pointed and laughed at his friend, “See! See!” then quieted any objection with a wave of his hand. “But no, not *really*. She was just the first name that came to mind as a hypothetical.”

Wyll sighed with relief and chuckled nervously. “At least you didn’t use my father as your example.”

“How you just felt. Pretend it wasn’t a lie. Mayhaps someone I know as a vile brute, who was horrid to me... repeatedly, *knowingly*, is to you a kind figure, one who bounced you on his knee as a babe, and you are so happy to have been able to see him once more! He has welcomed your return with open arms and smoothed things over with those who might object to your crown of horns!”

“... are we still theoretical with this example?”

Astarion rolled his eyes. “Yes. I’m just very good at imagining, my dear. Believe me, I know that people can have so many facets... the world would be so much simpler if that wasn’t the case. Even Cazador at times was kind. As much as it turns my stomach to admit.” He frowned deeply, wrinkling his nose.

“Someone who is kind to the child of a powerful man and monstrous to the powerless is not someone I wish to associate with. No matter any prior good will I had for them, I would act.”

“Act *how*? You cannot possible be enough of a fool to believe anyone would care a powerful noble was accused of ... vile acts, inflicted to one such as my delightful self? Not if he was still useful to them, or even possibly useful! I’m not a person. I’m a monster. Let us be honest, they would *barely* care if I was still a living elf.”

“I care. Such people should not be allowed to guide the future of this city. Nothing they provide would be worth tolerating such darkness of the soul.”

“*Besides you*. I thought that implication was obvious!” He waved a hand in frustration and laughed at the young man, wagging his finger at him. “Wyll, you need to learn most people are *not* like you... or her. If you do *not* realize that and *soon* you will be eaten *alive* playing politics. Good thing I’ll be there to catch you if you swoon, overcome with grief when you realize most people cannot look away quickly enough from something that would cause them even the smallest problem. You will be called a simpleton from every angle if you wanted to divest city funds from... someone who owned a controlling interest in the quarries that are supplying, what I imagine is, the bulk of the stone for the rebuilding efforts.”

“Astarion, I cannot even hope to enact real changes if I have no clue as to who is playing pretend with me. Concealing their villainous nature. I need your help to route out some of the corruption in the city. You said it yourself; people are adept at hiding aspects of themselves. They revealed their true selves to you; together we can turn that into a mistake that leads to their downfall.” He paused and considered, “Quarries... Lord Pendry? Is this another theoretical or...?”

Astarion rapidly drew his legs up, turning back towards the window, “Enough of this! Wyll, care for some debauchery?”

“What? Astarion, we are not nearly done with this conversation!”

“Just some light debauchery.” He scampered back inside.

Wyll stared out over the city for a moment running their discussion over in his head and considering with some trepidation what Astarion’s idea of ‘light debauchery’ could possibly be, before he followed his friend back inside. Out on the distant river, both ships still floated, though excitement was not over yet, as the origin of the collision was revealed; a giant clawed pincer emerged from the waters, snapping at the sailors.

Astarion held a bottle of wine, busy jamming a corkscrew into it. “When you are a creature of the night, you never need to bother yourself about what is the proper time on the clock to imbibe. I retrieved this from the bastard’s personal stores. I am *hoping* they are actually vampire suitable and he did not merely vomit up the contents once he was done tormenting his slaves for the evening.” He uncorked it and gave the bottle an investigative sniff. His eyes lit up and he licked his lips, gleefully purring, “Oh my, yes, there *is* blood mixed in...”

“Debauchery?”

He scoffed at Wyll, “I told you, these goblets, that I am very thankful for still mind, are very unsuitable for wine; not what those of good class and breeding would use, not at all, my dear.” He poured himself a glass anyway. “But sometimes you just want to be a bit scandalous, I do understand, Wyll, really, I do.”

Wyll covered his face with both hands and laughed.

Astarion played ignorant, “Darling, whatever is so funny? *Mmm?*”

“Absolutely nothing and everything, both at once.”

He grinned. “So! What would you like? I have a selection of purloined potent potables, all reds though, I do have *standards*.” He paused and leaned closer to Wyll to clarify, “That doesn't mean blood. Really red wine.”

Wyll picked up the other goblet and held it out, “I’ll try yours.”

He tilted his head to the side and raised an eyebrow. “There *is* blood in it, I was clear on that, yes? From some poor fool who is now down in the Underdark, most likely?”

“You are what you eat, are you not?”

Astarion laughed, “Well, you are a fool. A sweet fool, but all the same. Suit yourself. If you vomit in here, I will end you.”

Wyll laughed, “Fair enough.” He clinked glasses with Astarion, “Cheers. You first.”

The vampire swirled the wine around in his goblet, peering down at it. He steeled himself. If this tasted just like everything else to his cursed tongue, he would *not* become upset and fling the glass at the wall or off the balcony. He would *not*. He took a very hesitant sip, rolling it around in his mouth.

“Well? How is it?”

Astarion peered at the liquid again, carefully speaking as he evaluated the taste, “It’s... certainly *different*. It’s not foul vinegar flavored muck but... it is *hrm*... still rather *less* than excellent, I must say...” He sighed and was surprised at how disappointed he actually was, hadn’t he learned by now not to get his hopes up?

Wyll started to take a drink and then paused, “How much blood is in this?”

“Ooooooh, having second thoughts now, brave hero? Not much, really. But this is coming from a vampire sooooo...” He took another small sip and frowned. “Ugh. Well. At least it won’t make me sick, that much I can tell...”

The not-vampire took a sip and wrinkled his nose, “*Ugh* indeed! I will say though... while ale is much more my drink of choice, I don’t think the taste of blood is what my own tongue finds objectionable. The wine itself is lacking.”

Astarion pursed his lips as he inspected the bottle’s label, muttering to himself. “You... you’re right! This is a *horrible* vintage. I know that... somehow.” He flashed the label at Wyll; it was bottled years before Astarion’s death. “How lovely, *this* is what bubbles up from my lost memory. My Mother’s face? Lost loves? Oh no, no, no, that is all just unneeded detritus.” He laughed at himself before forcing down another swallow.

“I am game to power through our cups, if you are, my friend.”

Astarion toasted Wyll once more. “Of course, the bastard would have shit wine. He probably had no idea it was even shit. Prepared a large batch and let it sit for centuries... this means though, there is hope.” He eyed him, “I don’t suppose you know how to replicate this with non-shit wine, Mr. Monster Hunter?”

“Unfortunately, none of my manuals gave instructions on how to make vampire bait of this nature.”

He shook his fist. “Bah! What good are you! You’re supposed to know everything about monsters, highlighting my ignorance and embarrassing me! Stop going off script!”

Wyll forced down another sip. “I promise next time we have an audience I will not let you down.”

“So, I shall not let *you* down either and return to our previous conversation. I did hear your objection, my dear.” He sighed and took a drink. “Your concern is sincerely appreciated, Wyll. It is... nice for someone to care. To want to help. But this would not help me. Sorry to disappoint. I do not wish to

relate my... experiences to others, to try to prove *anything*. I want to move *on*. Ugh, if that is even possible. My times with victims, targets, and ... others... play through my mind so much... its honestly pathetic.”

“Astarion, you are *not* remotely path—”

“I will dump this horrid wine right on your intricate braid-work and you will have it clinging to you for days if you do not shut up this very instant.”

Wyll fell silent, but kept his gaze upon Astarion, who turned away, deciding the sewing supplies on his desk were much more interesting.

He took a drink of the horrid wine and topped up his glass. “It could harm you too, shooting yourself in the political foot. What if they stripped you of your new powers for causing too much of a stir? Then where would I be! Hunted because some bookseller took umbrage at my very existence? Think of the important one in the room here. Me! Cazador is dead, his parties will not occur again. I’m safe...”

“You accuse others of coddling you, do not coddle me. I know that while there might be no ogres or trolls in the political chambers, they can be just as dangerous as any frontier.”

“Dirty pool, my dear. How dare you? Maybe you are better at this politics thing than I was giving you credit for...” He smirked “I have given you so very many escape routes, but you will take none of them, *hm?* You really wish to carry this weight? It could break quite badly for you, darling, please be aware. I cannot see you dealing well with forced impotence if you cannot act upon knowledge I bestow.” He winked at Wyll as he took another drink.

Wyll choked down some awful wine himself, coughing a bit before responding, “I just want to *know* if I am putting my trust in those I should not. Any weight you proffer I will gladly bear, in hope to lighten your own burden.”

Astarion hopped up on the edge of his desk, crossing his legs as he all but drained his goblet, “Darling, would you *really* just let me be a mysterious pointing finger from the shadows? Forgive me, I had rather thought it would be more official, and thus, humiliating for me...”

It was now Wyll’s turn to advert his eyes and stare into his glass. “I must confess, I did originally plan on a much more formal inquest into these matters, in order to merit out proper punishments. I see now that would be... difficult to bring to bear, and likely would lead to the opposite of what we both want. I can just simple divest myself of connections to individuals as much as possible, for now, with no needed justification.”

“The blade not being anything but disgustingly honest? Heavens be, I *am* corrupting you, my dear.”

Wyll held up a finger. “I remain honest in my intentions, actions, and outcomes. If they have a position of power in parliament, at least I will be aware, if I cannot dismiss them easily. Is this an acceptable compromise for you? I swear, I will never even hint that you’re behind any novel dislike I show.”

Astarion rolled some more rubbish wine around in his mouth as he pondered, before nodding. “Thank you. Really. Truly. Thank you for both wanting to help and *listening* to me about the nature of that help.” He chuckled and shook his head, “You are quite the corrupting influence yourself; do you know that? I really do believe now, that if you had been born sooner, if there were more people like Wyll Ravengard in this world, mind flayers might not have been my liberators! Ah, but you are here

now. And I am... *still* here, somehow. Well... at least some of me. ... enough of me, I suppose.” He refilled his goblet.

Wyll looked rather pained and softly said, “Astarion, I am sorry—”

“Ugh! Don’t you dare apologize to me for being born two centuries late. I will inform you the best I can. Pendry is one.” He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Honestly, the only one at this very moment I can *name* that isn’t dead. They did not exactly wear name tags, darling. Who introduces themselves to the pretty little courtesan forced to fawn over them?”

Wyll nodded, “Thank you. I know this is hard for you to speak about, I will make it mean something.”

Astarion prattled on, relief and wine both working together to loosen his already very loquacious tongue, “And, truth be told, *Cazador’s little parties* were less frequent in the past decade or so. Busy, busy finalizing his ritual, I suppose. But Pendry was a recent, and frequent, visitor.” He face darkened. “I even was *borrowed* for a time, spent most of a tenday at his country estate.” He closed his eyes and grimaced, but recovered quickly. “If I see others on my little jaunts to your place, I’ll be sure to point them out. But this is on your head. I will point. I will not do more. No dragging me into the public light... I’d burn up more quickly than in the sun.”

“None of that, Astarion, I promise. I will not force you to do anything that you are uncomfortable with.”

“You know, we could make this *much* simpler, my dear. If you would only become a *tiny* bit truly corrupt...”

“... I am readying my objection.”

Astarion grinned broadly, “I could just eat them!”

“No!”

He pouted, “Why not?!”

Wyll shook his head and laughed, “I know you’re smart enough to answer that yourself, we already did this dance once tonight, Astarion.”

Astarion was a contradictory bastard down to his very core, this combined with the wine and his normal propensity for prattle lead to a rather disparaging reply, “I am... not as smart as I once was. I know that. I *really* was a magistrate! I had to be able to string together more thoughts than I can now. Think farther ahead, plan beyond the broadest of strokes.” He fell silent, stopping himself before he babbled out something insipid about how he was honestly a bit proud of himself for the pathetically small evening plans he’s been carrying out. Maybe he should refrain from any more wine.

“Astarion, I want you to know, I never have doubted you were once a magistrate.”

“Oh.” He took another drink. “I don’t remember it, you know. It feels like fiction to me most times, in truth. All I truly remember is being clad in magistrate’s robes when I was beaten to death and Cazador ripping them off me. After I crawled out of my own grave...” He coughed awkwardly, “Anyway. We could also always take a walk in the patriar cemetery and I’ll point out graves you should really just dig up to pitch into the sewers.”

Wyll gently guided the conversation back to less graveyard focused realms. “Thank you for reminding me that my position can be precarious. I do need to make sure I do not put too many targets on my

back, this early in my tenure.”

He giggled, “And you don’t even have to pay me for that bit of advising! Can I get an impressive title? I want my own *special* title. I’m not good at sharing.”

“Not a problem! There are a large number of vacancies. However, if you do not want too much attention, just Counsellor for Special Underdark matters, or something else of that of that nature, might be for the best.”

Wyll waited for a reply, looking to his friend, still perched on the edge of the desk, staring into space. “... Astarion?”

“It would take some strength, beyond what you would expect for a normal elf, to punch through a coffin, and climb through six feet of dirt, yes?”

“Um... yes.”

“Oh gods...” He slid off the desk, wobbling a bit on unsteady feet.

“Astarion, are you alright? What is going on?”

“Shut up! Sorry. Sorry. Quiet. Sorry. I need to think.” He took a huge drink of the rather rubbish wine and forced it down with a grimace, then set his cup down with a trembling hand, closing his eyes as he leaned on the desk.

Wyll remained silent, giving him the time he requested.

Astarion pushed away from the desk and yelled out, “I know what happened! Why I’m like this! Gods, how did I not put this together sooner?” He held his hands in front of himself and flexed his fingers repeatedly, shuffling in place; not sure at all what to do with his body.

“Why you’re weaker?” Wyll calmly asked, trying to keep things from escalating.

The messy blanket nest regained its occupant as Astarion decided that was the best place to be, practically leaping into it from his spot near the desk. He hugged a pillow to do *something* with his arms. He opened his mouth to speak then paused, thought, and exchanged the pillow for Karlach’s bear. He was beyond feeling any shame about this. He grinned brightly at Wyll, “So!”

Wyll took a seat on the only chair. “So...?” He pondered what fresh hell from Astarion’s past he was about to discover.

“He locked me up for a year. When I was new. First decade. In one of his horrid underground tombs. Just me and the stone. Starving.”

“I... you are probably correct,” Wyll said, wincing.

“I have to be! Not only must I have had my proper strength to escape my coffin, it’s not my turning when my memories begin in earnest. No. They start in that fucking tomb...”

Wyll could not resist asking, “Why did he—”

Astarion barked out a laugh and shouted, “You expect him to have *reasons* for how he tormented me!? Well, you’re in luck! This time *he did!* I ran.” He grinned “I got away too! For a while...”

“If you want to tell the story, I will listen. I will keep my eyes very silent, I promise.”

Astarion pointed at his abandoned goblet with a giggle, “Be a dear, will you, and top me off? It is vile, but I am feeling some intoxicating effect... cushioning it all.” Wyll obliged, giving him a generous pour.

“I don’t remember much of this, mind. Just flashes. Enough. I was so young... I found this sweet man to lure back... and I could not. Couldn’t bring myself to feed him to that bastard. Then, in him I saw all the darling boys I would lead back. I was so new, but I could see so much of what would come. I was much better at that than I am now, putting pieces together. So! I ran. I have *no* idea how I defeated the compulsions, but I did... I was more than these tattered scraps that remain... before he took almost everything.”

Wyll’s mind failed to give him anything substantial to reply to that with, so he just nodded, disappointed in himself.

“I think I got out of the city? I was gone for days, if not weeks... He was *furious* when he found me. *That* I remember, and what came after. My punishment? To be sealed in one of the Szarr family’s underground tombs for a year. Not that I had any conception of how long it was going to last when the bastard puppeted me inside. Soon enough, I was... *so hungry*. Beyond what I fathomed was possible. I scratched my hands raw trying to get out. Pointless, but what else was I to do? Eventually, I surrendered to the hunger, and lost myself. Little did I know, that would be the *more pleasant* period of my imprisonment.” He chuckled and shook his head.

“Did you know there’s a hunger beyond that of the feral mindless spawn? Hunger that rages for so long that it eventually breaks, thus you come back to yourself? The hold on your mind... released. Not that this is any sort of mercy, blessing, or kindness.”

He stared into his wine for a time before continuing, “By the time I was rational once more, my body was utterly mangled by the desperate actions of consummate starvation. Hands beyond butchered; reduced to broken fingerless nubs and splitting palms, teeth broken on stone, ah, but not before I had bitten chunks out of my own desiccated flesh! Chewed off my tongue and lips too... *hrm*. I wonder if I ate my fingers?” he paused and honestly considered before shrugging. “Not that any of that mattered to me much at the time, the agony from within was much more *mmm*... demanding of my attention. It was as if my paltry soul was fracturing, complementing my broken body, fragments of both splintering off and dissipating into nothingness. Eventually, I could not move even if I had any desire to do so. Lay there for weeks, if not months, wondering if this would be forever. Wishing, oh so desperately, that I could just *die*. Oh, and of course, because how could it be any other way, the eternal hunger was still there, in all of me, only it too was now a sad broken thing. Both of us longing for annihilation that never came.” He dryly laughed. “Put that in your damn bestiaries.”

“I’m... Astarion I’m so sorry. I’m... no words can help, I know. I admit, I’m not sure what else to say.” He wiped at his eyes.

“Nobody ever does! What could you *possibly* say to that! There’s nothing to say! Karlach knew what to say somehow. Nobody else does. Nobody else ever will. I don’t even know what I *want* people to say! People don’t survive experiences like I have! Monsters survive... why bother with comforting words for a monster.” He chugged down the rest of the wine, caring more for the blood than any other flavor at this point, flinging the empty goblet onto his bed.

“That *had* to be when it happened. My curse broke, as Dal put it. More vampire information for the monster hunter, how to make a broken spawn.” He hugged Clive tighter, squeezing his eyes shut. “Oh. Broken curse. Broken spawn. Ha. Ha. I still detest that name. We must propose another...”

“I’m glad you recovered as much as you did...”

Astarion flopped over onto his side and muttered into the bear, “Why did I say so much... I could have just said he put me in a box for a year because I was a naughty boy and it was a bad time. Something broke in me a long time ago, words spring forth, unbidden. Prattle... endless prattle, bothering all who hear...”

“None of us thought that of your words, Astarion. You made the journey much less dour.”

He *pdf*’ed at Wyll, sitting up and saying, “Who would have surmised I shared this quality with you. Sentenced to an unending punishment for being *kind*. Ugh. Disgusting. I lured so many after... some just as darling and sweet as him, or even more so. Not a damn bit of difference it made.”

“It made a difference to him, whoever he was.”

“He’s long dead now, so *who cares*? I’m still paying for it, 200 years later. Even in my freedom! If not for those ridiculous feelings of guilt that spurred me to attempt an escape, I might still remember what it was like to be something other than this! Have some notion what one really *does* with freedom. Once again, proof the world is horrid and there is no justice to any of it. Not that I really needed more. If there was an iota to be found I would have been the one who burnt up and she’d still be here!”

“Astarion, that’s... not correct, you shouldn't think of it like that...”

He rolled his eyes. He did think of it like that and he would continue to do, thank you very much. Gods, he didn’t want to talk about *this* anymore either. If only his weakness was more of a trade-off, with some of those bonus powers Wyll had mentioned, instead of nothing but negatives. He would love to be just vanish into a cloud of bats right now, a clear signal he was done with this conversation. He chuckled to himself, imagining the other man’s reaction to that little trick.

“... Astarion?”

He needed a new topic. Any topic. He searched his brain and grabbed for the topic that was always very near the surface. “As I do believe it is literally *impossible* for me to feel worse than I do right now. Tell me about Avernus. Help me understand why she would choose to *die* rather than return. She never told me much of *anything* about her time there. *Not* due to my lack of asking, I’ll have you know!” He shook Clive at Wyll for emphasis.

Wyll was grateful for the shift in topic, it still was not a pleasant one, but at least he knew what words to offer. “Would you mind telling me what she told you herself first, in the letter?”

Astarion tilted his head to the side, “Letter? What letter?”

He took a moment before he carefully and calmly replied, “I found a letter from her in my bunk. After she was gone. She wanted me to make sure you took her trunk, as she had put a letter for you inside it. She was afraid you’d find it too soon if she put it in with your possessions. I assumed you had found it by now.”

Astarion erupted out of his nest, sending pillows scattered all about as he scrambled under his bed and dragged Karlach’s trunk out.

He slammed it open.

There, carefully clipped to a pair of trousers, was an envelope. Written on it with big blocky letters: ASTARION!!!

He stared down at it for a moment then slammed the trunk lid down, flopping forwards on top of it, his forehead almost resting on the floor. "I'm really not doing a great job proving my claim that I am more intelligent than I first appear."

"I should have said something. I mistakenly assumed you would have opened it."

Astarion did not respond, remaining prone, dropped over the trunk. Thinking, his body as still as the grave. His train of thought was interrupted when Wyll realized he had not stopped to gather his thoughts. "She would be proud of you."

"I wander around aimlessly most nights doing nothing of any importance before I *try* to sleep on the damn floor because... *because*. I say *try* because I wake up, on average, two or three times each day, due to the endless horrible dreams that plague me! It's even *worse* if I try to trance so I just *stopped trying*. I do not see a lot to be proud of here. Are you confusing pride with pity, mayhap? They do both start with the letter p..." He finally raised his head up, looking at Wyll with wide questioning eyes, eyebrows raised.

"... Astarion..."

He hissed at Wyll then growled out, "Shut up. Forget I said that. Shut up. Speaking of my pathetic floor bed I simply must fix it; it is all in shambles. I do have *standards* for my pitiable solution."

"I'm... glad you found something that helps you rest better."

He pointedly hissed at him again before sighing. "So am I. However, I do wish that no living soul had *learned* of my new strategy. Am I not allowed to keep *any* of my humiliating secrets?" He shoved the trunk back under the bed.

"Forgive me for allowing that breach of privacy."

"My dear, I firmly blame that damn wizard, don't worry your sweet self. You have worried about me quiet enough for today, I hope we can both agree." He piled most of the pillows on his bed and shoved the heavy blanket aside, reveling another blanket underneath everything.

"Oh, it is a rather complex, um, nest after all."

He barked out a laugh. "I am not sleeping on bare floorboards! I am not *quite* that pathetic." He grinned as he spread it out fully and smoothed it down once more, "It is also enchanted to generate warmth. I am not using it yet, but I have plans... when winter is here? If a blizzard occurs? I will turn them both on and not move from here until it has passed." He started intricately arranging pillows and then added, after a moment's thought, "I'll have to make sure Jaheira knows to leave my blood deliveries close enough to reach."

"I have another apology, this one long overdue."

Astarion was in the middle of deciding, no, no, *this* pillow goes here and *that* one goes there. He looked up raising, one eyebrow in confusion.

"I did not always treat you kindly or with the respect you deserved, at the start of our journey together. I freely admit I let jealousy cloud my judgment."

He burst out laughing and waved Wyll off, “Ancient history, my dear. Besides, I did deserve some of it, I am sure.”

“In any case, you did make her very happy. I... thought you could stand to be reminded.”

“Is this make Astarion cry day? Is that every day? Am I even more exceptionally beautiful when I cry? Please tell me, darling, I have no way of knowing these things.” He spread out the topmost blanket, satisfied finally in his pillow arrangement.

When there is no immediate response Astarion looked at his nails before buffing them on his shirt. “That does not mean I am commanding you to stop telling me how good I was for her.”

“I’m sure you satisfied her in certain ways far beyond what I would have been capable of, both due to lack of experience and my more hidden... alterations.”

“Wyll, as already discussed, I am resting on the floor instead of a bed due to... what other people did to me. Do you honestly think all of that vanishes if I am with a wanted partner?” He stood up and took the goblet from his hand, “Ugh, you drank hardly any of this, I release you from this farce. The gesture is appreciated, but I could have given you blood-free wine, my dear.” He took an ample swig.

“Oh. Yes, that make sense. I... Um, never considered uh...”

“Of course *you* didn’t, and I’m honestly *glad* you never bothered to put those pieces together. We did have some success.” He paused and coughed, “In a totally unrelated topic, no relation *whatsoever*. She should have a grave. With a huge statue. More people should know she existed. Saved the city.”

“By Balduran's bones, another critical task that I’ve allowed to fall through the cracks. I am sorry. I have had so much on my mind, emergency after emergency brought to me, demanding my attention or approval on plans of action.”

Astarion finished the last of Wyll’s abandoned blood-wine, putting both goblets on the desk. “I do request that you put it someplace rather shady, if possible. And I *trust* it will be possible.”

“It’s a funny life... how different paths can go. I have to admit, I did not think I would have any of these responsibilities or worries until I suddenly did, everyone looking to me to help guide the rebuilding effort. You see, I offered to go to Avernus as well, a trio would have had much better odds of survival than a duo.”

“And she still made the other choice... Karlach, why...” He sighed. “At least that means it couldn’t have *just* been because she found my possible contribution lacking.”

Wyll laughed and shook his head sadly. “To think, when I offered, my biggest fear was that you would have been *most* upset to discovered I was tagging along.”

Astarion paused to consider what his reaction would have been, running a finger around the rim of a glass. “Mm. I do not think I would have been, not overly so. Walking away from all this power you have now, in order to help her? That would have been mightily impressive.” The blood-wine still working to keep his defenses a bit lower than typical, he continued, “In any case, I will admit I do feel... safe around you.”

“That also feels mightily impressive. Thank you, Astarion.”

He stretched, snickering, “More mightily hilarious. *Hm?* Considering I spent a while convinced if I blinked wrong you would leap at the chance to stake me.”

“In all honesty, that was never truly on the table, despite my boasting threats. If I may ask, what changed your mind?”

“You helped me, without laughing at my ignorance or peppering me with unending questions I *really* did not wish to answer. Unlike some others.” He rolled his eyes and sighed. “Not that it really matters anymore, so many of my secrets now laid bare.”

“I’m sorry you had to reveal more than you wished...”

“I would have paraded around camp nude and had sex with everyone repeatedly, if need be, to secure Cazador’s death. Compared to what I was willing to give, freedom cost hardly anything at all...”

“You know, we never really spoke that much, this evening has to be the longest private conversation we’ve ever had,” said Wyll, hoping his attempt at a subtle topic change was successful.

“No, but she talked to you. And I listened, even if it looked like I was not. I’m *quite* good at listening when I am otherwise... occupied. Listening draped over her shoulders or on her lap was no challenge at all, comparatively.” He sighed. “Looking back, it’s very transparent now. What she was doing... priming me to accept help. Ugh. It worked.”

“You were rather stuck to her like glue for the last couple of tendays in our campaign. Some called you her pale shadow.”

“Some huh? Not *everyone*?” He *tut-tut*’ed and flopped down on his remade pillow nest, stretching out as he sank down into the freshly fluffed pillows. It was so comfortable, honestly even more comfortable than the mattress had been even before sensations of lurking dread ruined it for him. He felt *almost* no shame at all, which he partially credited to the wine. It was a different sensation than when he was purely blood-drunk. He had all but forgotten how this felt. A great amount of blood made him, at least at first, a bit more energetic, almost manic. This? A soothing feeling instead, more placid, making it harder for him to care about every little thing. He didn’t even feel like he was about to be sick! Typically, if he imbibed this much wine it would have been ejected from his cursed stomach long before now.

“Others had their ... own terms. No offense was meant, trust me.”

He laughed, “I am well aware I was following her around... like a puppy? I think that’s what Dal said... no regrets here, not for those actions.” He curled up a bit, poking Clive in the nose with one finger. “Funny world, in some ways, isn’t it. You and Jaheira are the ones remaining that I trust the most... the famous heroes of our little troupe.”

“You’re a famous hero too, you know. Or you could be.”

“Hah! And *hah!* Again. I’ll stay one of your faceless assistants, thank you. No one wants to hear about the minor contributions of a supposed heroic blood sucker cast back into the shadows... they’d just ask why you did *not* stake me.”

“Or you might be a source of hope for some? An inspiration for a change in perspective?”

Astarion hissed and rolled over, reaching out to trigger the warming enchantment on the blanket.

Wyll laughed. “Fair enough. But, Astarion, you did help save the realm. You were a savior of Baldur’s Gate, just as we all were. I really do not think we could have triumphed without your contributions.”

A disbelieving noise drifted over from the pillow pile.

“It is the truth.”

“I was, by far, the weakest. A runt amongst that litter as well...”

“I do not agree! Why, you were so stealthy you allowed us to start many altercations with a clear advantage, not to mention that you were, on more than one occasion, critical to victory by being the only one able to make it back to camp quickly and—”

Astarion decided to stop paying attention. He had been there, he didn't need Wyll to tell him how the journey had gone, thank you very much. The combination of the wine and the adrenaline wearing off was making him rather drowsy. Gods, what a pair of stressful conversations. He could only hope his nightmares didn't decide to somehow combine Cazador's parties with the tomb. Did he even still make adrenaline? He felt like he did. Ghost of adrenaline, at least. Oh, Wyll was still talking. He listened long enough to contribute a well-timed “*Mm.*” And he was still talking and talking. “*Mm, hrm...*” This pillow nest really was quite warm and soft. Fuck you, Cazador, Astarion had a much better nest than you ever did.

Wyll realized he had been talking for some time without Astarion interrupting even once. That was unusual most times, and especially this evening. “... Astarion?” He leaned forwards and discovered Astarion was soundly asleep.

He had never seen the vampire so open and vulnerable before. Wyll long ago admitted he never really understood what drew Karlach to him. Besides his appearance and charming nature; his quips and amazement at aspects of life that had been denied to him for the past two centuries, such as the sun. But nothing beyond those qualities. The mystery was quickly dissipating. Karlach had, repeatedly, told him Astarion was a lot different when it was just the two of them alone. He believed her now. Not that he ever *really* doubted her.

How to wake him up? He eventually decided on a very simple method, standing up, causing his chair to scrape against the wooden floor boards a bit more than necessary.

Astarion *Mmm*'ed? without even a hint of panic. “Oh. Well. See, told you I trusted you.” He sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“My retinue downstairs is either asleep as well, or will bombard me with sending messages shortly, I suspect. I'll let you rest.”

Astarion scraped himself off the ground with a groan, “It is not nearly late enough for me to call it a night. I'll force myself to stay conscious. Walk around the city a bit.”

“In that case, would you like to journey with me until we head our separate directions?” He asked, moving towards the door.

“No, I've talked to you enough this evening, my dear. Shoo.”

“It was good seeing you again, Astarion. It was, overall, a very pleasant evening.”

Astarion made shooing motions and said, “I'll refrain from asking if the vampire spawn attack gained or lost me points.”

Wyll laughed, “I'll be in touch, need to make sure that sending stone is working!” he turned and then stopped just before Astarion could shut the door, “Oh! One thing I forgot to mention. There will be a

midwinter celebration, serving as a commemoration of the rebuilding efforts and honoring those who died in the attack. I would like you to attend, possibly we can unveil her statue at that same event.”

“You’re telling me this so far in advance, how could I possibly have an excuse to not attend. What, am I going to go visit *family*? My extended network of friends? Fine, you win. Now. *Shoo*.”

Wyll laughed and waved at Astarion, who rolled his eyes as he shut the door.

After locking up securely, he stored the sending stone with his blood reserves. He counted them again and frowned. Two days’ worth lost, into the gullet of a vampire that was not him. Most displeasing. He growled as he shut the cabinet, he still had plenty, it was foolish to have this panic building up over his supply. He needed to stop this, stop obsessing over it, he would be *fine*. All he has to do is tell Jaheira, and even then, there was a buffer; a new batch was due to be delivered days before he would run out.

He really should leave his flat tonight, even though it was already rather late. He could go drop a note in her letter box. Even better, he could sneak into her basement again. It was always a fun time waiting for her to finally find him, her reactions were so entertaining!

Astarion nodded as he decided on plan Annoy Jaheira Again. He’d just wait a bell or so, give sometime between Wyll’s departure and his own. Just in case he was still in the area. Then he’ll leave. Yes, that was what he would do, a short jaunt out. Most assuredly. First though, he really should clean those goblets and make sure his laundry is coming along fine.



He ended up not leaving his flat after all. First time in many days. Nights. Nights. It’s nights again. Not days. Why was it so hard to remember that? It was nights for 200 years. Days for a dozen tendays. Even if he remembered his life that would add not even forty years of days to the tally. He’s had *far* more nights than days.

The sun was already cresting the horizon, far too late for him to leave. The bars of his gilded cage are closed.

He at least was able to tell himself he had a valid excuse this time. It was not like previous failure nights. The ones where he did nothing much more than roll over in his bed, feed, and return to it. Now he’s tried to attack somebody *twice* in his own flat in the past few days. Then he dares to brag about not losing control. Pathetic wretch. There’s more to control than bloodlust. Cazador always mocked him for the rages he would fly into. ‘Fits of temper.’ Of course that was after the bastard purposely riled him up, but still, maybe he did have a point...

I can ’t let this keep happening. People only have so much patience to give.

The only thing that would be worse than having to swallow his pride over and over again as he accepted help, would be figuring out what in the hells he would *do* if all this help vanished. So much help, for one weak little spawn. The weakest spawn of them all...

Gods, the other spawn. His false-siblings and the hidden thousands both. He had done a *marvelous* job of barely thinking about them at all, since his day of triumph over the bastard. Now they were back at the forefront of his mind. Wyll was a bloody fool. A sweet fool, but a fool all the same. Astarion was already preparing to restrain himself from saying ‘I told you so’ too many times when Wyll was laughed at for his assuredly unshared desire to help the vampire populace. Honestly, that man. He still believed so much in others, somehow.

If only Astarion hadn't gone to the palace *that* night.

He should probably feel guilty for thinking that. This was a chance here to help so many people; many of whom he had led into the darkness. Without Astarion himself even having to do too much work! Too bad. He didn't feel a bit of guilt. Not over wishing his attempt at a new life would just stay disentangled from those unliving embodiments of true guilt and shame.

He could perfectly envision the *look* Karlach would have given him. Oh well, she abandoned him. Lost her judgment privileges.

If he had just avoided meeting Dalyria again he also wouldn't have been reminded Petras existed. Sorry, Jaheira, he simply *must* move now, this entire building was contaminated.

Even with all this running through his mind he really had meant to go out. To keep up his forced routine but. He didn't. He didn't even have dinner. (Unless one counted finishing off the opened bottle of tepid wine. He firmly decided to *not* count that as dinner.) He told himself it was to make up for the blood he gave Dalyria. This is not the reason. He didn't even read. Or sew. Or organize. He is not sure what he did. But time passed all the same.

He did at least take a bath, kept up that part of the routine, another way he at least did better than his worst nights here. Another nice hot bath. Submerging himself completely under the water for what must have been close to an hour, if not more. A rare benefit to undeath that he truly enjoyed. Just shutting off the instinct to breathe, one of the many trappings of true life he needlessly imitated. Too bad he could not shut his mind off, as all he could think is how insane he was for feeling so awful most of the time, when his existence a year ago was unfathomably worse than what he enjoyed now. He should be feeling unending joy every *moment* of this freedom. He had *won!* Even if he did not have nearly what he was owed. What he *deserved*.

He wanted more than the bare minimum, after his two hundred years of pure shit. But the bare minimum was all he was going to get, he had discovered. Solitude in a tiny flat, with all the beast blood he needed.

He had wanted privacy so many times in his slavery. The crowded spawn storage room was no sanctuary, only a different form of torment. The only torture free solitude Astarion reliably received was if he tarried when he ordered to seduce someone. Risking an hour in a private room or a deserted park, possibly paying for it with a tenday in the kennels if he came back alone at the end of the night.

Well. He had his privacy now.

He was not enjoying it, overly much.

Alone in the shadows, hungry, and cold.

Was this truly all that freedom had to offer him?

A still damp Astarion sat in the middle of his freshly remade officially designated vampiric pillow nest, holding Karlach's letter. Still unopened. His name on it, in her handwriting. Somehow even her handwriting was so boisterous and full of life.

He had been here for a while. Motionless. This was there all that time and he never knew.

He wanted to rip it open instantly and devour the words.

He also wanted to never ever open it.

This is a gift he didn't even know she had given him. He can pick when to have these last words. Because when he does open it, that's it. That will be the last new thing he'll ever have of her.

He didn't want that finality right now. Not after the revelations of the past day. Night. Whatever.

Gods, he really could have used her help these past few days. He missed her every single hour of every day, but the ache in his dead heart was somehow even worse now. His hands shook as he thought about his weakness, how he'd never be free of that horrible year. She somehow would have a way to make him feel better, he knows. She always somehow made him feel better, even when he was in the most dismal of moods for completely rational reasons. Hells, even when it was irrational reasons, which were the much harder demons to defeat. She would have kept him from making mistake after mistake.

How would she have reacted if she knew how truly weak he was? He never told her that his lack of strength was due to anything but the tadpole. (In his defense, she never specifically *asked* either.) Thus, she had no clue he was a... broken spawn. "Ugh." Such a cruel term. Ugly. He preferred the term runt over that. At least there was a name for this particular twist to his affliction. Dalyria couldn't get away with coining Astarion-Syndrome.

He stopped being a million miles away, once again actively staring at his name on her unopened letter. He smirked as he reflected on how little he has ever really seen his name written down. That's something for people, not monsters. He squeezed the envelop, feeling the contents. Just one folded page inside.

He can't leave this for too long. He can't. But he also didn't have to open it tonight. He decided he was entirely too fragile to deal with this tonight. He was just happy he somehow managed to keep from becoming a blubbering mess in front of either Dalyria *or* Wyll. He felt the tears brewing up so many times, but he kept them at bay. Just like old times, two centuries of slavery doing him *some* good in this freedom.

Astarion gently placed the letter back in her trunk, latching it securely shut, before shoving it back into its resting spot under the bed.

A moment later he pulled the trunk back out and retrieved the letter.

He slid it under the pillow on his unused bed.

He slipped it under the mattress of said bed.

He sat there and held it more.

He put it in a desk drawer, hidden under spools of thread.

He laid down once more.

He dropped it into his hidden blood storage cabinet.

He replaced it in her trunk, where it had been kept safe from everyone, even him, for the past two tendays or so.

He collapsed back on his pillow nest and felt like quite the fool.

He was motionless for several minutes, still as the grave, not even breathing.

With a snarl of frustration, he rolled over and started repeatedly biting a pillow, tearing several holes in it, feathers spilling out and drifting through the air.

Astarion felt even more foolish when a *Prrt?* drew his attention upward.

Fantastic, there was Tara the flying not-cat, he had an audience for his latest display of patheticness.

So, Gale hadn't given up on him after all? Lovely, now he felt disappointment that he would still have to deal with that whole situation. He really needed to make up his fucking mind. Riddled with complications indeed.

He propped himself up on his elbows, flicking a thumb over his ring in order to re-activate the enchantment. "Hello again. Nice to know for sure she didn't eat you."

"Mr. Astarion? Are you alright?" Tara inquired, once she knew he would understand her.

"Go ahead and give me the magnificent wizard's important speech, I've had enough of him bothering me by proxy."

Tara instead landed next to him and administered affectionate head-butts, rubbing up against his cheek while purring. He did not object, on the contrary, he pet her for a few minutes, even laying his head on her when she laid down between his arms, using her as a living pillow. The last remainders of the blood-wine were still in his system, giving him a honestly pleasant buzzy feeling, and tempting him to sleep. He poked the tressym and stifled a yawn as he said, "If you don't give me his message before I pass out, I cannot promise I will be receptive later."

Tara flew into the air once more while Astarion sat up. She triggered the latent spell, giving rise to a small projection of Gale hovering in midair.

While Astarion was very familiar with this type of message he had never seen one before quite like this. Gale's image was a bit blurry and very jerky, cutting from pose to pose rapidly with random noises. He raised an eyebrow in confusion and then laughed when he realized the most likely explanation. "How many times did your blasted wizard record this?"

"Enough," was her only reply, then the actual message began.

"I am sorry. I said things most uncalled for, I only wished to def—"

There were a few more flashes of Gale in different poses before the next portion.

"You are officially invited to both my temporary lodgings and my tower in Waterdeep. Looking back, I have already given you an unknowing invitation to the former, haven't I? But, I surm—"

A few more flashes of over written Gales appeared before the final one, looking very disheveled and weary, his robes and hair in various states of disarray.

"You owe me no apology."

The tiny Gale winked out of existence.

Astarion blinked. Then blinked again. "*Hrm.*" The wizard, no, Gale had worked rather hard on that, hadn't he? The message was roughly a tenth the length that Astarion would have predicted.

He was invited over after how violently he had reacted? Another surprise. While, yes, he had already secured permission to enter his room in the gate, now he had access to a whole tower in Waterdeep! Did Gale not realize Astarion had been actually trying to kill him? Or at least bite him. He wouldn't have killed him. Probably? Maybe he shouldn't think of that too much and just go with he hoped he wouldn't have killed him. It didn't happen, no use dwelling on possibilities.

Astarion had realized by now, with his days to reflect, it was really not *just* Gale he had lunged at in his rage. It was everyone who had mocked him with similar words in the past. Petras, Leon, and other faces that he deeply wished he could forget. Those who insulted him, mocked him, and really desired to hurt him with their words. Not just saying the wrong thing in a fit of... Galeness.

He laughed and flopped backwards again into his freshly made pillow nest, drawing the blanket up over him. "Not what I expected. Tell him..." he pondered for a moment and then said, "I'll respond... soon. In person."

Tara landed next to him, padding onto his chest and curling up.

"What, not going to fly that right back to him?"

"I would like to sleep here today, Mr. Astarion, if you do not object. My evening was not as exciting as our previous night, but very full all the same." She flattened her ears in distaste. "They already patched the hole in the aviary's netting."

"A terrible shame, my dear. Do not fret overly much, I'll aid you with the powers granted to me by virtue of having thumbs again some evening. Not tomorrow, but soon." Gods, even the flying cat was pitying him. He stroked her fur and found he didn't care really. He was fairly sure the default feline state was to pity all other creatures.

He started to drift off, feeling her feathers between his fingers. His curtains were securely drawn, but the room was illuminated somewhat by the soft blue glow of his new wall clock. Many things were still *far* from ideal, but he did not feel *as* awful as he had going to bed some other mornings, especially those where he had not gone outside. It helped he was a bit pleasantly drunk still! That was nice. Even if the wine was shit, it was still something different. A victory of sorts, even if it was ever so small.

The tressym started to purr again. Maybe some cat hair on his belongings wasn't that bad after all. He could always demand Gale tidy them up.

"If my window is open, Ms. Tara, feel free to visit anytime. Give you some respite from that rubbish beard he insists on sporting," he sleepily said, before drifting off.

Chapter End Notes

Wee talkies! Honestly my ideal BG3 style game would be about 50 more hours of just watching the characters flap their lil mouths at each other so. Lots of talkies! But important talkies, plot points set up and at least one mystery answered!

Wyll got to see a diff side of Astarion than he had shown him before, look at all the learning. That boy likes saving and helping people! And his current job makes it a bit... messy to for him to directly help people, most days I think. Doesn't see the individual people who benefit... but hey this little vampire man really needs help... hrm...

Did yooooo suspect it it was the year in the tomb that did it to him? Cuz it was, not to give anything away but Astarion figured it out. I mean its his body and his curse, he just had to let his mind drift over the Bad Year and a lot made sense

Cazador did an oopsie! He didn't realize what it would do to Astarion, but he sure did act like it was on purpose. No reason for Astarion to think otherwise! Reasonable, imo.

Everybody point and laugh at me, my original outline had ch3-5 all as once thing lol

Next time: GALE! and not just youtube apology Gale. And other ppl that start with G. Maybe?

Chapter 6: Stinky Wizard

Chapter Summary

It's the long-awaited return of GALE. This time he's not just a youtube apology.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

CLANG-tkssssssssss!

Three seconds prior Gale was deeply asleep.

CLANG-tkssssssssss!

He was now *very* awake, gasping as he sat up in a panic, trying to understand the cacophony of sounds bombarding him from the darkness.

Tssss-CLANG-tkssssssssss!

He reflexively cast an illumination spell, and though the source of the noise was obvious, he was not much closer to understanding anything.

Astarion was standing on the foot of his bed, grinning madly. He had a pair of cymbals in his outstretched arms. "Good morning! Rise and Shine!" He kicked at Gale's legs under the blankets, "Up up up!"

"A-astarion?! What in all the realms!" He pulled his legs up.

"I said, time to get up!" He bashed the cymbals together again with a laugh.

CLANG-Tsssssssssssk!

“Cease your aural torment!” Gale rolled over and was greeted with a small feathery corpse laying next to his pillow, he groaned, “Tara!”

“Good morning, Mr. Dekarios! My eyes were rather bigger than my stomach, I must confess. I do hope you enjoy, though I am afraid it is rather dry.” Tara was sitting on her elaborate pillow throne, next to her cat tree that took up almost as much floor space as Gale’s bed.

Gale picked up the dead bird as he sat up on the side of his bed, preparing to cast it into his rubbish bin, as he always did, but then the rainbow colors caught his eye and he inspected it more closely, rubbing sleep from his eyes. “This is no common pigeon... why this is a rare Esmelian bronzewing! They’re not native to this region, they hail from Amn, near Athkatla, where they are in a sorry state, I am sad to say, their population numbers have been extremely negatively impacted by the recurrent trade wars, but I do recall there was recent success breeding them at the Aviary in this very city!” His sleepy brain put the pieces together. “Tara! No! Bad tressym!”

“Mr. Dekarios, that is not how you react to a gift, honestly, your manners are lessening everyday you spend here. At least Mr. Astarion appreciated my hunting prowess.”

Astarion tossed the cymbals aside, where they clangsked one final time amongst some books. He commented, “For such a *fancy* bird it still tasted just like pigeon,” as he jumped off the bed.

“Right. That’s it. I do *not* wish to know anything else. Relating to your shared avian appetites. I am most interested to know other matters. Such as what bloody *time* is it?”

“3:17 AM, Mr. Dekarios.”

“Awww, is this too early for you to get up?” Astarion frowned deeply at him.

Gale laughed, “Point well taken... though I must comment your, well earned - mind you, revenge is a bit disproportionate! Living humans need much more rest than your people do. Both of your kin! Elven and vampiric alike. Even with your peculiarities.”

“Is that so.” He opened his mouth to say something else but was mollified when Tara landed on his shoulder demanding some pets.

“Don’t think I have not noted your habit of sleeping rather than trancing, very curious. Is that due to your undead affliction? I have read that it disrupts an elven soul’s connection to the feywild.”

“No.” Astarion was very thankful Tara had stopped him from asking Gale who in the hells let slip he was a broken spawn. A new goal solidified in his mind. Never ever let the wizard find out about his additional ‘peculiarities’. Astarion was certain he would make so many sounds in his direction if he was aware.

At the single word response, Gale dropped the topic. He rubbed his eyes with a yawn and sleepily wandered over to the other side of what was essentially, a studio apartment. There was a small kitchen arrangement here. “Would you like some coffee? Tea?”

The vampire just looked at him.

“Of course you don’t, right, right, sorry.” He stifled another yawn and began brewing for himself.

“Woke me up, kicked my legs, I am prepared for a most insensitive question or three, if you plan to keep up this pattern of, again most deserved, retaliation.” Tara landed next to the coffee pot, accepting some Gale head scratches.

“How long does it take to dredge up some bits of metal anyway? Shouldn’t you be *gone*? Godgone? Or at least back to your glorious archmage status. Either way, no longer slumming with us powerless plebeians?”

“I have grown fond of this city! It is not Waterdeep, true, but you won’t be rid of me that easily. Rolan and I have plans to create a portal connecting my tower permanently to his!”

“Is that what wizards do when they get married?”

“What? No! ...sometimes, but that is not what is transpiring in this situation.” He ignored Astarion’s giggles and continued, “Unfortunately, all other plans are delayed, as this last fragment has proved most uncooperative indeed. My latest attempt to retrieve it was three days ago, when I discovered the latent magic energy leaking from it has attracted some river denizens, including one extremely large crustacean.”

“That was *you*?!” Astarion laughed again, grinning as he sauntered over. “I really need to eat more people if they are letting you get away with this much chaos. Speaking of which.” He bowed at Gale. “I am sorry I tried to bite you.”

“Ah well, you’re not the first who wanted to rip my throat out to stop me from speaking more, I’m sure. I have made some more egregious verbal blunders in my time! Tara can attest to that history.”

“Nooooooooo.” Astarion put a hand on his cheek in shock.

Gale laughed as he poured a himself a cup of coffee, then started scooping in a generous amount of sugar. “In the halls of ethereal academia people speak much more plainly, provided you are well versed in the various specific lexicons. Outside of it, I tend to forget myself and take people at face value too often; apply too much of a literalist view to the words of others.”

“My dear, then I fear in the realm of conversations I am as dangerous to you as the sunlight is to me.” He clarified with a smirk, as he was really speaking mostly to amuse himself, “By that I mean why would I ever just say what I mean when there are so many other more colorful turns of phrase?”

“I knew what you meant that time!” Gale shook the sugar spoon at him, before scooping in a bit more, then pouring in a generous amount of milk.

“You could just pour sugar into milk, Gale, it would be faster. No need for this *coffee farce*.”

“That is what I have told him, oh so many times, Mr. Astarion!”

He ignored the both of them and said, “I fully admit that my lack of subtext ascertainment is, on occasion, very willful. Really, I should have examined some of your statements in much more detail, and not been as quick to accept the more palatable interpretation.”

Astarion plucked his satchel off the floor; he had flung it there before he began the cymbal concert. “Yes, well, maybe. But you did not. So! That is ov—”

“Such as, near the end of our time in the shadow-cursed lands, when you mentioned being prized for your entertainment value.”

“What?” He stumbled in mid-step, turning back towards Gale.

“Ah, it was the night you told us of your previous visit to the area. Cazador was attempting to establish an alliance with Ketheric? You made a joke about being brought along as entertainment; in

case your former master was bored. No one would have thought much of it, or at least I would not have, but Karlach had quite the reaction! I asked for clarification and you told me it was something such as storytelling or singing I believe?” He took a sip of his coffee, confident it was *coffee*, not sweetened milk.

Astarion slowly sank down till he was crouching on the floor and repeated himself. “What?” He rallied himself to be more eloquent than that, “Wh-when?” It did not help that the room was starting to go dim.

Gale blinked, looking down at Astarion and slowly said, “It was when your stored blood was on the edge of expiring, so you drank an extreme quantity at one time. You were most hematologically inebriated.”

He flopped over onto his back and stared at the ceiling, wishing he was blood drunk again at this very moment. Well. That solved the mystery of why he didn’t remember. Also, the much older mystery of why everybody started to be *so much* nicer to him. It did feel like overnight the camp’s views shifted.

There had been a huge debate concerning if they should kill the orthon for Raphael. He spent that night ripping every page out of a horrid book in his tent before shredding the pages and chewing the cover to pulp.

Then a few days later, suddenly everyone was gleefully on the side of team ‘Yes, Astarion, of course we will help you find out what your scars mean.’ He had never bothered to examine this too closely; afraid their minds would change again. He had assumed either Karlach had worked her magic or that everyone else had just come to their senses naturally.

“...Astarion?” Gale leaned over, taking another sip of coffee flavored milk.

Tara landed on his chest, shifting into loaf form.

“Hello again, cat.”

“Oh. You do not remember?”

“No. Rather a running theme with me, or have you not paid attention to that either?”

Gale hesitated then reached down to offer Astarion assistance in getting back to his feet.

He slapped his hand away. “Don’t touch me,” he snarled out, getting to his feet, petting Tara automatically as he fumed.

“Um,” said Gale, dipping deep into his linguistic reserves.

Astarion sighed deeply and tossed the tressym at Gale. “Oh, whatever. I suppose this sequence of discovery was better than everyone walking into Cazador’s bloody palace unaware of my... history.” He laughed at himself, spinning around slowly as he mused, “What a fool I am, a bargain I was not even aware I was making! So many humiliating secrets revealed to secure help...” They knew. They all knew. This whole time. Of course they did. Things were, honestly, rather obvious if anybody thought for a moment. And were not wizards. He laughed again, shaking his head.

“As the mood is already rather awkward. I would like to apologize for my insensitive words once more and—”

Astarion groaned and dropped his head into his hands. “Please no, I do *not* want to talk about this anymore.”

“I knew Cazador was a nasty piece of work, but I had only heard about his political scheming with hints of violent acts, no hint of any coital impropriety.”

“How did you come up with an even worse phrase? Were you practicing? No one is here to stop me if I decide *not* biting you was my real mistake, you know.” He hissed, baring his fangs.

Tara flew up between the two. “Oh dear, please, boys, let’s not get into any spats now. Mr. Dekarios, remember what we talked about!”

Gale held up his hands. Well, his hands and the coffee mug. “Sorry. I’m sorry. Topic dropped.”

Astarion smoothed down his clothing to help steady his nerves. He casually said, “Well. That is that. I told Tara I would take her by the aquarium if there was time. Perhaps I’ll see you again some early morning hour for an encore.” He grinned at Gale.

“Wait, don’t leave just yet. I assume Wyll gave you a sending stone as well? Do you have it on your person? If so, I can greatly improve it for you.”

“Improve it? How?”

“Allow it to have more charges for one, permit some real back and forth communication. I had offered to provide him with such prepared stones already, but I fear between the storm and the new giant river life, I am not his favorite person at present.” He sighed, “One reason for my delay is he had refused to give me any assistance from the cities various troops to deal with the aquatic megafauna.”

Astarion debated and then rolled his eyes. “Ugh. Fine.” He fished the stone out of his pocket, holding it out to Gale, “Here.” If he regretted this he could always pitch the stone out his window. He’d tell Wyll he needed another due to wizard contagions.

Gale took the stone and said, “The equipment is off in the main area of the tower. No matter how tempting, it is just not good practice to sleep next to particular arcane instruments!” He continued as he headed towards the door, “Ah, before I forget again, Astarion, do remember that I know very much so what it is like to be suddenly alone, when one has had every hour almost filled with a partner before. The circumstances behind our solitude are different, yes, but there is still a similarity. You should visit more often so we could commiserate!”

Astarion stared at the door as it swung shut, then looked at Tara, spreading his arms to the side with his eyes wide. “Does he do this on purpose?!” He hissed out.

Tara winced and said, “No, he does not.”

“I am going to repeat this performance *at least* twice more. Make sure he does not dispose of the cymbals, my dear.”

“Let me give you a tour, Mr. Astarion!” She flew to her giant cat tree. Astarion followed, shaking his head while laughing.

A few minutes later, Gale returned, without the stone but with a scroll in his hand now. “The attunement will mature shortly. Astarion! While we wait, you could assist me in my ‘bits of metal’ reforging.”

Astarion raised an eyebrow. "... how so?" Tara had taken him to the most dangerous part of the room, the cupboard of vanishing! He had just finished retrieving a number of lost cat toys from underneath it. He shook a fist at Tara after she promptly batted one right back under the furniture.

Gale held out the scroll. "This is an ancient record on reforging artifacts that were most aged at the time it was written! My elvish is, unfortunately, rather rusty, and to be very transparent, was never that strong. I only took my one required year, you see. I would appreciate if you could check my translation."

Astarion *ugh*'ed, sniffing deeply in disapproval. He froze momentarily, but whatever put him off his game quickly passed. He humored Gale and took the scroll. He carefully unrolled the ancient fragile thing, making a show of looking over the elvish script, pursing his lips just so and muttering a bit to himself, pretending to not notice how eager Gale appeared. He subtly took a few more sniffs of the air, contemplating the odors more so than the writing.

He finally cast his eyes back at Gale, "Well, my name is not on here, I can tell you that!" Astarion grinned at the wizard's confusion. "Here it talks about a hundred of something? Or is that a thousand... oh! There's the word blue! Is that enough to confirm your translation?" He finished with a giggle that he had been holding in for the entire performance.

"Wait... what? Astarion, have you forgotten this as well?"

"I didn't forget how to read, Gale!"

"But if you can't read the scroll..." He gasped as Astarion flung it aside, diving to catch it before it hit the floor. "I'm sorry, but I am having trouble coming up with any other realistic explanation, it is very obvious that you are, well, an elf! I have never met any other elves that did not know elvish..."

"Almost everybody you know is a damn wizard! That is not what one would call the most ideal representative sample! I would wager good coin most non-elves you know can understand a spot of elvish!"

"That is not outside the realm of probability. Blackstaff academy does pride itself on the linguistic aptitude of its pupils! Far it be it from me to besmirch the magical arts, but translation spells are just no substitute for true knowledge. I am realizing more and more that my understanding of people with no connection to the weave is sparse, at best."

"I can say, with much more confidence than most anything else about my past, that I never was fluent. I know very little, what one would teach a child. Numbers and colors. I can write my name! It is *very* gorgeous in elvish script; I'll have you know. Unsurprisingly."

Gale still looked rather skeptical, causing Astarion to cluck his tongue and elaborate more with a *tsk*. "There is a difference between forgetting and simply never knowing. I feel this..." he wiggled his fingers in front of himself, as if searching for the word. "Void? When I reach for things that have been lost. Trying to read that scroll of yours? No empty void, just a simple lack of knowledge."

"Oh! I think I understand now! During my oral examinations when I was quizzed upon the mechanisms used to derived the base values needed for arcane stability in the myriad schools of magic. I felt my mind go completely blank, despite having gotten the highest recorded mark in my course work on the subject. Why, that was a much different feeling compared to when Elminster posited the question of what was the single greatest impact of the second sundering on agricultural practices. I could perfectly visualize the cover of the tome which held the answer to his question,

exact shade and the various markings upon the cover, sitting, just at it had, for months, unopened on the corner of my desk!”

Astarion stared at him for a moment, before saying, deadpanned, “Yes, Gale. Yes. Exactly right. You perfectly understand what it is like to have lost all but the barest essence of yourself.”

Gale nervously laughed, clasping his hands together. “Still, I am surprised to hear you don’t know elvish.”

“Really? I was a bloody magistrate in my thirties for hells sake. That’s a very human age to have such a vocation. I had to have been born in this city, one of those lost and corrupted urban elves.” He *tsk*’ed, disparagingly. “That are, rightfully so, oh so pitied by the proper high elves. To be more serious, I do feel I was never closely involved with elvish culture.”

“You were a magistrate for much longer than I imagined...!”

Astarion grinned and leaned towards him, purring out, “Ooooh? Was I?”

“Oh no...” Even Gale knew that look and tone never portended a pleasant revelation.

“I was not even forty years old when I acquired this affliction.” He motioned at the whole of himself, striking a jaunty pose for a moment.

Gale stared at him, putting hand to his mouth, muttering from behind it, “That’s younger than I am now...”

Astarion *ugh!*’ed with a roll of his eyes, “Yes, yes, I’m very tragic and mournful, do you need a hankie?”

“Are you converting years or... I am familiar with a number of elves that hail from Waterdeep and the surrounding environs, to say nothing of those at Blacksta—”

“Less words, Gale!” Astarion stomped a foot.

Gale drained the remainder of his milky sweet coffee, sitting the mug down before saying, “You look older than I would have thought an elf would, if he was not even 40.”

“Well, I am faaaaaar older than that now. Aging is more than the number of years a body was alive, you know.”

“I am not following you, I must confess.”

Astarion huffed then rolled his eyes, before saying, “Observe.” He closed his eyes, taking a few calming breaths. He relaxed his face as much as possible, the tension draining out of it. Soon all but the deepest smile lines, even the worry lines on his forehead, vanish into almost nothing.

Gale tilted his head to the side and approached for a better look.

He opened his eyes again and startled at how close Gale was, pushing him away while simultaneously taking a step backwards. “Two-hundred years of pure shit and extreme stress takes a toll, oddly enough! Oh, and do *not* forget the near constant starvation! Turns out, you make that face long enough? It *does* stay like that! Even if you’re already dead... I am now a rather... rough elven 39.” He inspected his fingernails, “No matter. I’m still beautiful. Perhaps even more so! I’m now refined... aged like a fine wine!” He batted his eyes at Gale.

“Oh,” Gale said, followed by, “Ah.”

Astarion took pity on the stupid wizard and kept talking, “Karlach first pointed it out to me. That when deep asleep I appeared more... youthful? I suppose I was never relaxed enough before killing the bastard.”

Gale nodded. “So. No elvish.”

Astarion nodded right back at him. “No elvish. Lost and corrupted urban elf, remember?” He shrugged. “I’m even only mostly sure that I’m the moon elf variety of high elf...”

“You are,” Gale confidently said.

“... and how are *you* so certain?”

“That is the only variety of high elf that has your exact features, hair color and texture in particular. Why, I bet your skin was not much paler in—”

“Stop! No. I don’t want any attempt at comforting words from *you*. ”

“Ah, but I was only...” Tara shot him a glare. “Yes. Yes. Right.”

“Thank you. I suppose it does make the most sense... they are the most common variety of elves? Hrm. Pity.”

“Yes, you are.”

“My dear, I am a vampire spawn with pointy ears and an ethereal beauty, more so than an elf; this is not something I am upset about.”

“... but to lose connection with your heritage...”

Astarion rolled his eyes, “Gale. I am deeply sad about *many* things that I have lost. Why do you want me to add another to the tally? So, what color eyes do moon elves have?”

“Ah! Well, while there is of course a lot of variation—”

“I don’t need a two-hour lecture, Gale!”

“Typically, green or blue, both with specks of gold or other—”

“Hrm.” He looked up at the ceiling, pondering, before nodding. That did feel right. He decided he had the *loveliest* specks of gold.

“If this inquiry is not over stepping, is such extreme memory loss typical for the vampire curse? Based upon the texts I have read I was under the impression it was true vampires and not spawn tha —”

“Ugh, why is everyone so concerned with my memory recently?” He dramatically waved a hand around in the air, frustration on his face for a moment, while Tara was occupied batting more of her newly freed toys around. “You’ve forgotten plenty of things yourself! You don’t remember being a baby, I assume.”

Astarion side-eyed Gale and then with a sigh decided to placate the wizard, in this at least. “We vampire spawn tend to, quicker than one would think, forget our prior life... when our bodies were really alive and not animated corpses...” He stared at his hands, flexing his fingers, a half-smile on his face.

“But you’ve forgotten more than most?”

“As far as I am aware, my dear wizard, you are looking at the champion of not remembering anything about his living-life.” He mimed receiving a trophy and did a little victory twirl before tossing the imaginary object at Gale, cackling when the wizard reflexively dodged the nothing.

“I am sorry, once again, for my assumption. Rest assured if I ever am in need of elvish color identification though, I will ask for your assistance.” There is a flash of light and a tinkling noise on the counter behind Gale, near to the coffee pot. “Ah! The stone is ready.”

Astarion dashed over and snatched up the stone. “I have lingered long enough that I’m sure you will be miserably tired the whole day, just as planned! I really must be going if I am going to try to get a bite in on my way home, as it is getting rather early. Sorry, my dear, we’ll visit the aquarium another night. But first! A gift for your wizard.” He motioned towards his satchel extravagantly.

“A gift?” Gale was filled with trepidation.

Soon enough a pillow was thrust into Gale’s hands, accompanied by a torrent of giggles. It was a small white square pillow, with flowers embroidered in each corner, encircling the words *unwanted intimate activities*.



“Ah.” Gale read the pillow again and again. “If a picture is worth a thousand words, you have gifted me at least an order of magnitude more.”

Astarion tapped the words with a finger as he grinned. “You’d best take that with you wherever you are staying. If you do not, Tara *will* let me know.”

“Mr. Dekarios, you know it is very impolite to not display gifts. Why your mother will be so curious when she lays eyes upon it!”

“Oh, how right you are... how many times I will have to expound on this gift?” Gale cannot help but laugh again at this particular earned misfortune.

Astarion was already halfway out the door. “No going back to sleep now!”

“I’ll be in touch!”

“That’s what you think!” Astarion yelled back as he slipped fully out the door.

Gale pondered the pillow for a while before tossing it at his bed. He stroked his beard, pondering. “Tara, I think I have an idea for something I just might be able to do that would benefit our vampire associate...” When no reply came, he blinked and looked around the room, “Tara?”



Said vampire associate was sitting on the fountain in front of Sorcerous Sundries. He marveled at how fast everything here had been repaired. That’s powerful magic for you, he supposed.

As Tara flew down to him, Astarion nodded his head in greetings and said, “I was hoping you understood basic thieves’ cant signs. You do seem like a lady of culture. I am not surprised!”

“A little trick I picked up while having a spot of excitement with Mrs. Dekarios once upon a time. But what is it? Why did you want to speak again so soon?”

“Your wizard... he’s getting worse, isn’t he? That orb in him, it’s making him sick.”

“What? What do you mean, Mr. Astarion? What did you notice?”

Astarion chewed on his lip for a moment before explaining, “Ah, you see, he smells rather ... bad. Worse than he did prior. I suspected so when I saw him last, but the taint is even worse now. His blood, I mean. I’m not commenting on his hygiene. Beyond the beard.” He *blegh*’ed, sticking his tongue out.

Tara flew in circles as she spoke, “He did remark once that disgusting parasite was out of his head using magic now felt more draining. He has been sleeping *so much* too. Oh, dear oh dear, Mr. Dekarios, oh dear!” she flew faster and faster.

Astarion sighed very deeply and looked up to the stars. “Fine. I’ll be a *good boy*. You’d better be watching and laughing at me.” He retrieved the sending stone again. He made sure he could not be disturbed by any messages when he was resting, but he strongly speculated that was not true for everyone. Especially not for one person in particular.

“Wyll, my dear! Rise and shine! I have some... complications to bring to your attention, for once not my own! But rather our dear wizard’s...”

“Astarion? What did Gale do *now*?” Wyll’s drowsy voice confirmed his suspicions.

The vampire grinned. He enjoyed this new status quo, he would freely admit.

“Amazingly enough, it’s not so much what he did but what I fear is happening to him... I will arrive shortly to explain in person.” He started walking towards the Ravengard estate. Tara flew behind him, soon enough landing on his shoulders, washing a paw to try to soothe her worries.

Chapter End Notes

Weee! Lol I had to use my thinking meats on this one a bit, in my notes it was just ‘go see gale eventually’ Whoopsie. A much shorter one bc thats how it do be sometimes. The next part we’re gonna see doesn’t really connect much with this so fuck it, separate chapters! Wyll had enough screentime, so that talkies gets to be offscreen.

next time: Astarion has enough of talking to people. He's going to try to AVOID people. He's astarion and the gods must hate him so that doesn't work out well for him. More G people appear!

Chapter 7: Hello again, little scraps of misery

Chapter Summary

Astarion has a moment of victory before the universe corrects course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was only mid-afternoon when the sending stone began to glow. After a moment it emitted a single gentle tone. Astarion grinned and tapped it with his nose, holding the rock via its chain as he lounged.

“Astarion? Open the door, I’m here with the repair crew and some surprise deliveries!” Wyll’s voice emitted clearly from the grey stone.

“Darling, you may just let yourself in! I arranged for you to have that key for a reason, you know. For shame, I’m not there!” He laughed and rolled over, anticipating the reply.

“What? Why not? Where are you??”

“Why, not there, obviously, my dear! I *can* exist other places when the sun is up, you know. I’m not chained to the bloody floor.”

Wyll’s next reply took a bit longer to arrive. “Astarion! We were supposed to discuss important matters today, I *know* you did not forget!”

“Alas, your pet vampire has slipped out of his gilded cage. Sorry, darling, I’ve banked more than enough good boy points, I am playing hooky.”

Astarion learned that groans can be perfectly transmitted over enhanced sending stones. He sent a boisterous laugh back.

“Astarion, I cannot stress enough to you how important this is! Another drained corpse was found, I know it isn’t from you! We have to—”

“Oh dear, you cut off!” He grinned and spoke in a purposely staccato fashion. “Sorry, my.” He spun the stone around, taking a moment before speaking again, “Interfering as I.” He paused then finished with, “Tunnel,” before opening his hand.

The sending stone dropped into his bag of holding; one single frustrated “Astarion!” escaping as it was swallowed up by the enchantment. He drew the bag shut with a cackle. He mused that perhaps he was feeling a bit too much glee over such a minor triumph, but he did not particularly care.

Astarion was in the city’s labyrinthine sewer system, perched up on a set of wooden slats above the pipework. He was high up enough that he was able to ignore *most* of the smell. Most. A scented candle helped with a good portion of the rest. It was perhaps an abandoned spy nest once used by the thieves’ guild. No matter, it belonged to him now. He had disinfected, washed and repainted the boards himself! He had done more than enough, ugh, *labor* for ownership to pass to him. He may

have forgotten almost everything his living-life that mattered, but so many laws and regulations still rattled around in his mind. They were useful tools to bore him to sleep, if nothing else.

He slipped the bag of holding under his head to use as a pillow, clasping his hands behind his head. His knees were bent, with one leg crossed over the other, that he lazily waved around as he stared up at the ceiling. Why did they bother to put decorative tile work up there anyway? Nobody was ever going to see it. Except for him right now. Which actually made it all worth the effort, so never mind, complaint withdrawn.

As much as he enjoyed the custom artistry, he really needed to come up with another place he could spend daylight hours. However, this *was* a start - his first successful escape from a visitor! Jaheira had found him no matter what before, including when he tried to hide in one of the other flats. While that strategy most likely would work for avoiding Wyll, it was not a tenable long-term option.

He was very glad no-one had been around the previous evening to see him slam right into a previously non-existent invisible barrier. He ended up sprawled out on the floor, utterly confused for a moment. He had gotten complacent, forgotten about the *rules*. How dare he try to do something normal like walking into a flat after he picked the lock? Turns out somebody signing a lease was enough to shift the units to the forbidden *private homes*. He'd soon not be all alone in the building. He had *no* idea how he felt about that.

Today Astarion wanted to be *left alone*, but that wasn't going to happen unless he made it happen. Everyone kept telling him what he wanted mattered. He wasn't a slave anymore. He had agency! Then all of those lovely words seemed to mean nothing the moment what he wanted conflicted with what *they* wanted.

He *didn't* want to talk more about whatever the hells Gale was doing with the crown and he *really* didn't want to talk about other vampire spawn not bothering to clean up after themselves! Maybe his friends (it still felt strange to use that term for anyone, but they were rather instant) were just confused as to how much his wants differed from theirs. Didn't they realize that they were courageous heroes and he was just... Astarion?

At least the previous evening had been a quiet night, spent once again wandering around the city; discovering to his great joy the drunken pseudo-fishing half-orc had learned nothing at all! A good evening for both recovering from his Gale exposure and deliberately forgetting about any other vampire spawn in the entire realm.

So of course he had to be reminded. Another damn fucking drained corpse. That's the second one. That he *knew* about! The first was found near a sewer entrance, very close to his flat. All the gods might hate Astarion specifically, but at least he had the best alibi possible for this murder; it happened exactly when Wyll was still lingering in his flat.

It was obviously Petras. Astarion couldn't even bring himself to be angry at the idiot for not bothering to cover his tracks at all, he expected no less. But, Dalyria, really? Just letting him leave his leftovers out in the open like that?! Eat people in the Underdark, for hells' sake! Nobody cared about them, the Drow were always killing each other off anyway. They wouldn't even notice.

Honestly, Astarion could understand the first kill, Dalyria must have crawled on a wall and couldn't resist *explaining* things. She *loved* explaining things. A much better person than Petras wouldn't have been able to resist! So fine. Fine. But then he did it again! Well. It was probably Petras again. Maybe? Stake him anyway and be done with it.

All Astarion had said was they all deserved a chance, same as he got! If he had drained random people from every settlement they passed on their travels he would have most assuredly gotten staked for it. Deservedly! Astarion had to earn their trust, even if they did trust him a bit too soon, in his opinion.

If Petras the Moron was running around sticking his fangs into people, killing them, and leaving enough evidence to get caught? *Chance blown*. Simple solution, and *not* Astarion's problem. Dalylria would call him selfish again, he could just feel it. No, he was being practical. He had a life to *try* to live, he didn't want to just spend it cleaning up Cazador's damn mess.

Not like he could really make much headway in cleaning up a Petras mess anyway. Astarion had told Wyll before to just stake him and be done with it, but obviously that was not acceptable. If the Grand Duke thought his staff vampire could possibly say or do anything to make Petras do or not do *anything*, he was greatly overestimating Astarion's influence. If it was one of his other siblings? Maybe. *Maybe*. But not Petras. Never Petras. Idiot. The moron had honestly been envious that Astarion was *the master's favorite*. What more proof did anyone need that he was beyond all hope of intelligent thought?

Wait, did he call just them siblings? No no no! The other slaves? Ugh no. Captives? Other spawn? ... the house spawn?

Fuck you, Cazador.

That's it, enough thinking about what he was down here avoiding talking about, that was just idiotic and counterproductive. Though it was really entertaining to imagine Wyll getting angry in Astarion's flat. What passed for angry as far as that sweet man was concerned, anyway. He might grimace for a whole thirty seconds before laughing and shaking his head!

Astarion stifled a yawn, he was a very tired little broken spawn. Resting hadn't gone that well for the first part of the day, he kept breaking his trance, convinced he'd heard the chime that signaled Wyll was messaging him again and again, hours before the real message arrived. He hoped Dal was feeling inexplicable satisfaction somewhere. See, he could trance! He'd do it when some horrid sewer beastie might lunge at him at any moment to eat him, or worse, drip ooze onto him! Blech.

In case something horrible like that did occur, he was wearing his leather armor. He did *not* want to try to get various sewer denizen leavings out of cloth. Also, he knew the spikey circlet that he paired with the armor looked *fabulous*. He really should just wear it on normal evenings. He grabbed a novel, preparing to read until he managed to slip into reverie. If he had one horrible vision he was just going to sleep again though, let all the beasties attack! They couldn't be worse than the demons lurking in his head.

After a most of a chapter he started to yawn and realized he was reading the same page again and again, absorbing nothing. He set the open book over his face, blocking out the somehow omnipresent ambient light, and started drifting off. A little trick he used to help ease himself to rest was to try to identify the source of every noise that his spectacular sense of hearing delivered to him. Flowing oh, let's just call it water, rats, more weird winged summoned things (where did they keep coming from??), some distant argument at the very edge of his perception, and three sets of footsteps, getting closer.

Wait. Three sets of footsteps, but only one heartbeat? He rolled over and peered off the edge of his perch. Oh, it was the Gur man, the one from the hag's swamp a billion years ago, and his two vampire spawn children, walking right down what he had just then decided was *his* tunnel. The older spawn

combated any guilt that swirled around inside him by desperately trying to remember what the man's name was. Or either child. His started with a G...? the children's.... didn't?

Why were they here? Those children should be asleep at this hour! Was he trying to keep them on daylight hours? They could not be hunting down here, could they? There was nothing to eat! Except for rats! Ugh, don't make them eat rats, you can do better than that, whatever-your-name-is. Hunter is part of 'monster hunter' after all, go get them something good to eat!

Were they looking for him? No that couldn't be it, nobody knew he was down here. Oh, they were making sounds, perhaps he could, you know, listen to their conversation instead of panicking. Or at least multi-task. He could panic and listen at the same time; he was very well practiced.

"I'm hungry!" whined the longer haired spawn. Astarion was horrible at gauging children's ages, she was maybe ten?

"I know, I know. We all are."

"Father, you can eat! You're being foolish. Why are we walking here anyway! Why did you wake us up, why can't we just sleep at camp today?" Ah, that was the one that took point for the children in the cells. Lovely, of course the scrap of misery that personally threatened him was who he'd encounter by chance. She was older, possibly a teenager, albeit just barely.

"A nice change of scenery, Chessa! I thought you two might like to stretch your legs some, instead of being cooped up all day long. We'll return soon... when the sun has set."

The younger cursed vampire child stopped walking to cry, rubbing her eyes, "Isn't there anything to eat? I'm tired of being hungry! It hurts, Father!"

Ugh, they just went on and on like that in a horrific loop. He decided that was even worse than if they were looking for him. Astarion chewed on the poor book's cover as he thought. Gods. He did *not* want to talk to those little scraps of misery ever again! For all he knew they might lunge at him the moment they saw him. Ungrateful brats. He saved them! Yes, sure, *after* dooming them, but he had no choice when it came to dooming them! Saving them was a choice that he made! That should count for more. He picked up his satchel and heavily sighed. At least they had passed by him before they stopped to have crying time. He pushed the rope ladder over the edge, silently climbing down it and positioning himself behind the trio. He was really doing this, wasn't he? Nobody was even making him do it! What was wrong with him? Was this because he spent all that time with Wyll? Was he contagious?!

"Why, hello there!" Astarion cheerfully chirped out, giving a practiced wave as they turned.

"*You!*" The older one shouted at him, pointing.

"*Me!*" He grinned back at her, striking a jaunty pose!

Before she could charge at Astarion, her father put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing just enough that she looked back up at him. He smiled at the older spawn saying, "Why hello there! This is a popular spot today, I see!" The cheerfulness in his voice only had a tinge of wrongness to betray the facade.

"What do you want, freak?" The older one tugged free from her father's grasp, but did not move, only crossed her arms and glared.

“Chessa, be nice...” She huffed and kept up the glaring. The man plastered on a smile and lifted up the smaller, still sniffling spawn. “And this is Kass!”

“Astarion.” He gave a well-practiced bow to the trio.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Astarion sighed and dispensed with all pretense. “So. I was up there.” He pointed with a flourish. “I couldn’t help but overhear... you *did* walk right by my lair! So, uh. What have you been feeding them? How much?”

The man winced as he said, “You’ve stumbled into a thorny mire indeed with that question. We were safely bleeding off our livestock but...” he trailed off.

“I don’t want to eat rats!” Kass, wailed and then burst into tears, wiggling out of her father’s arms and plopping onto the ground.

Chessa rolled her eyes. “Ugh. Nobody *wants* to eat rats, Kass! Stop crying about it!”

Astarion raised his eyebrows, taking a step back. “Right. Okay. So. Uh, have you eaten at all today?”

Both children stared at him, after a moment Kass moved behind Chessa, peering out from behind her.

“No, they have not. Girls, you can talk to him. He’s been a vampire spawn much longer than you have.” He hesitantly looked at Astarion and added, hopefully, “He could teach you a great many things.”

“Yes, I know so many skills that are suitable for children,” he muttered, looking up at the tile work above them again.

“How do you make it stop?” Chessa asked, Astarion tore his gaze away from the ceiling to see two little sad faces looking up at him.

“... make what stop?”

“Uh. The *hunger!* What *else* would I be asking you. Hair care tips?” She huffed and rolled her eyes again.

Astarion shot a glance towards the Gur man, who did not meet his eyes, looking away quickly. Really. He was going to make *Astarion* tell them? Well fine! It’s not like they can hate him even more than they already do.

He grinned, holding his hands up to either side of his head, fingers widely spread and leaning down, as if he was about to say something pleasant instead of atrocious. “You do *not!*” He dropped his hands down and stood up straight again. “You blunt it. Dull it. Grind it down. Pick your favorite phrase.”

The man softly said, “Chessa, we did talk about this...” She ignored her father and just kept glaring at Astarion.

“You’re always hungry! I’m always hungry! It’s not called the vampiric blessing after all.”

Kass started crying once more, the man picking her up to sooth her. “There there, little one, I’m here, there there...”

“But you walk around and seem ... normal! For a weirdo,” said Chessa, ignoring her sister and keeping her pre-teen glare firmly focused.

“Hey!” He glared right back, then pointed at her. “What do you call that leg moving you did to get here then, *hrm?*”

“Ugh, that doesn’t count. There’s no people here!”

“... your father isn’t a people?”

“Pft, *no!* Thats my dad!”

Astarion shrugged at that, well, fair enough, he supposed. “Fine, besides your not-a-person-father, let us see... or well, hear.” He closed his eyes and focused for a moment, then pointed down the tunnel. “Four heartbeats, moving away from us, far off.”

He pointed another direction. “Two, some walls between us. Very active... *hrm.*” He pulled his attention away and pointed up with a grin. “So many!” He then blinked and pointed down, raising an eyebrow. “... one? Huh. Well, anyway. That is not even counting all the rats and other less desirable beasties! My small dear, you can find people *everywhere* in this city!”

All three Gur stared at him after that little performance.

Astarion buffed his fingernails on his armor and casually said, “Only reporting on the ones fairly nearby, of course. No need to exert myself.”

“How?! You’re lying! You can’t possibly know all that and be standing there!” She put a hand up to her ear and strained to try to detect anything herself.

“I am a *very* well-fed vampire spawn! The better you eat the better you get! Hearing and everything else.” He twitched his ears once; a bit of an rare ability for a high elf to have, their ears were far stiff than that of their kin.

Chessa stomped her little foot and shouted, “Of course I know that, everybody knows that! I meant how are you here talking to us and not hunting them! How are you not ravenous?”

Astarion stomped his foot right back at her. “What is *with* everyone as of late? I don’t want to! It’s that simple!”

The grown monster hunter laughed loud and hard at that interaction. The squabbling vampires took a break from glaring at one another to glare at him instead.

He chuckled softly again as he set down the wiggling Kass. “Sorry, it’s just you’re unknowingly repeating what I have already told her.”

Astarion snorted out a laugh at that, despite everything. At least one person knew *something*. “I cannot believe I am doing this after such treatment. But let’s get you at least somewhat fed.”

He plucked out two bottles of blood from his satchel. He had felt very paranoid bringing them down here with him, but no more! He held the pair out for the vampire children to take, but they only stared at him more. He growled and wiggled the bottles. “Oh, come on!”

“Girls, take it, say thank you.” The each took a bottle, muttering thank yous of two widely different sincerity levels.

“So. Uh. I drink two of these a day. Believe me, the hunger just wants me to *keep* drinking them, but beyond that animal blood won’t do a damn thing to help, so that would just a waste.” He took a third

bottle out for himself. Fuck it, early breakfast time. He *had* to leave that note for Jaheira tonight, or he *would* be in danger of running short before her next scheduled delivery. Maybe he'd tell her he lost control rather than admit how much he had just *given away*. That seemed less embarrassing than explaining everything.

“Will they need less because they're smaller? Or does that not matter?”

Astarion laughed, a bit louder and longer than he really intended to. “As if I bloody know. This is a recent discovery for me! You don't want to know how much *Cazador* permitted me to feed...”

There was a moment of silence before he gleefully said, “A rat a tenday! At best! Anyway, cheers!” He opened up his bottle and started drinking.

After just a slight pause, Chessa opened hers and drank it down, copying Astarion's pace. Her sister needed a bit of help to get the bottle open, once her father assisted, she began drinking very quickly, and a bit messy, finishing first. She then stuck her hand inside the bottle, trying to get at the blood clinging to the inside.

Her sister watched, restraining herself from doing the same, gripping her freshly empty bottle tightly with both hands. Astarion sighed and then stuck his fingers in his bottle, scraping out the remaining blood. “No reason to waste a drop!” Gods, he had hoped he was beyond this manner of degrading display of hunger. Chessa allowed herself to fish out the remainder of the blood after his example.

After a few minutes Astarion managed to get the mostly empty jars away from the baby spawn, allowing them to focus on the impact of the feeding more than the urge to get every single drop possible.

Kass blinked and looked around. “Wow... it's like the lights were turned up!” She looked up at Astarion and shouted, “Thank you!”

“I *guess* there's more stuff I can hear now,” Chessa said.

Astarion glared at their father. “Really, you have not even managed to procure a consistent supply of, gods I don't know, cow blood? Don't make your children eat rats!” He stomped a foot as he huffed.

“It is... harder than I would have thought to secure steady supplies of blood. Many of the butchers refuse to trade with my people on principle, nothing to do with any vampiric additions. And as for our own livestock...” he trailed off, looking at his daughters.

“Oh. I'm... I'm sorry.” He thought for a second and quietly said. “The High Harper. She can help you.”

“Children, could you please go play a bit farther down the tunnels? Just for a short while.”

“Go hunt rats or something, get some dessert.”

“No!” Chessa shouted; her sister started crying once more.

“Stop that! Stop leaking!” Astarion pointed at his wooden perch. “Go up there! I have some books you can decide you hate too.” The two children scurried up the ladder quickly.

“Soooo...” He smiled brightly at the Gur hunter. “What's your name again?”

“Gandrel,” he said with a laugh. “Will the High Harper of the gate really help feed my little ones? Our relationship with the Harpers has been strained for all my life. I am not privy to details, but an alliance was not honored, decades ago.”

Astarion waved off his concerns and scoffed, “Jaheira won’t care about any of that. She’s a *true hero*.” He rolled his eyes. “She’s feeding me, for hells sake!” He picked up the empty bottles, putting them in his satchel like a good little spawn.

“I don’t know if the butchers would sell anything to *me* either.” He muttered under his breath, “I’m having a hard enough time with booksellers.” He then eyed Gandrel. “Why don’t you people just break in and steal if they won’t sell it to you? Seems fair to me, your coin is just as good.”

“Ah, my friend, but then where would we get blood for them the next week?”

Astarion rolled his eyes, they’re nomads, can’t just they pack up and go steal from somebody else down the road? Whatever. “And why can’t you feed them with your beasts? Did one of them get a bit too bitey and drain them all? It can be a bit of trouble to stop when you’re new. I suggest keeping a rolled-up broadsheet on hand.”

Gandrel sighed heavily, dropping his voice down, hoping his children cannot hear. “There is much strife in our camp currently. While I am most thankful you gave my precious little ones back to me, I am a minority view amongst my kin.”

Astarion winced, wishing deeply he was more surprised to hear that. The events after Cazador’s death were a bit hard to recall, but he did remember how except for this one with that unforgettable mustache, the Gur were not the most... pleased with his decision.

“Truth be told, I have taken many other little ones under my wing. Their own parents have refused them. Before I realized what was brewing, one of the others was... dispatched, by her own mother... and one family exiled their own back into the Underdark.”

“They rescued them from that sea of spawn only to kill them or cast them out again?”

Gandrel sadly laughed. “No, I was the only one to intercept the spawn flooding into the Underdark. I secured all of our children and shepherded them back to camp. Two of your fellows were very helpful with that. A tiefling and an elf woman who looks a fair bit like you, now that I see you once more. Please tell them how grateful I am.”

“Maybe parents really *don’t* love their children as much as I’ve been led to believe...”

“They are different now, true. But I look at them, and I still see my sweet ones looking back at me. Confused and in pain. In need of my love and guidance now *more than ever*. I cannot understand how anyone feels otherwise. Casting them out? That would be the fastest way to ensure they did truly become monsters.”

“What if it had been a... long time since you had last seen them? ... and they no longer remembered anything about you?”

“What? Why are you asking such a thing?” Gandrel was jerked out of his own thoughts by the odd question, raising an eyebrow at Astarion.

“Oh no reason.” He coughed. “Anyway. You should get them better blood. Thinking creature blood. It’s what we’re made to use. It helps us just... be better. Feel better. We *need* it. It dulls the hunger

more than all the beast blood you could shove down their little gullets. Almost quells the appetite. Almost.”

Gandrel looked skeptical. “That is a door we cannot shut, once it is opened.”

“Just a nibble! Come on, Papa. You look big and full of blood? What about Mama Gur? Where is she at? You two can switch off and feed two little spawn just fine.”

“She was slain during the assault on your former master’s palace.”

“Oh.” The two men stared at each other for a moment before Astarion stomped away a few paces and said, “If you won’t feed them yourself, there’s enough people in the gate, you can take sips from without anybody being the wiser. Trust me!” he finished with a grin.

“Have you been hunting in the city? That was not part of our deal with you.” He narrowed his eyes at the spawn.

Astarion made a strangled noise of offense, flinging his hands up. “Well, be that way then! Good luck helping your vampire daughters with *your* centuries of personal experience. *Goodbye!*” He turned to start walking down the tunnel.

“Wait. No. That doesn’t matter. It’s not our problem, forgive me.”

He frowned at the Gur hunter, considering for a few moments before hissing at him, crossing his arms with a *hmph!* but no longer moving to leave.

Chessa slid down the rope ladder with lighting speed, racing to get between her father and Astarion. She spread her arms wide and glared up at Astarion with a frown.

“Aren’t you just precious!” He laughed at this display.

“Chessa, it’s fine. I was just a bit rude to him.”

“I won’t let him attack you!”

Astarion flung his hands up again, he might as well just keep them over his head at all times, these people were *exhausting*. “Why in the hells would I do that *now?!?*”

“I heard you hissing! That’s what feral spawn do!”

He lunged towards her, hissing again. She jumped backwards, obviously frightened, bumping into her father. Astarion erupted into laughter, wiping an eye at the scene. “You can just make sounds you know! You don’t *have* to be mad with hunger. I can make other noises too, you know. ... want to hear?”

“Yes.” She stared up at him, her sister starting to climb down the rope ladder.

Astarion grinned and stood up straight, clearing his throat to prepare. He then emitted a growl that sounded more like it should be coming from some form of wildcat than his lithe elven form, the effect amplified as it echoed off the close in walls of the tunnel.

Kass was halfway down the rope ladder, taking her time. The growl startled her so much that she lost her grip, starting to fall. Astarion just stood there and watched her, while Gandrel dove past him to catch her before she could hit the stonework of the sewer walkway.

Chessa stared up at Astarion wide eyed. He rolled his eyes at her and waved his arms around exasperatedly. “Well, *fine* then. Everyone’s a critic.” He crossed his arms and *hrmph*’ed!

“Thank him, Chessa, you *did* ask. But I think that is enough of that for now.” Gandrel approached the pair, carrying the still sniffling smaller girl, his scraped forearms starting to ooze blood.

“Ugh, why even bother with that ridiculous display of pretend heroism? You’re injured and do not even heal efficiently! A fall from ten times that height wouldn’t kill a vampire!”

“I don’t want to see her hurt, even if she would heal quickly. Better I skin my elbows.”

Astarion raised an eyebrow at that, staring at the Gur man comforting his small vampire daughter. One could almost hear the gears in his brain grinding together as they tried to process that statement.

“I’m still hungry!” Kass cried in her father’s arms.

“Thinking creature blood dulls it more,” Astarion so helpfully told her. This made Kass wiggle down and scurry away from her father, going to her sister. He chewed on his lower lip then sighed, and said “If I bring you some better blood, no going mad and trying to eat your father, hear me?”

“Ugh! We won’t do that!” Chessa shouted out. Her sister tugged on her sleeve, whispering something into her ear.

“Hrmm... I did not think Dalyria, of all people, would try to eat someone either and I got mauled for it! That has rather made me even *less* trusting of other vampires.” He paused and reflected. “Though she *did* try to eat a child before that... but really, that was under *very* different circumstances.”

The two vampire children stopped whispering to each other, staring up at him after that comment.

“Well, I mean, she *was* trying to escape Cazador, after I told her he was going to slaughter them all for the ritual. So, really, she was being much more reasonable than it sounds at first. Whomst amongst us would not have eaten a child or seven to escape? I personally would have devoured a whole school with no guilt if that secured me my freedom!” He pondered, running his tongue over the front of his teeth as he considered, then nodded. That seemed fair, no need to add any clarification to that.

When he stopped pondering there were two sets of little children eyes staring up at him, horrified. “What?!” He spread his arms out, exasperated once more. “You were only there for a few months; would you say you had a *good time*?”

They both shook their little heads.

“Two! Hundred! Years!” He jabbed his finger into his chest with each word.

They both gasped their little gasps!

Astarion smugly smirked down at them.

Chessa wrinkled her nose. “Ugh, having to hear that tall creep’s voice for 200 years? Ew!”

“Hah! I had to experience far more than just his voice...” he trailed off, staring into space, his cocky tone rapidly diminishing.

Awkward silence descended, interrupted only by the various drips and bubbles of the cavernous sewer system.

Astarion clapped his hands together and said, “Anyway! If I get you fed don’t turn around and try to eat your dad. Please!”

“You are most ancient for a spawn,” Gandrel said as he looked Astarion up and down.

Astarion batted his eyes at Gandrel “But yet what a vision of youth and beauty I remain!” He struck a pose for a moment before rolling his eyes and saying, “Time to hunt. Don’t run off now!” He spun on his heels and started stalking down the tunnel, hands going to the swords on his back.

“Is he... is he going to go kill someone, father?”

“I think so, Chessa.”

Once again, all that could be heard were the background sounds of the sewers, with Astarion’s receding footsteps added to the ambiance.



“Oh! I hear him coming back! He was right about at least one thing. Even freaks with stupid hair know a few things, I guess,” Chessa said. Gandrel laughed and shook his head, ruffling her hair.

The older vampire spawn came into view, dragging large human man wearing a Banite mask. Or at least, was trying to drag him the rest of the way. He called over, “Little *help*?! Do I have to do *everything*?” Chessa ran past her father to help.

“You *did* kill someone!”

“I killed a Bane worshiping nitwit, does that really count as a someone? He was fighting with a Bhaalist moron. Guess they hate each other again! Poor fool, had barely achieved victory when I appeared to shove him into the jaws of defeat.” He laughed then licked his lips. “I saved the larger one for you.”

She had some difficulty at first due to her small size compared to the corpse. Astarion lifted the body’s torso up with a grunt of effort, permitting her to get a better grip. She took over completely, moving much faster and leaving him behind, the legs slipping out of his hands, but the body not slowing down without his contribution.

He suppressed a sigh as he followed after. Lovely. Turned out vampire spawn children *also* had vampire spawn strength. Good for them. Wonderful. She was not even well fed. Amazing. At least this tragic family shouldn’t be able to realize anything was wrong with him.

After Chessa drug the body to the nook they had been waiting in, she looked back at Astarion. “What’s wrong with you? That wasn’t hard at all!” She tilted her head to the side, studying him.

He scoffed, “Nothing is *wrong with me*. I just thought you should do *some* of the work. It’s your food, after all.”

She looked him up and down, pondering for a few more seconds, then the realization came to her. She gasped out, “Father! He’s a broken spawn!”

“Chessa, no, that’s not nice...”

“But he is! Have you ever seen one before?” She reaches out to try to poke Astarion’s hand.

He hissed at her, slapping her hand away. “Rude little brat! No touching! I brought you *food* and you’re treating me like this?!” He hissed again and stomped. “... how do you even know what that is!? I didn’t know those were a thing, *which I am not one of*, till this last tenday!”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Uh, it’s in *all* the monster guides.” She grinned and peered up at him, moving around to look at him from all angles. “Did you forget your whole life? What else are you missing?!”

Astarion deeply and truly regretted not sending this little brat’s soul to the hells. “Of course not! I remember plenty. Almost everything! Get away from me!”

Gandrel said, very firmly, “Chessa.” She slunk away from Astarion.

“Child, you are an excellent representative of your people.” He pointed at the body. “Eat your damn food and leave me alone. Forever.”

Chessa looked at the body, crouching down by it. She looked back at Astarion. “How?”

“Wh-what do you mean *how?!?*” he sputtered out. “You have fangs! *Bite!*” He bit the air and then *ugh*’ed before kneeling down with a growl, putting a finger lateral to the hollow of corpse’s throat. “Trust your senses, you can just *tell* where there’s more blood. Major vessels. Neck is the easiest, they’re close to the surface, larger, and it’s softer.”

He pulled out a dagger, cutting one arm free from its armor. “The arm is a bit more difficult, but he’s dead so you might as well get some practice in. Sure, you can *see* the veins but they’re hard to get your teeth into and keep the flow going when you drink.”

The older Gur child was staring intently at him, absorbing all of this and waiting for more. As Astarion had nothing more he was planning to say they just stared at each other for a long moment.

“That’s all you have to say? Just bite? I could have figured that out,” she said as she rolled her eyes with preteen expertise.

No one ever helped *him!* He had to learn everything the hard way. Ungrateful brat. Pitching her right into disgusting flowing muck next to them was becoming more and more tempting. He gritted his teeth, saying, “Trust your instincts. They’re there to help you.”

Astarion stood up and added with a flippant laugh, “Until they’re not! Sometimes you do *not* want to trust them, at all! You’ll figure out which ones are which...”

Gandrel laughed, shaking his head. “You were not a teacher in life, I am assuming.”

Astarion flipped him off.

The vampire spawn children ate their very generously provided meal, and didn’t do that badly, thought they were rather messy. Gandrel helped them both clean up afterwards; the younger one needed more help, of course.

Astarion eyed them warily, ready to intercede if needed. But they showed no signs of the odd behavior Dalyria exhibited after her first thinking-creature meal.

“Thank you. And um. Thank you again. For not killing us,” Kass said softly.

“Don’t mention it. Really. Please.”

Chessa put a hand to her stomach and looked over at him. “This is as good as it gets?”

He gawked at her. “Well, yes! It can get a lot worse. As you well know! This is nothing in comparison...”

“You call this nothing?!”

“Yes? I mean... the ache is not that dissimilar from what the living feel when they are rather peckish.” Or so he assumed, anyway.

“Do you *really* remember being alive?”

Hissing at her was the extent of his rebuttal.

“Chessa, remember, we’ve talked about this. Don’t bully adults.”

She hmph’ed. “Does he *really* count as an adult?”

Astarion suddenly understood the parents that killed or sent away their vampire children. Just a bit. Especially if their horrid spawn acted anything like this.

Meanwhile, Kass wandered over to the sewer wall, staring at it for a long moment, before she put her hands to it and then started instinctively climbing up it, like a spider, one might say. She gasped and shouted out, “Chessa! Father! Look!” as she climbed higher and higher.

“I was wondering why the children couldn’t wall climb, but I thought it might have been due to their age.”

“No.” Astarion was not that surprised this was happening, but he was mighty jealous.

“Kass? How are you doing that? Wait for me!” Chessa stuck her hands to the wall and followed after her sister, easily catching up. Once she could reach, she tapped her sister on the shoulder and exclaimed, “Tag! You’re it!” before rapidly scuttling away on the wall.

“Hey!” Kass raced after her sister.

“Girls? Girls, no, wait!” Gandrel reached out, fruitlessly trying to stop them as they completely ignored him.

“She’s right, by the way. I am a broken spawn.” Astarion pointed at the rapidly vanishing wall climbing children while grinning widely. “I can’t help you with this! Another thing I am *missing*, as she so kindly put it.” He did a little impromptu dance to celebrate.

“... really?”

“Yes! Really! Better go get your kids, Poppa!”

Gandrel started running after them, shouting, “Girls! Girls!! Come back, please! Chessa! Kass!”

Astarion climbed the ladder back up to his little wooden perch, laughing the whole time. He swept the boards to cleanse them of any children detritus, real or imagined. Ugh. Vampire children, the only

thing worse than living children. He was somewhat glad he was incapable of climbing on the walls, just for right now. If he had that power, he might have felt he had to help chase them, since this was his fault. Dalyria would be very interested in this. More confirmation for her the spawn in the cages were not broken. Only special runty Astarion received that glorious designation!

He grumbled and stretched out to slip into trance, which took very easily as he was so fucking tired.

He was chained to the kennel wall. All he was wearing were shackles on his wrists and ankles, with a matching iron collar around his neck. A chain was connected to the collar, the links clinking as someone gathered it up and started tugging, forcing him to lift his head up. Cazador's red eyes and wicked gleaming white grin awaited him.

Astarion broke his trance instantly. Motionless, he stared up at the tile-work for a few seconds. In theory, at least, trancing can show you *nice* memories. Perhaps not for undead elves. Most of the gods specifically hated the undead. Why would the elven gods be any different? Perhaps this was how they punished anyone who found themselves an elven vampire. With a sigh he rolled onto his side and curled up, time to sleep again. He was a light enough sleeper anyway, he'd wake up if something did try to eat him. Also, at this point he was not so sure being eaten would be that bad after all.

His light sleeper credentials were proven when he startled awake, just in time to see Chessa scurry down the wall away from his tiny lair. He sat up to make sure she was really gone and discovered she had delivered him a dead rat. He wrinkled his nose and picked it up to fling it back down at her, but upon discovering it was still warm he paused. A very fresh kill. It looked pretty healthy too... even if he didn't take into account it was a sewer rat.

Before he could think about it too much more, he expertly drained the rodent and flung the empty body down below.

Child vampire laughter drifted up from below. The pair talked over one another, but he could make out "He ate it!" and "Ew! He sucked it so dry!" Heavier footsteps approached and Gandrel clapped his hands to get their attention. "Girls! I said to leave him alone."

They laughed again as their father succeeded in shepherding them away. At the edge of his hearing range, they began making little hissing, growling, and even roaring noises, obviously trying to imitate him. Astarion surprised himself by laughing softly at that. Ah well, at least they were discovering there were some ways to have fun with their shared affliction. Not many at all, but some! He then frowned, remembering they could crawl on the walls and he could not.

He did a good deed today and no one else ever had to know about it. Now he can wash his hands of these people fully and them of him in turn, they all would be much happier. *At least I never have to see that little brat or any of her people again*, was his last thought before drifting off.

Chapter End Notes

Look there's so many bad dads in this damn game there has to be at least one good father!! I totally killed Gandrel off my first play-through but 2nd time around I was just like OH NO HE'S A GOOD DAD TO HIS BABY MONSTERS. WHAT HAVE I DONE PAST ME. And really post Cazador if you don't just kill all the spawn all of the Gur except for him are uncertain at best and most are just like 'you fucking moron'. So! I don't think it went that well in ole Gurland.

Fun trivia this was actually the first concept I started writing after the 'live, bitch' one shot, but then I was like hrm!! Bc I started describing the little apartment Astarion had at the start and was like, maybe I will show people bothering him there first! Good decision IMO bc then I got to make fun of Gale more this way.

NEXT TIME:

You would think Astarion would learn by now no good deed goes unpunished, but I guess he is new at this good deed thing.

Chapter 8: High Harper

Chapter Summary

Summary: HEY JAHEIRA IS HERE FINALLY. SO. STOP READING THE SUMMARY AND START READING THE CHAPTER.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jaheira knocked on his door. It was a delivery day for his blood rations, if he hadn't gotten his skinny vampire arse over to her house to pick them up. He only managed to do that once, so far. Despite telling her over and over again he'd swing by the next time, promise. So, she will show up when the sun is still in the sky rather than later and he will like it. His revenge was to randomly wait in her basement to surprise her. Or maybe he did that first and this is her revenge? She does not remember, nor care. That was balance, what druids aim for, yes? She was sure this was doing Silvanus proud.

No answer. She knocked again, much harder. Still no answer. She sighed in and kicked the crate against his door, hard.

"I *know* you are a light sleeper, little bat!"

"The window is open!"

She blinked, honestly surprised he answered. If their normal routine had been followed, she would have soon started hunting for him somewhere else in the building. Fine then, he can have a slight reward.

Shortly after, a raven flew in through his open bedroom window, transforming back into Jaheira before even fully landing.

She expected to see Astarion glaring up at her from his blanket nest, as was their newly established tradition. However, when she looked down, in his normal spot was instead his silk sheets and ornate embroidered duvet; neatly folded and stacked on top of each other. A pale hand entered her view and lazily waved, drawing her eyes upwards.

Astarion was sprawled out on his bed, with his collection of pillows; he had amassed so many that it was verging on impossible for all of them to fit on the bed. One of his fuzzy enchanted blankets was spread out on the mattress, and he was tangled up in the other, wearing only his baggy pajama bottoms. The late afternoon sun was streaming in, hitting the wall dangerously close to his prone form.

He squinted at her, clutching one of his numerous pillows. He (mostly) suppressed a yawn as he said, "Mm... you're early. Cheater. I even set the alarm this time..." He pointed at the encroaching sunbeam with a leg, then jerked it back; one toe freshly singed and smoking. A couple of pillows tumbled to the floor.

"... do you make it a habit of burning yourself awake with the sun?"

He shrugged as he sat up, another pillow joining its compatriots. "You suggested I should try to rise earlier, get a better start on the evening and all, not waste any of my precious hours. Don't give me that look, mortals get sunburned too. I'm just more efficient," he said with a grin, scraping off bits of crispy skin flakes.

She stomped across the room, jerking his curtain shut as he giggled at her. She made sure to wipe any irritation from her face before turning back around.

"So. You want me to praise you? Or to ignore this accomplishment?"

He scoffed at her, "Praise me, but of course!"

Jaheira clapped at him politely as she walked back over. "First night?"

"Well, aren't we nosy. Third *day*, if you must know." He paused for a moment, then muttered, "Two and a half? If I'm being fully honest? Disgusting habit, really, so let's say three."

She clapped again and then pointedly stopped clapping in the middle of another repetition.

He laughed and flopped back down again, catching another pillow mid-tumble to the floor. "I had some... trial and error. Before I determined the sensation of silk itself was what was... poisoning the greatest hindrance to properly resting. Foolish, really, it's so obvious now if I stop to... consider." He carefully found a new spot for the errant pillow in his transposed nest.

"Most things are obvious once we are past them, little bat. Don't feel foolish."

"Shame really, silk does feel lovely... In any case, with this arrangement, I no longer am overcome with the sensation of... waiting. Anticipating. Or worse." He coughed, "Anyway. Would you like any silk sheets? Very fine. Your horrid children can, oh, I don't know, set them ablaze or whatever it is children do for amusement."

"Keep them, my children have not been well enough behaved for such a reward." She noted a few empty wine bottles, laying on their side next to the sheets. "You were forced to do much... anticipating, I take it?"

"Ugh, Cazador loved tossing us into some situation and leaving us for hours, if not days... sometimes, honestly, the more active torment truly was a bit of a relief from the uncertainty... Hrm. He never *did* manage to get around to impaling me on that pike he loved to brandish in my direction..."

She kicked at a wine bottle, sending it clinking against its fellows. "A bit of liquid courage to help you through? Finally manage to make it work? You owe me for all my bottles that you ruined!"

"I needed hardly any today; I'll have you know! Not even half a bottle!"

"And the day before?"

"Why do you want to bring up ancient history?" He waved her off. "I know you're not *just* here to bask in my presence, bring in that ghastly beast blood, chop-chop."

"You have legs. And arms. It is outside your front door."

He sniffed at her, "But it's so cozy... you're already moving about... bring it in for me, please?"

"What happened to getting up earlier?"

“Five minutes? I could... get dressed while you retrieve it. Maximum efficiency!”

Jaheira grumbled, but decided it was quicker to do so than to argue with vampire princess here. She found more surprises for her waiting in the front room. There was now an actual table and chair set in here, as well an enchanted lamp on the wall. She eyed the bathroom door as well, was that different? She then decided she didn't care one bit and promptly retrieved the crate from the hallway, hauling it back to his room. She noted a new chair here as well, a plush lounge chair near his windows.

Vampire princess was still in bed, but he had moved; no longer tangled under the blanket but fully covered by it. He stuck a hand out and motioned towards his hidden blood cache. “The code is ‘taters’, one t, in case you forgot.”

“Becoming more in bed is the opposite of what you said you would do, lying little bat! It would be a shame if my weak old arms gave out on me in the shock of this betrayal and shattered this all on your floor.”

“You wouldn't dare. You'd just *have* to bring me more.”

“Would I?”

“Yes. ...any delicious Harper blood in there this time? I'll get up for that.”

She blew air out of her nose harshly and slammed the crate on his desk, knocking a few spools of thread and other various items to the floor. “How many times must you be told no?”

“Always once more, my dear, always but once more.”

"I had a very interesting visitor yesterday," Jaheira said, leaning against the wall.

"Good for you...?" he sleepily replied, debating if he could manage to stay under the covers the whole time she was here.

"Ulma. Leader of the local band of Gur? I'm sure you remember her."

He was on his feet in an instant, shouting, "I didn't do anything!" Jaheira laughed softly; he was dressed with his hair styled, he had gotten up while she was out of the room after all!

"She wanted me to pass on her thanks for the kindness you showed to the children, some days ago, but if you did nothing then maybe she was confused... she is also rather old."

"Har har. What else? There's always something else!"

"She gave me this, to give to you." Jaheira held out what was obviously a child's drawing of a person, very crude, the only identifying details really being pointy ears, fangs, and red eyes. Scrawled below was 'THANK YOU! - KASS'

Astarion took the offered piece of paper, holding it between his thumb and forefinger as if it was riddled with pestilence. "How disgustingly saccharine."

"If you do not want to keep it, hand it back."

He *hrmphed* at her and walked the paper to his desk, keeping it at arms length, opening a drawer and digging around in it once there.

“You have volunteered me to help to feed more vampires, without bothering to ask if I would be willing and able?”

He found a thumbtack in the drawer, pinning the drawing to his wall above the desk. After a moment to appraise the positioning of his new wall decoration, he plopped in his desk chair. “We both know you would have said yes. I was being efficient. Again! See how efficient I am?”

Jaheira nodded at him. “I cannot say you are wrong, I agreed to help. My first act of helping was agreeing you would visit them this evening. To help them test out possible food.”

“*What?! No! How dare you!*”

“Hah! You can do it to me, but I cannot do the same to you?”

“*Yes!*” He banged on his desk, sending more sewing supplies tumbling to the floor as the bottles of blood clinked against one another.

“Come now, little bat, we both also know you would eventually agree to help, after much back and forth and performative complaining and protesting. Did you not just say how much you liked being efficient?”

“I hate you.”

“You are so sweet to this old woman.”

Astarion growled at her and then flung his hands up. “*Fine.*”

“I told them to expect you some three hours post sunset. They’re in an old barn in Rivington, in what was until recently a general refugee camp.”

“That’s so far away,” he groaned.

“Again, you have legs.”

“But I’m so *sick*, Jaheira. Have you not heard? Broken spawn here. That’s too much hardship for one as crippled by infirmities as I.”

“I believe in you, little bat, you will somehow manage.”

He crossed his arms and hissed at her, before turning away with a huff.

“I brought your mail up.” She motioned to the crate on his desk.

“I had mail?” he blinked and picked up the envelopes laying on top of the bottles. He flipped through them. “Well, look at that...”

Jaheira patiently waited as he examined his mail, treating each letter as if it was some strange foreign object he had never seen before. “Anything interesting for gossip?”

“One from Dalryria, one from Wyll. Why did he send me mail? I just saw him. I’m seeing him again rather soon! I think this one is from Gale’s mother.”

“Why is his *mother* writing you?”

“It’s a long story…” He opened the letter and laughed, reading it to Jaheira, “Tara gave me the details. I am sorry my son talks faster than he thinks. His heart is in the right place, trust in that. Please visit if you are ever in Waterdeep.”

“I must get this story sometime.”

“I’ll tell you the next time we randomly run into each other in your basement.”

“My heart is filled with joy at the anticipation.”

He snickered and tore open another of his letters, a card with *THANK YOU* emboldened on it, opening it up he laughed once more, “My, my, my! An official missive of thanks from the Ravengard manor.” He held it out for Jaheira to see!

“My eyes do not like how small that is written. Fancy seal. What did you do? Or is this thanking you for not doing something?”

“Rude! I am being thanked for my actions, not lack-there-of! I saved Wyll from a ravenous feral vampire spawn, you see!” He shook his head, reading over the parchment again. “What a… positively unique man he is.” After he unearthed another thumbtack, the letter joined the child’s drawing on his wall.

“And you said you were not doing anything interesting!”

“I *wasn’t*, then the gods remembered I existed. It has been nothing *but* interesting for the past tenday or so, I long for the sweet embrace of boredom once more.” He waved the last letter at her. “This right here portends so much more *interesting doings* in my future,” he said dourly as he opened it.

“Who is that one from?”

“Dalyria, another one of Cazador’s, oh let’s say, active spawn. We had a chance encounter, unfortunately? Earlier in the week. She’s the one who tried to eat Wyll! He forgave her, so I suppose I shall as well,” he said with a laugh, which faded as he read the letter. He frowned most distastefully at it.

“Is she writing to say she is going to try to eat him once more?”

“If only… she wants me to meet her at the Society of Brilliance. Ugh. I literally will have to check my schedule. How *have* I become so busy as of late.” He glared at Jaheira. “I can’t even blame much of this on you!”

“I’m sorry, little bat, I will try harder.”

After taking a moment to narrow his eyes at her, he grumbled and drummed his fingers on the desk as he thought about all the various blasted engagements he had agreed to, in what must be reoccurring fits of madness. Gods, Dalyria was asking him to arrive the night following his appearance at Wyll’s estate. She had no idea, of course, but naturally the gods must hate Astarion personally for events to line up as such. He would be so bloody tired; how could anybody expect so much from him? Well then. If she wanted to examine the broken spawn, he’ll be sure to show up nice and broken. If he passed out at least that meant he had to experience less of whatever she had planned, he supposed.

Jaheira tired of watching him crawl around in his own mind, so asked, “Why were you not bothering to check your mail?”

“It honestly didn’t occur to me!”

“Even though you have left me several letters?”

“So much of each day is full of all these strange tasks and expectations. Not that the concepts are new, no, no, just that now they apply to *me*? Receiving mail? Having to determine if I really *am* free on a certain evening. Being responsible for my own ... appointments? Cazador had *people* for that, you see. Arranging his pretty little spawn’s itineraries when he tired of giving us *personal* attention. I would mostly find out what was about to happen to me simultaneously with said happening. Freedom is just... so much. At times.”

“It is horrible, is it not? My true sympathies, little bat. I can be difficult even for those of us who have never been enslaved! Once, long ago, I accidentally scheduled six different people to meet on the same day.”

“... and how did *that* work out?

Jaheira grinned. “It was fantastic! I was able to make them all talk to each other and slip away when no one was paying attention to the little harper I was. Such a long time ago.”

Astarion tapped on his chin while making thoughtful noises.

“Do not get any ideas. I tried that trick again on purpose recently. It did not work nearly as well this time...”

“Tut tut, poor not-so-little Harper. Suffering from success, are we?” He leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the desk and said, “Speaking of mail. Well, not truly mail but...” he sighed and then spat it out, “she left me a letter.”

She pushed away from the wall, waiting for him to continue.

“I haven’t not opened it yet. ... have not quite been able to bring myself to do more than look upon it.”

“I understand. That will bring... finality, is the best word, I suppose. A true end.”

“*Mmm...* advice?”

“Open it sooner. Not later. The longer you keep it the more you will start to imagine will be there for you. You run a great risk of turning a final new experience, something not just a treasured memory, into disappointment.”

He peered up at her, tilting his head somewhat. “You’re speaking from experience.”

“He had a trunk, which I found months after his death. I had all these imaginings of what could be inside. I did not open it for years... a mistake.”

“Please tell me it held something other than his unmentionables in need of laundering?”

Jaheira laughed and shook her head. “No, it was not that. It was full of random keepsakes he had yet to sort. Though perhaps your idea was what I deserved? For not being appreciative of this last glimpse at my Khalid? But I had built up such impossible ideas that what should have been wonderful was very much not. Do not make the same mistake.”

“I won’t. Not that I plan to leap to my feet and open it now, you understand...”

“Yes, it is better to be alone. Another mistake. Ugh. Minsc was there.” She rubbed her eyes with her thumb and forefinger, groaning again.

“Well now. If things are already delightfully awkward...?”

“What?” she said, tensing.

Astarion stood, starting to putting away the blood she brought. “Thank you. For helping me. Feeding me.”

She narrowed her eyes as she watched him, suspicion building up within her.

“Thank you for... listening. I suppose. When I was... rather a mess.”

“Is that what they are now calling the state you were in while in my basement?”

He put a hand to his chest, making contact with only his fingertips. “That is what I will call it. I know, I am still *sometimes* rather a mess. But! I spend a great deal of my time *fairly* gathered, as of late, I will have you know.” He shook one of the bottles of blood at her.

She barked out a short laugh. “You are impressively gathered, in my eyes. Much better...”

“Hrm. Better, am I? I have... gotten better? What does that mean, exactly?” he mused.

Jaheira raised one eyebrow, “How much of that special wine did you drink?”

Astarion casually made a rude gesture vaguely in her direction. “Certain people, that *Wyll* remain unnamed, are taken with reminding me that I escaped Cazador and got better. While I most assuredly am *improved* from how I was when I first tasted that strange sun-kissed freedom, I cannot help but feel the implication with those words is that I am well... well. That I am some imaginary version of myself that is now ‘all better’.” He rolled his eyes, as he made air quotes with both hands. “And so, I see some very surprised and well, not disappointed, but pained expressions when my actions prove I am very much *not*.”

“Are you under a fever?” She put a hand on his forehead. “Can vampires get fever?”

He batted her hand away and huffed, “Which is just preposterous. Two hundred years of pure shit caked misery does not leave *anyone*, even someone as amazing as my good self, that quickly. If it ever will...” He finished storing all but one of the blood jars, sealing the door once more.

The High Harper tilted her head at him.

“You have never made me feel... as if I am letting you down for only being better, and not ‘all better’. That is all I wanted to say.” He bowed slightly. “Thank you.”

“What do you want?”

“Is it so much to believe that I am merely expressing my gratitude? Being... nice? To you?”

She stared at him.

He *grrred*. “Will you accompany me to the bastard’s mansion this evening? I have not discovered the method for producing wine I can drink. Those are from his cursed stock. I want to pillage more than I am owed and do not wish to go alone.”

“Of course, little bat!” Jaheira grinned at him.

“I hate you.” He made the rude gesture again, this time with both hands. “I’m still not pleased about you just offering me up to the Gur! Telling them I would help them. Without even bothering to ask me!” he whined at her, making sure to look at her with the roundest eyes possible.

“Oh, go out and play, you’ll have fun!”

“*Excuse me?! Jaheira!* This is no... play-date you have arranged for me! You want me to walk into the veritable lion’s den, I’ll have you know! They’re killing *their own children*. How safe can I be?! The one they blame for the situation... I had no choice!” He motioned widely during his whole brief rant, Jaheira had to duck once to avoid his gesticulations.

“I would not have agreed if it was not very dire. I had told them I was not your keeper, when they first asked. The one with the impressive mustache then pleaded his case. He was very passionate.”

“... was he now?” He popped open a blood bottle, chuckling as he managed to send the stopper flying in her direction.

She caught the plug and shuffled it between her fingers. “Much more so than their leader. Harpers and the Gur have not always gotten along, for reasons I do not care to even start to learn. He most likely had to work hard convincing her it would be worth her time to speak to me.”

Astarion filled up a goblet and started in on his breakfast. “Everything is always so complicated...”

“Your presence will give them something else to direct their ire at, if nothing else, rather than their own children.” She flung the stopper right at his forehead; it bounced off and clattered onto his desk.

He *hmp*ed at her, “Rude.”

“I told Ulma if you were harmed, she would regret it more than she could dream possible.”

“... really?”

“Yes. We have a mansion to get to, do we not?” She motioned at his now dark curtains; the sun having slipped over the horizon.

He hissed at her then rolled his eyes. “Slave driver. Let me at least finish breakfast! What, do you just want to bring me blood so I can look at it and not feed?”

She sat on his bed to wait, saying, “What is a broken spawn? I’ve heard this term before, but ah well, old brain, so much has fallen out, you see!”

“*Ugh...* Curse my prattle... though I suppose it is best if *you* know,” he said before proceeding to fill her in on his past few shitty days of self-discovery while eating and preparing for his unexpectedly busy evening.



Astarion yanked yet another drawer open, rifling through it quickly, barely glancing at the papers he pulled out before he tossed them aside, scanning for key words. “Ugh! Nothing!” He stopped, reading one that caught his eye before flinging it Jaheira’s way. “Here, have some decent blackmail on a noble I’m *fairly* sure is still alive and kicking.” He slammed the drawer shut with a grunt of frustration.

Jaheira looked it over, pausing in her own search of Cazador’s desk. She nodded and slipped it into a pocket. “Very interesting, and useful. Information I can put to good use.”

“So *happy* for you, my dear.” He hurried through the last drawer on his side; upon finding nothing he wrenched it from the desk, flinging it across the study as he screamed in frustration.

It smashed into bookcase, shattering one of the glass paned doors.

“Nothing here either,” Jaheira calmly said as she slid her final drawer shut. She wandered over to the damaged bookcase and crouched down, opening the cabinets underneath the shelves. Upon seeing nothing but a variety of very specialized torture implements, including a muzzle customized for vampires, she shut them once more.

“Of course there isn’t. Of course, there *fucking* isn’t!” He picked up the globe and flung it across the room; it shattered on the floor, not that he even bothered to watch it land. Instead, immediately stomping towards the bookcase, flinging the doors open.

Jaheira leisurely moved out of his way, stopping to inspect the remains of the shattered globe, but there was nothing unexpected to be found. Astarion was wearing his leather armor, complete with swords strapped to his back; he had told her this would help keep him more at ease in the Szarr Palace. Jaheira was uncertain if it was working.

“All we’ve found is just more of that same shit wine! Shit all the way down!” He flung a book at the crate sitting by the door, stocked full with modified wine bottles.

Astarion punched out each of the glass panes in turn. “It is all such shit! Can’t I get *one* thing I want?” An entire shelf’s worth of books found their way to the floor with one sweep of his arm. “Not permitted even this one *small* thing?!”

Next one of the bookcase doors flew across the room, crashing into a chair.

Individual books started flying, he flung them at jars, candles, and anything else that dared to enter his field of vision.

She leaned against the wall, watching him demonstrate the power of the written word, nodding approving. He had impressive aim, she only had to dodge once, when a book slipped from his grasp sooner than he intended. “Thinking thinking... is there any other place a recipe or ingredients would be stored? Maybe where he first prepared? Or had *others* prepare it for him?”

Astarion paused in his systematic destruction of the bookcase, mid-gnaw on some tome that particularity infuriated him. After a moment’s thought he exclaimed, “There *is* a kitchen! Behind another bloody illusionary wall! This way!”

The kitchen was much smaller than one would expect in a mansion of this size, keeping up the claustrophobic dread that characterized the whole structure. Based on the number of doors, Jaheira speculated it had been much larger at one point, but now was separated into distinct rooms for reasons she could only speculate at. She did not feel like speculating on them now. Nor later.

He motioned at the dark cluttered space. "Behold! The neglected kitchens of the Szarr palace. Hardly used, this past quarter century. Mostly the domain of pathetic servants; when they were permitted to prepare anything. He enjoyed keeping his mortal slaves just as starved, you see."

Jaheira released a light spell. "Now I do."

Astarion glared at her for a moment before rolling his eyes. "In the decades prior he would hire staff, use these facilities to prepare lavish banquets as part of his grandiose evenings of debauchery... but those had become *somewhat* less extravagant as of late. Of course, now with hindsight, it is very obvious he was busy with other preparations, drawing close to his seven thousand damned souls... but to be honest, I had not even fully realized anything at all had altered, until I had cause to think over... events, recently."

She started opening drawers, looking over shelves. "And I thought I kept a poor stocked kitchen. I should bring Rion here. Adjust her expectations."

"Oh, well, you see, you don't want to keep food in your kitchen, that might attract rats which your slaves could snack on in secret."

"Vampires have odd habits with food preparation." She picked up a thumbscrew, turning it over in her hands.

"Again, mustn't keep a well-stocked pantry, no, no no! Ah, but it would be a shame to let all the space just go to waste. Might as well use it to better torture your slaves. Cazador would pride himself on how efficient he could be. Practical and *inventive*. I'm sure I had some terrible torment inflicted upon me in every single room of this blasted edifice. You asked earlier about the anticipation, *mm*? Oh, what the mind can concoct when left simmering in dread for hours..." He spread his arms wide, wiggling his hands a bit as he looked around the kitchen, remembering, instead of searching, his eyes resting on a currently empty knife block.

Jaheira kept scanning through shelves and drawers, searching for anything that seemed more alchemical than culinary or torturous. "There are no secret rooms here, yes? No?" When there was no reply she looked over at Astarion, finding him motionless. "Little bat?"

When he still did not respond, she moved closer. "Astarion?" she said as she reached out, lightly touching his shoulder.

In an instant he was crammed into a corner, sprawled out on all fours, staring up at her, trembling, eyes wide. The brief cacophony his movement created faded quickly, leaving many more various kitchen supplies now scattered around.

"Ah," she summarized, holding her bleeding hand, examining the fresh punctures wounds in her palm near the base of the thumb. "My fault entirely. You are not in trouble, little bat."

Astarion grumbled, both grateful and annoyed how quickly the proper words to say fell from her mouth. He shifted to sit up like a person instead of just a person shaped thing, wrapping his arms around his legs. "Don't touch me," he said before resting his forehead on his knees.

"Noted."

"How bad?" he muttered into his knees.

Jaheira tentatively flexed her thumb slowly, smiling in relief. “You didn’t hit anything important. Pick your head up and look!” She wiggled her thumb much faster towards the sulking vampire, resulting in more blood running down her arm. “Help me find something to wrap it.”

He stared for just a moment too long before jerking his gaze away and clambering to his feet, opening a cabinet he knew held rags. “I didn’t drink. This is not my plan to finally get Harper blood, darling. That’s not why—”

“I know, little bat, I know. My fault, I said. I have been bitten worse before for less.”

“I want to burn this mansion down. Leave nothing...”

“Why haven’t you?”

“Hah! I should have known that is something *you* would ask. Partially for the same reason we are here at this very moment! The bastard had so many secrets, records of clandestine activities and thaumaturgic artifacts both. I want to be sure before sending it all up in smoke. And... Karlach... she talked of wanting to burn it but we never...” he trailed off, concentrating on selecting the cleanest rag he could find.

“In *addition*, Dalyria is still looting the spoils herself. I really should not make this decision all by myself. As much as it is my right to do so! I am the one who killed the bastard, after all. While I very much do want to set it all ablaze, I am trying to think about people that are not named Astarion, for a change.”

“Don’t strain yourself.” She took the rag, holding it to her wound.

“Hah. Hah. Hah.” He tilted his head back and forth with each sarcastic laugh. After closely watching her tend to her wound for a moment, he squeezed his eyes shut and moved to search another part of the kitchen. “I’m making sure I take it slow. The rest of the other spawn can be as displeased with me as they like if I torched this mausoleum. Well, I suppose Aurelia should be told... she might have some ancient cache here...”

“Were you closer to those two then? Alliances forced in your bondage?”

He made a vague noncommittal noise, wiggling a flat hand in the air at her. “It’s complicated... complicated in a different way for each.”

“Spit out the details, little bat, I can tell you want to tell me, but I am too old to play this game.”

“I hate you. Have I told you that recently?” He slammed a cabinet door shut. “Fine. You’ll need to know more about the other spawn soon anyway...”

“Oh? Now why might that be?”

Astarion did not elaborate on that particular statement. “Aurelia was his first spawn. I was his third, arriving some two decades later.”

“Dalyria was the second?” She peeked under the rag at her wound, then nodded and tied it around her hand as a makeshift bandage.

“Hah! No, no... Dal was many spawn down the line. Over a century later. I suppose I’m the second spawn now, if we only count the ones that remain. The true second is gone, not that long ago, but gone all the same.” He scanned over a row of shelves.

“Aurelia was loyal in a way that none of the rest of us were. Hollowed out, but not filled with his poison. Just... empty. An obedient doll. Cazador almost never had to compel her, she would just obey. Even his most heinous command. She helped Cazador... break in the spawn that came after her. So, no, we were not... *friends*. Nor shall we ever be. *Buuuuuuuuut* she was here even longer than I was. That counts for something, it must. She deserves to see this place burn with her own eyes, if nothing else.”

Jaheira peered inside the oven, but found only skulls, shutting it quickly.

He tapped on sealed jars as he laughed. “Do you know the average time a vampire spawn... well, lives for, as I cannot think of a better term? Oh yes, we are *gifted with eternity!* But there’s a good deal of fine print explaining the details of this *eternal gift*. Roughly a century is all you can expect, for most. Before something or other happens. They find some way to wiggle into the sun, or what have you. He used to have the most *wonderfully* structured intricate training regime. Before he realized he would *not* have most of us forever. Hah! One ‘*brother*’ was not even a full tenday beyond ‘spawn graduation’ before he ran afoul of monster hunters.”

She next tried a breadbox wedged behind a pile of manacles. Inside she found a stack of index cards, she picked one up and peered at the tiny writing, still listening to Astarion, who was walking between tightly spaced shelves.

“Of the first seven, only Aurelia, myself, and Violet remain. After *so* many losses, he got sloppy. Less selection. That’s how we ended up with ugh, *Petras*. Aurelia was not a miniature Cazador for the ones to come later, less selection and less training both. I... it was *years* after I was turned before I was allowed to walk the streets again. Then after I was a *naughty boy* and earned a year in the tomb, it was decades before he permitted me to roam outside. I was just... a house spawn, for a time. Party spawn.” He frowned.

They were recipe cards; she flipped through them, they were mostly various forms of potions, modified so they could affect undead, poisons and remedies both. “You should write a book, little bat. I am not joking.”

Astarion pretended he didn’t hear her. “Then when Dalyria joined us... she was so new when he sent her out. Whored her out. She was not even fully aware *why* we were loaded into a carriage to another patriarch’s mansion the first time.” He flung a jar across the room, it shattered against the wall, long desiccated olives scattering all about. “I had to be the one to tell her what her new duties entailed. What would be... *expected* of her.”

All that could be heard for a moment was his heavy breathing. Jaheira softly said, “I understand, little bat. If you ever find the right time to burn it, let me know. I do not want to miss the event.”

“You have my word.”

“And I have your card. A recipe.”

“...what?” He pushed away from the shelf and peered at the card she was holding up. “That is far more complicated than just adding blood to wine...” he groaned.

“Most of this is common, but I am not fully sure what a handful of these ingredients are. Look for dried herbs and crystals.”

He *hm!*ed and retraced his steps, plucking a sack from the shelves. “I thought this was just some potpourri or the like, but perhaps...”

She nodded, grinning as she held up a rack that was stocked with jars containing various crystalline shards. “Is a nice solid maybe, I think!”

Astarion retrieved the crate holding the wine bottles. “The card you found is more important. Let’s just say we’ve found what we need.” He did not even wait for her to agree before heading back to the ballroom.

Jaheira looked around the tragic kitchen once more before following after, “Is there anything else? I will help, but I won’t lie, little bat, being here gives *me* the shivers too.”

Astarion pursed his lips, glancing around, shifting the crate in his arms as he thought.

Jaheira waited, going over the various stupid bullshit she had on her plate in the upcoming tenday, family and Harper matters both. Soon she was ordering the other High Harpers based on which would most benefit from a professional service to remove sticks from their asses. She realized after ranking her five most disliked peers, that she had been at this for some time.

He was frozen again, trembling slightly. When she traced his sight line, he was staring the back wall of the ballroom. It appeared to just be a trio of windows there, but Jaheira had learned to not trust anything in this miserable mansion.

She took a step away, looking around for something to poke him with. This turned out to be unneeded, as her motion was enough to snap him back to the present. He flinched, almost dropping the crate as he instinctively raised one arm up to shield his face.

“That is a no, I take it?”

Astarion rested his forehead on the wine bottles for a moment before taking a deep breath. He muttered into the crate, “Let’s just fucking go. I can’t think of anything else. I can’t think, period!”

Jaheira nodded and started moving out of the ballroom, she was almost knocked off her feet as he sprinted past her, wine bottles clinking against each other. She shouted after him, “Astarion?! Stop! Slow down!” as she started running.

He was much faster than her, but the clink of bottles allowed her to follow his path, which took him out of the mansion as quickly as possible. When she made it out the ramparts entrance he was waiting for her, leaning against the parapet as if he had not just bolted in fear.

“Darling, what took you so long?” He grinned down at her; no trace of whatever demons of memory had resurged visible in his expression.

“Little bat, can I look at those wine bottles again?” she casually asked.

Astarion tilted his head to the side, a bit confused, but handed over the box he was carrying. Jaheira smoothly slipped it into her bag of holding before he realized what was happening.

“*Hey!* What is this?! Those are mine!”

“You are *not* taking those home with you. If you had access to this many, I do not want to think of the state I would have found you in today.”

“I hate you. Come closer, my dear, let me bite you. With intention this time...”

“Jord knows some alchemy. More than you, I am sure. I will give him everything we found here today, for the best possible result. Unless you truly mean to tell me your own research of drinking them down is the best path ahead?”

He glared at her and then pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. “*Fine*. I really do not care who solves this particular mystery, so long as I am the one who benefits from the solution, but must you take them *all*?”

“I will drop two of them off at your flat.” She grinned at him. “You need to start heading to Riverton for your meeting.”

“If the Gur kill me tonight, I’m going to return as a ... vampire-ghost or some other sort of vengeful revenant and haunt you and yours for generations.”

“And they say that with enough age you stop having new experiences. How sweet you are to make sure I am properly enriched still in my twilight times.”

Astarion simultaneously hissed at her and flung his hands up in the air before turning sharply and stalking away. After a few moments he tossed a wave back over his shoulder, jamming his hands in his pockets as a response to the laughter that generated.

“Be as good as you can be, little bat!”

Chapter End Notes

Awww, they’re friends!! :3c

You have NO FUCKING IDEA how much I have thought about Astarion and Jaheira interacting with each other. SO MUCH!! I’m so happy I finally got to actively write her and not just refer to her.

Gee I wonder what happens next time?

(It will be the Gur again. We’re going to see how well Jaheira volunteering him works out. I promise it will be entertaining. I do not promise anything else.)

Chapter 9: High Astarion

Chapter Summary

Gur time!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

While Rivington had not been visited by the Nautiloids that demolished so much of the city proper, it had seen a great deal of changes since that chaotic day. The giant brain crashing into the harbor signaled the end of the Absolute crisis; almost as quickly as they had arrived refugees flooded out of the camps.

Many were able to return to their previous homes; they had fled the growing menace of the Absolute as an understandable precaution. While most of those that had no homes left were now in Reithwin Town, helping to rebuild the community after a century of darkness, the scant few refugees that remained were easily folded into housing in the city; it was amazing how much charity appeared when it was primarily Upper City citizens that benefited.

Thus, almost a month and a half after the assault on Baldur's Gate, the region was once again a sleepy little nothing town, sending goods and people to the city proper every day. The residents seemed now to want to savor and reinforce the reclaimed calm; it was very quiet most evenings now. This present evening was no exception, there was hardly a living soul to be seen on the streets, the chirping of the remaining late autumn crickets echoed through the evening air, uninterrupted. The crickets also evidently did not care to stop their performance due to the unliving soul quietly passing through.

Astarion grumbled to himself while he plodded down the last stretch of road, frowning at the various mud puddles. Didn't these people have any civic pride? There was almost more mud than cobblestones on some parts of this blasted excuse for a street. Blasted parasitic hamlet. At least his destination wasn't *too* deep into this village that pretended to be part of the actual city!

As he rounded the final corner, the barn that once housed donations for the departed refugees finally came into view. How utterly transformed it was; the ramshackle nature of it was no more! So many new boards on the walls and repairs to the thatched roof; why, there was even a new fence surrounding the property!

"My, my, my..." he muttered to himself. So, this was the Gur's now, was it? Or at least they were permitted to squat here. No doubt it was more of Wyll's charity. Gods, that man. Astarion surmised he would still be baffled by his behavior centuries from now, with none of his future companions believing his stories of this singularly self-sacrificing son of Baldur's Gate. The newest Grand Duke would carve pieces off himself to hand out all day long if he had his way! He probably even managed to convince the true owner it would be only fair if they paid to restore it for the transients and their undead progeny.

Astarion would *have* to have a talk with his horned friend. It was perfectly understandable, expected even, for him to want *Astarion* to enjoy luxurious charity and lax enforcement of the rules, but there

had to be limits! Not for Astarion, mind, only for the less deserving. Which just so happened to be everyone not named Astarion.

He chuckled to himself, ah, he should say exactly those words to the young fool the next time he saw him. Knowing him, Wyll would most likely believe that Astarion was serious! That would be great fun indeed...! Much more fun than his task tonight, that Jaheira had *somehow* convinced him to undertake. Ugh, *why* did he listen to her?

Two very obviously drunk human men were attempting to climb the fence, saving Astarion from his ruminations. When they proved to be too drunk to successfully climb the fence, one of them pulled out a short knife, quickly pivoting to carving a message into a board.

“We’ll... tell ‘em where... to get off! Go where they bloody belong!”

“Yah, fucking thieves! They cursed me cow, they did!”

Astarion cleared his throat. Once the two ruffians turned around, he said, “I think, rather, it is *you* should go where *you* belong, for I am very certain it is *not* here.”

“You gonna make us, you poncy fop?”

The vampire blessed these *lovely gentlemen* with a most charming wide grin; lunging forwards to snap his jaws in their general direction once, before tilting his head to the side and raising his eyebrows. “Perhaps I will...” He then licked his lips and grinned at them once more.

Astarion leaned against the fence, smiling as he watched the pair run away with an inefficiency that could only be harnessed by the truly inebriated. Ah, if only he didn’t have this blasted commitment, he would follow them and have some *real* fun, dinner *and* a show! Hopefully they would remember this incident enough to file a report with Wyll’s little Fisters, give them both something to laugh about. Well, Astarion would laugh and Wyll would pretend he didn’t see the humor in the situation. Perhaps even his left eyelid would twitch again!

He sighed as the pair of drunks finally managed to make it out of sight, much more covered in mud than they had been when they started their mad scramble. Listening to Jaheira had cost him a meal! How dare she. He skillfully did not ponder how he would not have even encountered these potential suppers if he had not trudged out here at her request.

Well, there was no more putting it off, time to go get this horrible task of vampire food testing started, so he could be done with this pointless waste of time, he sighed as he silently skittered over the fence.

Inside the barn, Gandrel was doing some ruminating of his own as he prepared for their scheduled visitor. To think one of the allies of the mysteriously freed daywalking spawn was now a Grand Duke of the city! What amazing fortune his once-upon-a-time quarry had found for himself. Fortune his people were also benefiting from in the most unthinkable ways! Barely days after the assault, when the Upper City neighborhoods were still smoldering, young Duke Ravengard himself arrived at their camp. Gandrel could not recall ever before seeing Ulma at a such a complete loss for words. Then when Ravengard greeted her as an equal, as a leader representing a foreign state, she did something else he had never seen before; wept openly in gratitude. Perhaps his people could have a future, after all... at least they had been given time and space to rebuild. To try to come to terms with their newfound circumstances. Not only had this wondrous lodging been given to them, with no scheduled date of departure, but they had not been hassled by the Flaming Fists even once since they shifted their camp’s location!

Gandrel sat a sealed box on one of the dining tables, before turning to peer out the window, scanning for any sight of their vampire visitor. Ulma was talking to the rest of the encampment, instructing them to stay away from the barn this evening. Of course she was not telling them *why*. They both doubted the majority of their fellows would agree with their plan. Casting his eyes further afield he spotted one of the other trusted parents leading the children away. There go his sweet little ones; he had to trust they all would be safe without him there tonight. Tearing his gaze away, he returned to the table to finish preparations before their guest arrived. At least that was his intention.

Astarion was in the previously vacant chair. "Hello!" he chirped out, tossing out a wave complete with finger wiggles.

To his credit, only raised eyebrows gave away how surprised Gandrel was at this silent arrival. Or well, that was the only indicator most people could detect.

"Mmm, you cannot hide your heart rate increasing *most* rapidly, my dear. Should I give your children lessons in silent movement? Proper sneaking? They are *obviously* still rubbish at it if you are *that* surprised by my arrival."

"Thank you for the offer, but no, the other skills you have taught them are enough for now."

"How often do you have to cajole them off the ceiling?"

"Almost constantly."

Astarion grinned and laughed, hitting the table in glee. "Good for them!"

"I wish you would have told me *before* I agreed to let them partake that human blood would unlock new abilities for them." He sighed. "It was quite the time explaining to the rest of our people the manner in which they acquired their new abilities. Now all the other children are very jealous and the adults concerned. They can subsist on animal blood."

"They shouldn't *have* to! It's muck!" he crossed his arms and hmped, pointedly looking away.

"We shall agree to disagree on that point, my guest."

The door creaked open as Ulma entered. "Make sure you shutter all the windows before the spawn arrives." She slowed to a halt, finding Astarion already sitting at the table. "Oh."

"Hi!" Astarion chirped out with false cheerfulness, waving at her exaggeratedly. "Too early? I can go away again if you would like. I *might* even come back. No promises. I probably won't. Anyway!" He started to stand. "Timing is *so* hard to get right, better luck next time."

"Sit back down, spawn."

"I have a name! I won't do anything for you if you keep calling me that!"

Gandrel batted down his internal screaming. "Thank you for agreeing to assist us. We're most appreciative you're here to sample what we've prepared, to make sure it will not hurt the children."

"So, it's perfectly acceptable if it hurts *me*?"

"Yes." Ulma clearly stated.

"... fair, honestly. I'll give you that one."

“You were the one to saddle us with this... questionable duty.”

“... do you now wish me to *apologize* for not *killing* your *children*?!”

The elder leader of the Gur stared into the middle distance as she replied, “On the hardest nights... when it feels as if no dawn will ever break, I do wonder... Wonder if we are tormenting them for our comfort, denying them the only kindness we can really offer.”

Gandrel gave Ulma a sideways glare; this was a well tread conversation that he was not interested in having again. Let alone in front of an outsider. Even, or perhaps especially, an outsider who could give a very well-informed opinion on the matter.

Astarion huffed, “There are *far* worse things one could be in this world than a vampire spawn.”

“That does not nothing to alleviate their burden...”

“Are you done insulting me? Implying we’re pitiable things better off dead? I’ve been *this*—,” he motioned at his face, flashing a smile for a moment, “Far longer than your little mewling brats have. Kindly stop suggesting that I would be better off truly dead. While I freely admit I am not having the beeeest time of things currently, it is not because of our shared affliction.”

He tapped his fingers on the table, thinking for a moment, pursing his lips and studying the ceiling, before he continued, “I suppose it is *a* problem? Perhaps? ... Maybe? But not really near the top of my list of complaints. The hunger is of course the worst part of it, I suppose, and I that does not even place in the top ten things that upset me every day!”

Leaning back in his chair he considered, counting on his fingers, “Weeeeeell, perhaps top ten, but not top five. If somebody snapped their fingers at me, and I was suddenly cured of this curse? My life would still be, honestly, rather oh... shitty. ... in some ways worse, honestly. I suppose I could be miserable in the sun?”

“Ah, perhaps it is time for a new topic of conver—” Gandrel tried to interject.

“Besides if your Gur spawn wanted to stop being *vampire* spawn they could simply pitch themselves into the sun! No words of command are stopping *them* from availing themselves of oh, let’s call it... the easy way out.”

“Ulma, did you not have another query?” Gandrel asked, plastering on a smile.

“Where are the rest of your kin, spawn?” Ulma asked.

He scoffed, “Is your memory going? The Underdark? We’ve been over this?”

“I merely want confirmation. Why have you not joined them?”

Astarion rolled his eyes, “Because I don’t waaaaaant to?”

Gandrel laughed, “I think that is a good enough answer, Ulma? Don’t you?”

He tilted his head up and looked down his nose at the pair of Gur sitting across from him. “Whhhhy are you asking? Making sure you can get your next test spawn lined up if I up and die from this experimental concoction of yours?”

He interrupted right as Ulma started to speak, “Make sure you get the blond human one, if you do. And toss my unmoving corpse on Jaheira’s front porch.” He waved at them dismissively. “Fine, bring out the potential poison.”

“Ah! It is already here!” Gandrel said, reaching out to lift up a tray cover, revealing said potential poison.

So, this is what they wanted him to imbibe, was it? With one last skeptical look at the Gur, he leaned over to examine the pilot serving of this ‘vampire food’, making sure not to breathe in as of yet, just in case.

It was orange-red in hue, already very unappealing, contained in a small clay bowl. Dingy. Couldn’t they at least get something clean looking for him? Tapping on the surface with the provided spoon, he discovered it was almost solid! A skin had formed on it so quickly. He mostly successfully forced down the urge to retch as the spoon broke through the disgustingly thick skin. The texture was that almost of clotted blood, even though it was warm enough that steam was rising from it still. The smattering of herbs throughout did nothing to improve matters.

“Do you know how hard it is to turn a vampire’s stomach? Congratulations, you have accomplished much already today!” He frowned and poked the surface again with the spoon. Oh gods, the skin had already reformed, he *ugh*’ed and shivered. “I’m not eating this.”

They did not reply, only stared at him.

He stared right back for a moment. Maybe it smelled better than it looked?

Reports quickly came in as he gagged, no. No, it did not.

“You think it’s so great, you eat it!” He shoved the bowl away.

Ulma immediately shoved it back, fixing him with an emotionless gaze.

“Ugh. Ugh! Fine!” He gripped the spoon tightly again. “If I vomit, I am doing everything in my power to coat you with as much of it as possible.”

Astarion dipped the spoon in and hesitantly raised it up towards his mouth, holding his nose shut. He then paused, fixing his gaze on Ulma again. “Address me by name. And say please!”

“Please, Astarion,” Gandrel quickly replied.

“Not *you!* Her!!”

Ulma glared at him.

He dropped the spoon back down, crossing his arms and stared right back at her.

“Spawn Astarion. I would be most grateful.”

“Close enough.” He plucked up the spoon, already calculating the best possible technique to flip this table over before storming out, and took the smallest of all possible licks.

For one moment, he was completely still, as if he was now a statue of flesh.

His eyes widened almost imperceptibly.

Astarion practically lunged at the table, pulling the bowl closer to him and frantically spooning its contents into his mouth. He quickly decided this was much too slow and swapped to drinking directly from the bowl, making no effort to contain the truly indecent noises he emitted in the process.

The bowl clattered back on the table.

“It is... better than it looks,” he commented for the two silent staring mortals, peering into the bowl he discovered some remaining. His eyes flicked up to the Gur for a moment, debating with himself.

Astarion promptly decided dignity was overrated; he fished out the remainder of the delicious gross looking whateveritwas left, licking his fingers clean between scrapes, determined to consume eat and every morsel. Using the handle of the spoon, he scraped some of the goop off the table. At least he had restrained himself from licking the table, he mused, licking the spoon cleaner than it had been when they first handed it to him. That was a victory and he would cling to it!

As he frantically searched the rest of the table for any other escaped tidbits, he fully realized he looked like a ravenous monster in front of these two monster hunters. There was a perfectly reasonable explanation for that, however! He *was* a ravenous monster in front of two monster hunters. Sometimes these things just happen with no way to avoid them.

Finally satisfied he had consumed every last iota of the miracle matter, he leaned back, smiling. “If your children complain about being served *that* they are spoiled brats who deserve the most vicious of beatings. For a start!”

Gandrel laughed, “Pretty good, I take it?”

“Oh, it was fine, you know. I suppose.” He tried to play down his enthusiasm with a casual wave, looking off to the side. “Do you have more?” He looked at them out of the corner of his eyes.

“No,” Ulma sternly replied.

“... can you get more?” He looked directly at them.

“Not easily...” Gandrel glanced at Ulma.

“... wheeeeen can you get more?” He sat up straight again.

“How did it make you feel, spawn?”

“Fine. *When* can you get more?” He leaned forwards.

Silence and stares were all he received in reply.

“Yes, yes, you want *details*! It was filling. Very much so. I am... impossibly sated currently. The hunger is as blunted as it ever becomes, maybe to a greater extent than ever before...? Now that I focus on it...” He put a hand on his abdomen, pondering for a second before asking, “Can I know what you fed me yet? Are you sure there is no more?”

“Thank you for the excellent review, friend! Mostly animal blood, with only a few drops of human blood. My own! With assorted herbs, various other substances, it is a medley of remedies and curatives.”

Astarion’s eyebrows shot up almost to his hairline. “Huh. I would have never guessed. Eating it... each mouthful felt like... like I was actively feeding. Ugh, well, I *was* but I mean. Proper! From a

person. That is the only time the hunger fully abates, if you were not aware. It is *not* the same if I drink the *same* blood from a bottle or some such later. You have... you have invented something truly amazing here.”

He paused for one moment and then leaned forwards even more, putting his hands on the table. “... are you *sure* you don't have any more?”

“No. As I said, that is all. And that is all we required of you tonight, go in peace, Spawn-Astarion.”

“*Really* no more? How hard is it to make? How long would it take you to make more? Do you have the full recipe? If you will not tell me how to make it in full you *must* make me more!” He stood up.

Both of the Gur stood up as well, Ulma's hands going to her weapons.

He flung his hands high in the air. “How paranoid! I just want *more* of that, how could I get more if I killed you? I'm not *that* stupid!”

They relaxed, before they could do anything else, Astarion spoke again.

“I... I cannot stress to you how good that tasted, how... how... utterly... please. Please give me more. Please. Please, oh, please. I'll do anything, anything you want! Please...” He clasped his hands together, leaning towards them as he pleaded.

Ulma eyed Astarion warily. “The test is over. There is no more. You cannot barter us anything for it, as we have none to barter with.”

Astarion eyed her right back. She could say that all she wanted, lots of people said lots of things! There had to be more of that horrible looking but oh so delicious tasting concoction of pure pleasure stored here somewhere. It was impossible that they would have given it all to a spawn. Especially the spawn that was him. One they all must hate, more than any other spawn. Just so he could slurp it down. Maybe this was a way to punish him, get their revenge: by denying him!

No matter, Astarion merely needed to find the right technique so they would stop this charade and give him more. He quickly decided on the next tactic he would try; for when you think all you are is a hammer, the world appears full of nails.

“Ooooooh... when I said anything, I meant anything...” he leaned forward, eyes half open as he smiled at her. “Do all monster hunters secretly wish to lay with the monsters they hunt? Or is that merely the one I know best, mmm?”

The leader of the Gur did not dignify that with a response. Astarion laughed his perfect oh so charming well-practiced laugh, then purred out, “I'm very talented... truuuust me. You can do whatever you want to me...ask me to do whatever you wish to you... both of you could even go at once, if you so wish!”

Gandrel held his hands out in front of him. “Easy there, friend, I think there has been some misunderstanding...”

“Oooooh no misunderstanding, I know what you want, what everyone really wants, in the end. And yes, I do mean *sex*. Come on now, I'll do it with bells on, literally, if you'll just give me another taste...”

As he spoke, he tried to unbuckle his armor, but his hands just didn't seem to want to fully obey him. Giving up on that Astarion instead climbed onto the table, grinning. “Offer on the table... *literally*,” he

slowly said with a wink, beckoning them over with a finger.

The two Gur started quickly conferring in their native tongue.

Astarion became most distracted by the waving motion of his own finger, wiggling it in front of his eyes, sitting up, not bothering to maintain even a remotely sexually charged pose. He started wiggling all his fingers, grinning more, as if this was the best thing he had ever seen! The giggles began as he poked the fingers of one hand with that of the other.

Gandrel coughed, trying to get his attention once more.

He blinked and looked back up at them. "Hi! What were we doing again?" he happily chirped out, tilting his head to the side, eyes bright and wide again.

They fell silent, the situation turning on them once more.

The vampire giggled again as he started knocking everything on the table off to the floor, one item at a time, endlessly entertained watching each and every one of them fall to the ground, laughing and laughing and laughing.

"I am going to fetch the High Harper," Ulma said as she moved aside to allow a salt shaker to roll past her feet.

"I think that would be... most wise."

"Keep him in here. Don't let him hurt himself; as tempting as it may be, we can't afford to lose the Harper's favor." She took one last look at the vampire she had accidentally drugged, confirmed he was still systematically knocking objects over while giggling, and jogged out of the building.

This left Gandrel behind on spawnsitting duties; something he had done a great deal of in the recent past. Though his charges were typically much smaller, they were much more numerous, therefore, this would be no challenge at all, he tried to convince himself.

Once he had successfully eliminated every single object on the table, Astarion tumbled off onto the floor himself. After laying there for just long enough that Gandrel began to hope he had passed out, he jumped to his feet.

"This... it was... it was different here before? Yes? It was one big room." He tottered over to an interior wooden wall, peering at it suspiciously, before slowly looking all the way up it. He laughed, "Oh! They don't go all the way up!"

"Ah, yes, we have not repaired the second story yet. Future plans."

"Mmm, yes, much more important to have patched all those holes... ah, how a place can seem to be such an ideal shelter sometimes, only for bloody sunlight to worm its way in." He pushed on the wall, giggling when it moved slightly.

"Stop that!"

Astarion grinned, "Give me more!" He pushed the wall again, much harder, laughing as the boards creaked and groaned.

"There *is* no more."

“Liar!” He pushed again and then startled when his actions dared to have consequences. There was the sound of something, no, several somethings, clattering to the floor on the other side of the wall. With an inquisitive noise the quickly recovered vampire went to go examine what new wonders could be waiting for him!

Gandrel dutifully followed after, calling out in vain, “I don’t think you want to go in there!”

Astarion paused at the doorway of the small room, staring at the various tools of restraint he knocked free from their hooks on the wall: muzzles, manacles, and chains were among the pile. As Gandrel stepped near he turned to stare at him, aghast!

“Some nights are harder than others.”

“It’s not because... they fed from... I gave them...”

“Chessa has never once come close to needing this room... and she keeps her sister calm,” Gandrel said, unable to keep the pride out of his voice, Astarion sighed with relief at his words.

“Some of the others though, have—”

Once he was reassured that he was not *directly* at fault for this equipment being necessary, Astarion stopped caring. His temporary brush with sobriety all but a memory as he started clinking the chain links together while laughing at the sound.

From the doorway, Gandrel watched, pondering if he could successfully get that chain around his addled charge; then suddenly Astarion was charging right for him! He threw his hands up to defend himself.

Only to then watch the spawn run past, calling out, “What’s this over here?!” pointing to a shield on the wall.

“That is from our homeland, the mountain in the—”

“Boring! Don’t care! What about this?” He pointed at a wooden sword.

“Bark from a tree said to—”

“Who cares about bloody trees?! What’s this?” This time his attention was captured by a hanging banner.

“Fabric dyed with blossoms from...”

“Why’d you stop?!”

“Blossoms from the trees that grow in the mountains in our homeland.”

“Good color, nice blue, fabric took the dye very well,” he said as he inspected the banner, nodding with approval, tugging it away from the wall, looking up to see how it was anchored. Torchlight glinted off something wedged into the wall in the incomplete second story.

“Hah! Your kids are hiding things up there? Away from adult fingers and eyes!”

“Yes,” Gandrel said with a sigh, he motioned to some ropes hanging down, “Not just my girls, they are inviting everyone to join them.”

Astarion tried to scale the wall as he had now seen *so many* other vampire spawn (a whole three) do, and failed exactly as he had every time he tried to imitate them. He hissed out in frustration, batting a rope away, “It’s not fair!”

“You really can’t—”

“*No! I can’t!*” he spun to growl out in his face.

Gandrel held his hands up once more, “Apologies.”

“Nothing is ever fair, I know that! I know the world isn’t fair... but... but why isn’t it ever fair in my favor?! Why not that? When does Astarion get to win, *hrm?* Astarion, the favorite! All that ever got me was extra helpings of things no one should ever want.” He giggled and then kicked the wall.

“Now I can’t even climb up the walls, like every other spawn can! The bastard! Denying me this as well?!”

“If you could just sit back down over here,” Gandrel hopelessly pleaded.

Astarion blinked as he looked around, deep in thought, pursing his lips, before making a decision with a firm nod. He shouted out, much too loudly for how close he was, “It’s boring in here! Good day! ... goodnight? Good... Good time? ah! Goodbye!” With a grin of victory he took off running towards the door.

“No! Wait! Wait, please!” He tried to grab the quasi-inebriated spawn, but Astarion dodged without a second thought, or even a first one, most likely. In a flash he was at the door, flinging it wide open and stepping outside.

A few Gur were in the middle of a melancholy evening of drinking around the fire pit; an offended vampire squawk drew their attention towards the barn. Gandrel finally managed to get his hands on Astarion and jerked him back inside, slamming the door shut.

“So... more?” He grinned. “I’ll stay inside for more...!”

“I am very tempted to tie you up...!”

“I knew you’d see reason! Sure, you can tie me up when we get down to business, darling, that’s *so* tame!”

Gandrel rubbed his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of one hand, flatly stating, “There is no more.”

“You... you really don’t have any more?” His ears drooped ever so slightly. “Not even if I suck your cock for it? I’m very talented, you know. Don’t worry about the fangs, you won’t even know they’re there! Unless you want to! I am aware that is part of the... appeal! For some,” he added with a grin, wagging his eyebrows.

“There is. No more. It was very difficult to produce, we did not want to waste supplies if it was not suitable,” he replied very slowly and clearly, hoping his words would finally be believed.

Astarion sighed and slumped against the man. “Fine. I didn’t want to do it anyway...” He giggled then slurred out, “Astarion... the broken runt. Only good for one thing... and he doesn’t even want to do that anymore...” as he slowly slid down to plop on the floor. Once down there, he became fascinated with his boot, playing with the leather straps and buckles.

His latest objection of fascination did not move, as Gandrel figured this was infinitely preferable than trying to keep him from going out the door again.

“What am I good for? How can I possibly have any sort of real life when I can’t go into the sun? what a farce of an existence I have. They’re only humoring me, you know? This poor pitiable pathetic preposterous pretend person,” he giggled again, undoing a buckle.

“I suppose I’ll have no choice but to join Dalyria in the Underdark, when they tire of me... when my complications and fits of temper are too much for them to bear any longer. When my prattle grates, instead of amuses... tick-tock goes the clock. Midnight will always chime...”

“The high harper does not strike me as one to easily abandon her friends.” Gandrel risked slowly moving his foot away.

Astarion released his grip but remained laying on the floor on his side. One hand shot up; a single finger held aloft. “Oh! Oh! I forgot! A thing! To say! To you!” He waved his finger back and forth as he spoke.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Leather!” Suddenly he was back on his feet, holding the leather strap he liberated in front of Gandrel’s face, giggling once more. “Leather!”

“Yes. Yes, that is leather.”

“Have them chew on it! If you cannot feed them. Your misery scraps! It helps.” He opened his mouth wide and pointed at his fangs, then said, “If they itch! Chew on it!”

Gandrel took the leather. “My thanks,” he softly said, wearily watching the vampire sway slightly, then sighed when Astarion followed one of his sways and zipped away, towards another one of the newly created rooms.

“What’s in here?” He didn’t bother to wait for a reply before flinging the door open and half falling inside, looking up at the shelves and scrambling over to throw open the nearest chest.

“A playroom.” He leaned on the door jamb, glad Astarion had put himself in a room, at least for now.

“Wonder if I ever ... hrm... these are very common... yes?” He pulled a puzzle box from the chest; it was covered with intricate carvings of triangles, hexagons, and squares, dyed a variety of hues. He tilted it back and forth, staring at it intently, watching the torch lights glint off the varnished surface.

“I lied to your daughter, I’m sure you know that already.” He tossed the box away over his shoulder and started digging in the chest again.

“Oh?” Gandrel wondered how long it would take Ulma to return with the High Harper; this was shaping up to be one of the longest nights of his life.

“The only thing I remember about living is dying. Nothing else. *Cazador* might as well have carved me out of the bloody grave dirt. I *am* his creation, even more than any of my cursed *siblings*. I *can* be more than he made me to be, but he did make me. That is impossible to deny.” He trailed off as he pulled a wooden cup and ball toy out of the chest.

“How many abandoned toys left in my wake... ruined lives and broken families... life of violence and sin indeed...” With a flick of his wrist the ball was ejected from the cup, hanging from the rough

twine that tethered them together. “At his behest, of course, but... I’ll never truly be free of him... there’s always going to be a part of him in me.” He flicked his wrist again, easily returning the ball to its home, nestled in the cup.

He hurled the toy away; it smashed into a wooden wall, shattering as the wooden joints fell apart. “Enough toys...” he clambered to his feet and pushed past Gandrel, stomping back into the main room.

Once there, he swayed back and forth, gazing around, already having lost the thread, wondering why he came back in here. The motion of Gandrel following him drew his attention. After squinting at Gandrel in confusion for a moment, he asked, “What’s going on?”

“Just a bit of a bad time, friend, please, take a seat again... perhaps a nap? Then you’ll feel better.”

Astarion leaned away from him, looking skeptical, “Why am I here? Where’s Jaheira?”

Gandrel forced a smile to remain on his face, “She’s on her way here now, easy—”

“She’s coming here?!”

“Yes.” Gandrel reflected that maybe he had chastised Chessa too much for interrupting him in the past; at least he should not have accused her of constantly doing so.

As his burgeoning panic ebbed back down, the vampire tripping his undead balls off nodded, starting to nervously fix his hair. His fingers brushed the gemmed circlet he was wearing.

“Oh. This. This doesn’t do anything. Just pretty now, not magic anymore... I think? At least... it stopped working for me. Lots of things don’t work for me anymore... they’re for people you see, not monsters. I suppose the worm in my head counted as more of a person than a mobile corpse does...” He slipped the headpiece off, running his fingers over its form, fascinated with how the tines of different metals wrapped around one another.

“She said I looked nice with it on. She gave it to me, you know? Slipped it on my forehead and laughed when we were in some horrible fetid cavern...” He polished the red gem, smiling sadly.

“I think of her when I wear it. That’s why I wore it today. I knew I’d be scared... I thought it might help. Scared of my old home, scared to come here... I’m still so frightened at times... by so many things...”

“... her?” Gandrel asked, not really expecting to receive an answer.

“No wonder she left me. I was a fun time... before the end. But nothing longer... nothing forever. Why would anyone stay?” He spun the circlet around a wrist, like a miniature hula-hoop. “What a fool I am. Thinking I would have made Avernus better for her, and not worse. What use is a frail, no, a broken spawn in a place such as that?” He laughed and rapidly spun around in a circle, again and again until he tumbled down to the floor.

The vampire-sitting Gur breathed a sigh of relief when Astarion plopped down, very thankful they had not tested this mixture on his daughters, even though Chessa had volunteered multiple times.

Astarion kept laughing as he slipped the circlet back on. “She got so angry at me when I called myself broken. Well, take that, Karlach! I win! I *am* broken.” He sniffled again, wiping at his eyes before pulling his legs up and wrapping his arms around them. “I’m glad you never knew,” he whispered.

All was still and quiet in the barn.

For roughly a minute and a half.

“I miss you so much!” Astarion wailed, then promptly burst into tears, paying not a lick of attention to Gandrel, who was unsure if the vampire even remembered he was present.

What he was sure about was that enough was enough, he would give this poor man his privacy; he obviously was in no condition to run anywhere. If he did damage anything in the barn, no doubt it would be easily repairable. Without a word to his charge, he quickly made his way to the door and tugged it open.

To his great surprise, he found two of his kin standing right outside the door.

“What? Oliver? Katelyn? Why are you here?” he tried to step out and shut the door behind him.

The man shoved his foot forwards, preventing the door from closing; with a sinking feeling Gandrel realized they both reeked, copious amounts of booze on their breath mixed with the generous helpings of ironvine on their skin.

“You know why, Ganny. He still in there?” The woman grinned at him.

The man was much more somber. “Why is it here? Why haven’t you slain it?”

“He’s helping us. Ulma arranged this; he is not to be harmed.”

“Ulma has lost her mind; it’s beyond time she stepped down, she is leading us into ruin and disgrace. If our people are to perish, we at least will have our revenge as a lasting legacy,” Oliver growled out, staring Gandrel down.

“Come on, Ganny! You gotta see reason, and help us make Ulma see it!”

“Wait, no, no, please no, let’s go discuss this over here, away from—” He tried to block them from entering, but they pushed past him easily, soon beholding the still sobbing vampire spawn sitting in the middle of the floor.

Katelyn brandished a freshly carved bit of wood and shouted, “I have a stake with your name on it, bastard!”

At the word “stake”, Astarion’s ears twitched slightly, his head snapping up to face the new arrivals.

The Gur woman dashed out at him; he managed to dodge to the side with a roll, quickly getting to his feet again, drawing his swords and starting to laugh.

“Stop this! The world has changed, we must change with it! That is the only way we can survive!” Gandrel ran after his friends.

“Fuck change, I want revenge!”

Oliver grunted in agreement, then added, “Then this new world won’t have our people in it! Better to vanish than betray our ancestors by treating with a monster!”

Said monster was proving rather difficult to stake, despite his intoxication. He kept dodging every blow, even as he started to be overcome by a case of the giggles.

“Weird laughing bastard! He’s quick, even for a spawn...” She drunkenly tottered backwards, digging in a pocket, “Where is that garlic powder?”

Astarion laughed and laughed and *laughed!* He tried to talk once then gave up, nothing but laughter emerging. This was hysterical. Would he now *really* be killed by Gur? A true death delivered to him by these people would be the most hilarious option possible.

Gandrel flung himself in-between the two wobbly, chemically addled combatants, spreading his arms wide. “No! Stop! He’s here at the behest of the High Harper of the city. If we harm him... we cannot harm him!”

“What the fuck have the Harpers ever done for us?” she asked, still digging through her pockets.

“She agreed to help us feed the children!”

“Don’t care,” Oliver growled out.

“Ulma said not to harm him, we have to listen.” He moved away from Astarion, trying to get his compatriots to follow; they only turned to watch him, failing to move after.

Katelyn finally found her satchel of garlic powder. “Maybe it’s time for a new leader. Ulma has guided us to naught but ruin.”

Oliver nodded, taking a swig from his hip-flask.

“Foolish decision after foolish decision! With this one the worst yet!” She pointed behind herself at the giggling spawn, then froze.

All three Gur realized the giggling had stopped. They turned to look at Astarion’s last location. He was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did he go?!” She glared at Gandrel accusingly.

“I don’t know!”

“Sure you don’t? All these years of travel, I thought I knew you, Gandrel. But look at you now... protecting our enemy.”

“He does not have to *be* our enemy. We need any allies we can get!”

“You’re a damn vampire lover! You hide him away with your little bloodsuckers? I’ll stake them next... stake them all!”

“You don’t mean that!”

“We’ll start with that thing pretending to be Chessa, she’s been a right little bit—”

Gandrel shut Oliver up with a right hook.

Oliver staggered back; he was not expecting that punch at all. He growled and drew his short sword.

“Stop it you two! We shouldn’t fight *each other!* We have to find the spawn!”

Her desire was fulfilled immediately, in a way.

Astarion dropped down from the rafters, right on top of Oliver, knocking the man down to his knees.

The Gur flung Astarion off, the vampire erupting into hysterical laughter again the moment his feet touched the floor.

Hardly able to believe what he was doing, Gandrel moved to join the fight, on Astarion's side! Or that was his plan. It was catastrophically derailed when he felt a sharp pain in his side, turning to see the Gur woman next to him.

"Leave this to us, Ganny. Don't worry, we won't hurt the kids. Not till you see reason at least." Katelyn grinned and waved a familiar dagger at him. Every Gur would instantly recognize the purpose of this blade; it was always loaded with a fast-acting poison.

As the toxin took effect Gandrel's legs might as well have turned to jelly; Katelyn guided him down to the floor. "There you go, Ganny. Don't worry, we figured you'd be weak to his charms. All that exposure, wearing you down. You just take a nap now; we'll clean up this mess. Make Ulma see reason."

He tried to protest, but the only sound he could make was a weak groan as she propped him up against the wall.

She patted him on the head and gave him a kiss on the forehead, as if she was a mother putting her child to bed, then dashed towards Astarion and Oliver, still locked in combat.

Through suddenly very heavily lidded eyes he saw his fellow Gur landing a deep blow to the vampire's stomach, finally slicing through his leather armor to bury his sword into the dead flesh underneath.

Astarion laughed hysterically at this, gripping Oliver's forearm with both hands and driving the blade deeper and deeper into himself.

He grinned at the stunned Gur, shifting to grab his elbow, then jerked forwards suddenly, impaling himself further, closing the distance between him and his attacker; most importantly, his fangs and the attacker's neck. The tip of the sword burst out his back, spraying the approaching woman with undead gore.

As Gandrel's vision started to dim, the last thing he perceived was their invited guest striking his true target and burying his fangs deep into the flailing man's neck.



"Again. I have gotten a gaggle of mind-addled Harpers home after an encounter with a hag miles away from our camp. No need to worry, I trust he will follow me without complaint, even if his condition has gotten worse since you left," Jaheira confidently stated, jogging towards the Gur encampment with Ulma.

"I hope you are right, I want to end this night with no violence..."

"He will save his complaints for when he is sober!"

When they entered the compound, the single woman still drinking at the fire pit took a final swig of liquor. She tossed her bottle into the fire; it shattered as she ran over to meet the two elder leaders.

“Ulma! There was... Oliver and Katelyn went in! ...it’s been silent for some time now.”

“Where is everyone else?!”

“... gone. Various places.”

Ulma swore in her native tongue as she raced to the silent barn, flinging the door open, Jaheira right behind her.

The main room was a vision of utter chaos. Furniture was flipped over, some very damaged, lots of wall decorations were now scattered about, and oh yes, there was a copious amount of blood; pools and splatter both. Gandrel was slumped against a wall, mostly unbloodied. The other two Gur were sprawled out on the floor, both very pale and smeared with a great deal of blood.

Ulma stood stunned in the doorway for a moment, Jaheira pushed past her and swore in *her* native tongue at the scene.

Gandrel groaned, slowly rousing due to the stomping feet. “No... wait...” He grimaced, putting a hand to his forehead.

Ulma knelt next to him. “Did the spawn turn violent?” He shook his head, drinking from his canteen.

Jaheira scanned the room, calling out, “Astarion?!” When there was no immediate answer, she muttered under her breath, “Please still be here, little bat...”

“This is *not* my fault! I was on my best behavior! They attacked *me!*” The reply came from high above, Astarion was perched on a ceiling beam, glaring down.

“Well get down here and explain to us, little bat!”

“No! Look what happened last time I trusted you!”

Jaheira did just that, once more her mouth a flat line as she looked about.

“He’s telling the truth. They attacked first,” Gandrel said while Ulma helped him to his feet. He nodded his thanks, then blinked with surprise as he examined his side. “Katelyn, she...” he looked over at her prone form, fearing the worst, but not wanting to confirm it yet.

“She stabbed my side with a tainted dagger... but the wound is gone.”

Astarion scuttled over the beam. “I poured some healing potions down your gullet. Your kids have it hard enough already.” He dropped down finally, landing right next to Jaheira.

She looked him over and raised her eyebrows. “Damn, little bat...” He was also covered in blood, with large gashes in his armor, including a huge chunk now missing from his abdominal region. Fire must have come into play after Gandrel passed out, for his poor leather armor was also singed; some areas burnt so badly they were now totally blackened, cracking as he moved. As for Astarion himself, except for a rash on his face, he appeared uninjured, all his broken armor only exposed pristine pale flesh.

He widely grinned at her. “It’s fiiiiine... I ate. Took back what they made me bleed. Maybe... maybe too much...” He swayed back and forth a bit, giggling.

Gandrel winced, exchanging a look with Ulma. They both went to check on their prone comrades; he steeled himself as he turned Oliver over, preparing to see his ruined throat.

The man groaned, he had rather messy bite marks on his throat, but he still *had* a throat. “He’s alive!” Gandrel could not help but exclaim.

“So is she. Barely... drained to the brink.” Ulma said, in a bit of disbelief.

“Despite my better judgment.” Astarion dismissively waved at them, rolling his eyes as he turned away. “If any of you ever jump me again... over the brink we’ll go!” Jaheira laughed, patting his shoulder for a few moments before he pushed her away with a *hmph!*

“What happened after I passed out?”

“Oh uh...” He faced them again. “I have no real idea when you dropped. It is a bit of a blur, really, darlings. However! I can say once I got my teeth into his neck, she flung blasted garlic powder at me!” He frowned while rapidly motioning to his face with one hand.

“Then fire! I hate the smell of burning hair... most especially my own! And ugh, just *look* at my armor! I don’t think this is even repairable! I’m sending you a bill.” He shook his fist at the Gur.

“Then what, little bat?”

“Oh, the smoke hindered her far more than my amazing self; Once I got behind her and bit it was over. Really, rubbish monster hunters...”

“They were very drunk...” Gandrel felt he had to at least offer a token defense for his people.

“*I was way beyond drunk!*” Astarion stomped his foot as he yelled.

Jaheira put her hand on his shoulder again, he grumbled but did not shrug her off. “Please trust, I truly did think you would be safe.”

He flicked his eyes down to her and sighed after a moment’s thought, pushing her hand off his shoulder only then. “It wasn’t a trap.” He pointed at Gandrel. “He *was* defending me... so...” he shrugged as he trailed off.

“You seem more yourself than when I left,” Ulma offered as she approached.

“Because I *bled out* all the stuff *you fed me!*” He frowned heavily at her and then smiled brightly, asking, “Do you have any more?” He laughed heartily at her darkening expression.

“I think we are going to consider that formula unsuccessful, yes Ulma?”

Jaheira crossed her arms and glared at Ulma. “You assured me he would not be harmed.”

“I did not order this. No one was to know he was here.”

“He briefly slipped outside. Very briefly... but that had to be enough.”

“I told him he would be safe!”

Astarion groaned, clutching his head with both hands. “Can’t you fight later? On your own time? I want to go home... I...” he blinked and giggled, swaying again. “Did you know she can turn into things?”

At the blank expressions he started prodding Jaheira’s shoulder. “Turn into a kitty! Show them! Kitty!”

Jaheira blinked, staring at his rapidly moving hand.

“I may have spoke too soon,” said Ulma.

The poking stopped, Astarion jerking his hand back, fighting down the altered state again. “I ... I was better. But...” he waved his hands in the air. “I feel ... off? Hard to... describe. I need to keep... a different type of control? To not... slip again. It is... tiring.”

Gandrel offered, “They had prepared with ironvine on their skin... I suspect it is mixing with one of the herbs from the concoction; they are known to react with one another.”

“*Mmm*. Lovely. And I did drink... rather a lot... from them.” He waved a lecturing finger at Gandrel, “It’s rather easy to ignore the foul taste of ironvine if you’re angry enough... good tip for you...”

“Thank you for the information,” Gandrel replied, even though he was already well aware of the limitations of ironvine’s protection.

Astarion hiccuped, surprising himself. “Oh... oh colors...”

“... little bat?”

“Wow, Jaheira! When... when did you dye your hair?” He giggled as he clumsily patted her head.

“... Oakfather preserve me.”

“Is *that* what took you so long? My, my, my! How irresponsible... little High Harper!”

“Keep it together. My business here is not done.”

“No! I’m dirty! I feel bad! I want to go home!” He flung his hands up and then started to leave, only stopping because Jaheira grabbed his arm.

“No! *Stay!*”

“Only if... you turn into a kitty!” The arm poking resumed.

Jaheira closed her eyes and counted to ten.

After opening them again, she firmly addressed Ulma. “We will talk later.” Then less harshly, to Astarion she said, “Fine, let’s get you home.”

The drug-addled vampire wiggled away from her, stumbling over to Gandrel to explain, “She can become a biiiiig kitty!” He held his hands up in front of him and spread them widely, demonstrating, holding the pose for a moment before bursting into laughter again.

“Come on you, you are lucky this is *truly* not your fault, little bat.” She expertly guided him to the door, giving one final glare back at the Gur as they departed.

The two conscious Gur stood there in silence for a moment, both looking over the disaster that was now the main room of the barn.

“I hope the children had a pleasant evening stroll,” Gandrel said after a few moments.

Ulma looked at Gandrel, raising one eyebrow when his only reply was to smile.



Jaheira kept ahold of Astarion’s upper arm, guiding him back along the path to the city proper, making sure to jerk him away from anything that threatened to disrupted him from focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

This was working out fairly well, mostly because his object of fascination for the last twenty or so minutes had been Jaheira.

“Jaaaa-heeeeeiiii-rraaah! Come ooon, turn into a kitty! Pleeeeeease? Pretty please? Oh...” He stumbled, then whimpered out, “I don’t feel good...” before doubling over and vomiting.

Intellectually, she of course knew whatever he brought up would be almost pure blood, but still, seeing the splat of dark red sent a cold shiver of fear passing through her. She felt his forehead, then swore at herself, what good would that do?

“I hate... throwing up. Caza... *Cazador* would compel me to lick it back up sometimes... most times...” He wiped his mouth, then leaned against the nearest wall, closing his eyes.

“You are not walking back.”

“Noooooo? You think? Really?” He steadied himself again, “What did they feed me?”

“You back with me now, little bat?”

“Oooh, come and going, my dear, coming and going. Here now, for now... just for now. This is a very odd feeling I will tell you!” He raised a hand, tracing an imaginary graph through the air. “How fast this is... oscillating. I am *not* enjoying it.”

“I did not think you were.”

“I’m proooobably more going soon, to be honest. I feel rather... tenuous. Please, do not leave me here...”

“Of course I will not leave you! I owe you that and more, foolish bat!”

“Well, *pardon me* for doubting the glorious *High Harper* as I feel my lucidity slipping away once more!”

“Maybe vomit again?”

“Noooo... I do not think... that would work. It is in my vessels already. *Mm?* Why this is coming and going, perhaps?” He started to giggle again, thinking of how absurd it was that his blood did flow,

despite the lack of a beating heart.

Jaheira *hrmed*, stepping away from him, looking a bit concerned.

“No reason to be nervous, my dear. I’m not going to lose control... in that manner.”

She scoffed at him and dismissively waved. “Not concerned with that, little bat! Thinking how we are going to get you back. I can’t carry you on my back in any form, we are decades beyond that.”

“Oooh... So... No kitty ride?” He giggled again and then said, “Oooh, there I go!” laughing and laughing again, sliding down the wall he was leaning against.

“No. No kitty ride.”

He frowned harshly at her! Then instantly became captivated by some pebbles by the side of the road, picking them up and laughing as he tossed them at the road, watching them roll down the slight hill.

“Ah! Little bat, I have a great idea!”



Around the fifth time she body slammed Astarion back into his seat to keep him from tumbling out of the rickshaw, Jaheira started to think this had not been a great idea. When she had to grab him by his belt loops and jerk him back to keep him from lunging at their driver, she reflected it might have been a bad idea.

He pouted at her, leaned just a bit too close, and slurred out, “I was merely playing... you’re no fun, darling!”

“Yes. That is what I am known as: Jaheira the High Harper of No Fun.”

Astarion giggled at that, his eyes unfocused for a moment before he zeroed in on her, poking her shoulder repeatedly once more. “Turn into a kitty! Do it! Do it!”

As the Upper City spires, still covered in construction scaffolding, *finally* came into view, Jaheira accepted this had been a terrible idea from the start.

Chapter End Notes

Astarion did what he was told! He’ll not make that mistake again.

I’m not sure anybody came out a winner this evening!

Astarion got dinner and won’t remember most of this evening, so let’s call it a draw.

Horrid gross yummy make vampires high food inspired by delicious autumn squashed soup by Panera bread.

Please come back to me soup.

Next time!

Astarion's most very busy day/night gets started.

Chapter 10: A long night begins

Chapter Summary

The day after adventures at the Gur encampment! Don't worry, nobody else will cause any problems for Astarion in this one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As always, one of Astarion's first conscious actions was assessing his condition and location. He was at home, on his bed: good! He was wearing his drow-crafted leather armor: confusing! Said armor was bloody, tattered, and burnt: concerning! There was no pain, save the hunger in his stomach, which was so blunt nowadays that did not even count as pain, not really: less concerning!

With nothing horrible found he started pondering what the results of his assessment meant. Why was he in armor? Why was it bloody and tattered? Adding to the mystery: it was not merely *his* blood, at least two mortals contributed to the mess upon him.

Wait.

How did he get *home*? What *did* he last remember?

The events of the evening before slowly reassembled themselves. Ah, yes, he had been at the Gur's new expanded encampment for a culinary adventure, unwillingly, only there at Jaheira's behest. They had fed him something splendid!

How can I get more? I want more. Moremoremoremoremore—

He sat up and shook his head.

No, no, no! Enough of that, thank you!

He successfully pushed the desire out of at least the forefront of his mind. Based on the *lovely* cornucopia of scents, he suspected he threw up last night. He *detested* vomiting. Nothing that resulted in *that* was worth imbibing. No matter how pleasurable it was at first taste.

Now if only he thought that a dozen more times, he might make himself fully believe it.

So much was still a blurry fog. There was a fight? Yes. He won? ... yes! Did he kill anybody? ...no? Most likely, no? If he had, he probably would not be here, unharmed, and unshackled. Thus, he went with 'no' as his final answer.

Astarion's attempt to recall what happened *after* the fight was derailed by the sudden realization a heartbeat was in his room, a scant few feet away from him. Leaning over to peer off the side of his bed, he found a panther sleeping on the floor.

Well, either that was Jaheira, who was a panther in his flat, for reasons. Or there was a random panther in his flat, for *other* reasons?

He pondered and stared. Then, mixing it up a bit, he stared and pondered.

After careful consideration, he decided his first order of business was to get this malodorous armor off and silently crept out of the room.

Soon enough he returned, sparkingly clean and fabulously dressed. Time to deal with this latest problem fate dumped on his doorstep.

“Soooooooo... are you Jaheira? Oooooor did Gale get another pet? Oooooor some weird 3rd option I cannot even begin to fathom?” He tapped his nose as he thought, then crossed his arms and glared down. “You’d have better be Jaheira.”

The beast’s eyes flew open; Astarion stood his ground, standing over it. If it had wanted to maul him, that would have been easy enough while he was asleep. ... right?

With a sickening sound that Astarion did not think he would *ever* become used to, the panther was gone and Jaheira was standing up, cracking her back as she stretched. “Good morning!”

“Wrong on every account!” He shook his finger at her and then pointed at the sunlight, the barest hints visible around the edges of his curtain. “Firstly, it is afternoon! Second, how can you say *good* with the state I woke in?!” He glared at her, as he pointed to his damaged armor, propped up against the foot of his bed.

“Whenever I wake up it is morning, the world does revolve around you, little bat, but me! I am sorry you had to find out this way.”

Astarion used every scrap of control in the entirety of his being to keep glaring at her.

“And seems rather good to me, you are in full control of your faculties once more, yes?”

“I hate you.” He gave in, spinning around for her while giggling. “Yes, yes, all better! It *was* amazing food, maybe I could get more?” He shook his head with a grimace. “Ugh. No. I shouldn’t. I know that. But... I *do really* want more...” he licked his lips, trailing off as he stared into space.

“That tasty, was it?”

“Gods, yes! I know I shouldn’t have more, but Jaheira it was... it was *so* delicious, I cannot... I cannot explain it to you, I fear, my dear. What with your oh so limited mortal palate.”

“Try me.”

“Oh, darling, if you insist.” He bowed at her. “It was... it was better than straight from the neck!” He put a hand to his own neck, smiling dreamily.

“Hrm...” She looked him up and down, accessing if he was about to bail out the window in search of more of this ‘better than neck’ food.

He scoffed at her, dismissing her concerns with a wave. “*Tsk!* I’m *fine*. I won’t try to get more. I’ll just be... thinking about the experience. Sensations. For a while. But I *do* have at least a modicum of self-control, I’ll have you know!” He wagged a finger around for emphasis.

“You have a great deal of self-control; we both know this. I am sorry, little bat.”

He waved her off once more. “Just don’t let it happen again.” He then paused for a moment and shifted to loom over her, grinning down.

Jaheira looked up and raised one eyebrow. “Yes?”

He grinned wider!

“Spit it out, I am busy, many things to do today. Like everyday, unending!”

“I was right and you were wrong!” he said in a singsong fashion.

She pinched the bridge of her nose with a groan, followed by a chuckling.

He cackled, “Really, that makes the whole horrendous experience rather worthwhile!”

“How much of said horrendous experience do you recall?”

“Nooooot that much, really.” He flopped halfway onto his bed, legs hanging off the side, dramatically putting a hand to his forehead. “Another bit of my life lost to the depths... utterly forgotten!”

“Ah, well, at least you are used to the experience.”

He kicked out in her direction, not even coming close to making contact. “Probably just as well. I will not weep over another forgotten night. I’m sure it was full to bursting with dreadfully embarrassing moments.”

“I will keep what I know of your evening to myself, til’ most needed. That is the Harper way.”

He lifted his head up just enough for her to see him narrow his eyes.

“After I arrived, the most I saw was you being very demanding; insisting that I turn into ‘a kitty,’ as you put it.”

He flopped back down and sighed out a laugh. “Appears I got what I wanted in the end.”

“You absolutely *refused* to get to bed until I would transform. Worse than my actual children you are!”

“I aim to provide nothing but the pinnacle of experiences! *Hrm*. If you were hoping for an explanation as to why *that* was my primary desire last evening? I have none, my dear, apologies.”

“Oh, another moment! When I suggested you should remove your bloody armor before getting into bed, you became very upset.”

Astarion groaned, sliding off his bed, a good half dozen pillows tumbling to the floor with him. He grabbed the closest one and curled up around it while suppressing another yawn. “Fantastic. I doubt you were overly surprised at that reaction...”

“No, little bat, not after I took a moment to think. You calmed down quickly and the ‘kitty’ demands returned.”

“I was consistent in my inanity, at least.” He sat up, tapping a fang with a finger. “I am going to be wondering for *some time* exactly why I was so enamored with your panther form.”

“Do you remember anything about the scuffle?”

“Jaheira! One does not have that much blood on them due to a *scuffle*.”

“Extreme scuffle.”

He giggled, “Vague *extreme* scuffle memories. Mostly reconstructed from various blood bouquets I was bathed in and the damage to my poor armor. I deduced it was doubtful I delivered a deathblow.”

“Correct, no deaths. Good job. Want a gold star?”

“Ooooh, yes please! I’ll show up and demand my reward when you least suspect it.” He grinned at her then his voice dropped an octave as seriousness returned, “Two random Gur, jumped me? Yes? I... suppose I am glad I did not kill them.”

He stood up and started returning pillows to their proper places on his bed. “I refuse to dance on puppet strings any longer... even if my revenge would be true and not simply a result of the facade he constructed around my death.”

“Care to explain that one, little bat?”

“Not particularly, but I will. You should feel so very special, little Harper!”

“I am in a vampire spawn’s flat after having babysat said spawn all night. I feel special enough.”

“Cazador hated the Gur. Abhorred them. No idea his reasons, but there must have been some motivation beyond their propensity to take up arms against the undead. He’d have to hate *so many* people if that was his only criterion. Though he diiiiiid love hating people, so perhaps? *Hrm?*” He tilted his head, looking at her questioningly.

“I long ago stopped trying to understand why madmen do what they do,” she said with a shrug.

“Wise, really. For it does not matter why, he stoked the fires of hate in me all the same. Ascertaining I would share in his abhorrence. Reminding me over *and over* again how the Gur were the ones who *murdered* me. He was the one who *saved* me, so generously and graciously. Preventing my pathetic existence from ending with me bleeding out in an alley, after just shy of two score years of true life.”

“More years than many have to enjoy,” Jaheira replied, looking more past Astarion than at him.

He blinked and then giggled, “You are the first in my memory not to comment how surprisingly young I was, *annnnnd* also the first one with elven blood, now that I think on it... I swear, do other races think every elf that has aged out of short pants must be centuries old? We can live long; we do not *grow-up* long!”

“Mm. You have not told many who have had the life I have.” She met his gaze once more.

Astarion eyed her for a second, raising an eyebrow, before simply continuing on, “Now with the clarity of thought given to me by freedom and good food both, realizing how he cultivated that hatred in me, nourishing it... aiming it. Rather puts me off killing any of them... if nothing else Cazador despised them, reason enough to keep them in the world.”

“The enemy of your greatest enemy. I have seen strong alliances forged on far less.”

“Though if the two that attacked me dare to ever even *look* askance in my general direction, I will grant them an exception.”

“Ah, the limits of the great Astarion’s mercy!”

“200 years spent cultivating a hatred for a group of people, all the logic in the realms cannot disperse the result in an instant. After all, I *do* remember them beating me to death’s door, I could even tell you the style of clubs they wielded!” he bitterly chuckled, “Remember it all too clearly, except for the most important part.”

“More important than if the clubs were in the latest fashion?”

“Did the Gur’s eyes that night have the red sheen of compulsion upon them? If nothing else will come back to me maybe I can expand out on this, I thought the other evening! The only bit of my former life I can remember... once again, foolish to even hope or try. I do truly not know why I continue to bother... I only ever succeed in upsetting myself...”

“Little bat, I think you might be a bit of an optimist.”

“How dare you insult me like that! In my own home!”

“You are right, forget it, I will save that insult for when you are in my home.”

Astarion flung a pillow at her, she caught it and sat down, using it as her cushion, watching him as he continued, “Sometimes I see that sheen... other times, their eyes are all so unclouded. *Mmm*. Even if he did not charm them, he capitalized on their actions. Really, I suspect now, it was *all* a farce. My grudge was but another way Cazador molded me. His perfect imperfect little broken spawn... acting out his wishes even without any word of command.” He flopped on his bed once more, deliberately pushing the same pillows he just restored back onto the floor once more, one by one.

“Do you know what happened to them? The ones who wielded the clubs?”

“No idea... none at all.”

“Would you like to find out?”

“What does it matter? Who in all the realm would care what happened to people who murdered some forgotten fool two centuries ago, it is ancient history to all.”

“I think you care.”

He rolled so that he was facing away from her, falling silent... his ears drooping an almost imperceptible amount before he forced them to be still.

“As you are so fond of saying, I am so old. It is not ancient history to me. What if I wanted to know?”

“If you have some ideal curiosity, far be it from me to try to forbid you from sating it. Even if *why* you would care to know is a mystery to me...” He sat up again and kicked a couple of more pillows off the foot of his bed.

“Give this old woman her secrets.”

“Speaking of old women! Did the leader of the Gur blame me for the kerfuffle? Do I have to worry about being hunted once more?”

“No, the mustachioed one spoke in your defense.”

“So I’m *not* in trouble? Not that I should be, but I have an unfortunate history of being the one in trouble when I am fully blameless...”

“Astarion, you are not *in trouble*. All is well.”

“If they are *not* hunting me, then tell me, how does one send a bill to a nomadic people? Though they are rather more sedentary as of late; seeking to avoid their children bursting into flames in the sun, I suppose, for *some* reason.” He grinned as he slipped off the bed.

“What are you on about, little bat?”

He held up his tragically damaged leather armor, frowning deeply as he shook it at Jaheira. “Look at this! Just *look* at it! Made for Lolth’s little pets, but perfect for me as I have been cast back into the shadows. Or it *was*... and now utterly ruined!” He stuck an arm through the damaged stomach region and wiggled his fingers out the corresponding hole in the back!

Jaheira whistled at this little display. “Give it to me, we have a number of Harpers with drow heritage, they will know how to repair it.” She examined the hole in the back. “I did not notice how this was made before...”

Astarion grinned, “Ah, that it is an obvious exit wound?” He laughed and mimed stabbing his abdomen. “A classic vampire spawn move! Drive the blade in *deeper*. It is honestly very amusing how *many* people tend to forget that a gut wound is not catastrophic when their opponent is a walking corpse.”

He pondered for a moment, stroking his chin. “Hrm. Unless you manage to make me trip upon my own entrails, I suppose, or if—”

“It might take some time to repair. Do you have others still? If not, I can loan you something, if you need. And I think you will need; you seem unable to stay out of trouble.”

Astarion grinned at her and dropped down to the floor, tugging a trunk out from under his bed. “Do I have others, she asks! Oh, do I have others—” he flipped open the trunk and yelped in pain as a soft yellow glow illuminated the room.

He slammed the trunk shut, all of his exposed skin already smoking.

“Wrong trunk,” he explained.

Jaheira watched his freshly styled central hair curl break off and tumble down onto the now closed trunk, scattering into ash when it hit.

Astarion wasted no time in shoving the trunk back under his bed and pulling out another one. “Ah, this one is the armor trunk. I think. I really should label these...” He flipped it open, much slower this time, wincing as some skin flaked off his fingers.

“What was in the other, little bat?”

“Here they are!” He flipped the lid fully open, shouting out, “Behold!” as he motioned at his collection of leather armors.

“Astarion! Other trunk! What is it in! Tell me now!”

He hissed at her and then tried the deepest growl he could produce.

Jaheira kept pointing under the bed, not reacting one iota to his display.

Astarion weakly hissed at her once more, then sighed. “Nothing to get all excited about, only a mace.”

“Are you telling me. All this time. You have had the missing Blood of Lathander *in a trunk under your bed?!?*”

“Well, I didn’t *tell* you that, you are rather making assumptions—”

“Do you know how much we have searched for this?!”

“No! Nobody asked me!” He slammed his armor trunk shut.

“Of course we did not! Why would we think you had the anti-undead weapon! Wyll and I assumed Lae’zel must have taken it!”

“See, more assumptions. You know what they say about assumptions, my dear, you *are* old enough to —”

“Why do you have something that can harm you?”

“Because it’s mine!”

“Why do you claim it is yours!”

“It wasn’t fair! Everybody else had... had so many *things!* Karlach and I had *nothing*. Then it was... it was only me and I still had *nothing!*” He pounded the closed trunk with a fist, the vibrations causing more of his hair to break off and crumble into dust.

“... I see.”

He met her eyes for a second and then looked away, focusing on rubbing the ash off his healing fingers. “So, yes, fine. I took everything I could. Everything that I suspected would not be missed. That was not important to someone else. Such as leaving anything githyanki behind.”

“So generous you are. When?”

“While they were downstairs celebrating... the next evening.”

“Were you mad at them for being happy?” She peeked under his bed, while he was still busying himself peeling his hands.

“No, and that is the truth! I told them all to go celebrate instead of trying to, *ugh*, comfort me. I knew she would have wanted everyone to do so. Me included. But I did not feel like it...” He got to his feet once more, frowning as he felt how burnt his face was. “I thought I was going to have to push Wyll out bodily, but then his *father* appeared, thankfully. And I will never say *that* again.”

“Allowing you to steal from all your friends.”

“Allowing me to properly distribute the spoils of our expedition!”

“Pull the other one, it has bells on.”

“Mine!” He stomped his foot and hissed again!

“I care not one whit about most of your pilfering. But I am taking the mace, Astarion. It is *not* safe for you to have it.”

“I had one accident! One!” He balled his fists up, shaking his arms in frustration.

“Are you seriously going to argue to keep it now? With your face a blistered mess and half your hair burnt to ash?”

“It is not *half my hair*,” he huffed, “Perhaps half my bangs...”

“How long was it open? A handful of seconds? Fine, you may keep it if you can be in the room with it, unshielded, for five minutes.”

He glared at her.

“Mmm? Problem?”

Astarion’s eyes became oh so very round and he sniffled, “But it’s mine...”

“Very well, it is yours.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, “...the catch?”

“Yours stored someplace else, not here.”

He sighed heavily, “I’m not winning this one. Am I?”

“What do you think, little bat?”

“Ugh. *Fine!*” He huffed and tugged the chest back out. “I wasn’t planning on using it on *myself*. Please think better of me than *that*.”

“What then? A reason beyond ‘it is mine’?”

“You’ll meet Petras one day and then all will become clear.”

Jaheira filed that name away and put one foot on the trunk, waving him away. “You go take care of yourself. Have a snack.”

“That’s what I was *going to do!* You don’t have to tell me what to do.” He grumbled and stomped away, grabbing a blood jar on his way out and pulling the door shut.

A few minutes later he called through the door, “So... is it *safe* now? Can I return to my own bloody room?”

“Yes, I permit you!” Jaheira called out with a laugh.

Upon his return he first made a rude hand gesture at her, then held up his almost empty bottle of blood, wiggling it back and forth. “Time for a trick!” he said, promptly downing the rest of the bottle, then flinging it away. It clattered against the other empties in a wooden crate.

He held his hands up to frame his already healed face, splaying his fingers out widely. Before Jaheira’s eyes his damaged hair regrew, each strand growing until it reached exactly the length it was

before the incident. Pulling a prepared brush out of his pocket, he quickly styled his hair, finishing with a “Ta-da!” as he posed for her.

Jaheira politely clapped, sitting on a trunk. “Useful trick.”

“You have *no* idea. Being able to *mmm...* influence which injury heals first, and to what degree, has been *most* useful.”

“An unwanted hair cut is an injury now?”

“Yes! Yes, it is!” He crossed his arms and played up being offended, before grinning at her and saying, “It’s a part of my body, like any other! Frozen in the state it was upon my death, forever more...”

“Pity the vampire who died the day after a bad haircut.”

“Now that would be a reason to stake oneself.” He stifled a yawn, “So unnatural... to be awake when the sun is up.”

“Take joy in that my sleep schedule has also been horridly ruined. I slept away most of the day.”

“You’re old, I’m sure you could use the extra rest. Really, this could be a bonus for me as well, I need to be awake at roughly this time tomorrow. My first official day as part of our most favorite Grand-Duke’s retinue and all...”

Jaheira blinked, then laughed, “That is a bet I would have lost, I did not think you would ever agree to something so official!”

“Oh. You don’t know? Of course you don’t, why would you...” He trailed off, laughing softly.

Secrets! He got to have secrets now, people only knew things if he told them! Such amazing privacy! Well... no, this was not a *secret*, per say. It was a normal lack of shared knowledge. How it was for most people, he assumed. Not knowing everything about everyone all the time. Wonders of wonders, what occurs when you are not forced to be together constantly. Not crammed into a horrid room in a ghastly torture mansion or huddled in close proximity to a blasted artifact. How wonderfully strange, a bit of a hassle at times, yes, but still... rather nice, all in all.

“Astarion? Are you coming and going once more? Not free from the effects of the concoction?”

He startled then laughed, shaking his head. “No, no, the only one taking me anywhere is myself... lost in thought for a moment, my dear, that is all.”

“Tell me what this work for Wyll is? Feed an old woman her gossip, little bat, since you have no other food for me here!”

“He wants me tooooo... advise him on... various matters,” he said, worrying with the lace of one sleeve.

“Rather unsure, are we?”

“To be honest?” He waited for her to make some quip, then continued on after nothing came, “I am uncertain what he expects to come of any contribution I can provide. I’m not sure I have much to offer really, besides insight for one or two particular topics...”

“Politics is a game full of people with big opinions who love nothing more than to hear themselves talk. You will do fine, I have not a single doubt!”

Astarion rolled his eyes and waved his hands towards the door, “Shoo. Take *my* holy sun-god artifact with you and do... whatever it is you are so eager to do with it.”

She allowed herself to be herded into the front room. “See you soon, little bat, but take no offense, I hope not *too* soon. You always bring so much excitement with you! I am busy with enough excitement already.”

He made another vigorous shooing gesture at her, guiding her out, narrowing his eyes when she laughed at him, then *finally* and triumphantly shut his front door, flipping every lock with great satisfaction!

He then stood there and looked around, pursing his lips as he thought. Now what was he to do? It was *hours* still until sun down. Going right back to sleep was the most obvious answer, he was still *so* tired, but it *would* be best to stay awake.

Soon he was staring at his bed, resisting the impulse to lay down upon it for only a *few minutes*. With a grunt he instead sat down at his desk and once again resumed his endless task of organizing the various sewing supplies he had collected over the past tendays.

After almost an hour of diligent effort, Astarion leaned down to grab something else from his pile of unorganized items, when he found nothing, he leaned over farther. Then farther still, looking down when his fingertips brushed against the bare floor.

“I’ll be...”

The grand task was finally finished. That was possible? Everything in its place and a place for everything. Organization reigned! Astarion blinked a few times, running his fingers over the spools of threads, all nicely sorted by both fiber type and color in a rack made just for this very purpose. How many times had he imagined having something like this? It had seemed an impossible dream for so *many* years. He sat back up in his chair, massaging his eyes with a thumb and forefinger, focusing on breathing steadily.

In. Out. In. Out.

With a final firm exhalation, he dropped his hand down and shook his head at his foolishness. Moments like this he was so grateful he was alone. Let no one see him almost burst into tears over something so minor such as having various types of *thread*.

It was such a strange feeling, not having to scrounge for every scrap, bartering marks or rotten rats with his siblings for the exact color of thread he wanted. He had traded his body outside of Cazador’s demands for a full sewing kit more than once, before he had become adept at shoplifting and learned how to better budget his time when he was sent hunting. Regardless of the manner he acquired supplies, he’d lost them all eventually. To other spawn, Cazador, or simply the ravages of time. It was a rare stroke of good luck he had a fresh sewing kit on him when mind flayer liberation occurred.

Now though he had a veritable treasure trove. Even more amazingly, if something happened, he could easily replace them all. Hells, he could most likely look rather sad at Wyll and wobble his lip just *so* and the fool would even organize them again for him.

“I suppose I should decide what in the world I want to make now.”

Ah, more decisions! Freedom really was *unending* decisions! The luxurious burden of being able to stop and ponder, plan out what he *wanted* rather than merely reacting. Staring at his accumulated bolts of cloth did not generate any ideas promptly, frustratingly enough. Very unbecoming of them, really, some of these were worth a good amount of coin, they should have inspiration wafting from them at all times! So far, even with his preponderance of supplies his new freedom had delivered him, he had only mended his clothing and embroidered the punishment pillow for Gale.

Oh, there was an idea. A gift perhaps? He could sew something for someone else, and not *merely* as mockery? Wyll had brought him a number of items, he could return the favor? The idea filled him with *such* trepidation almost instantly.

Now *this* was pointless fear. There was no possibility that Wyll, the foolish man that he was, would mock or disparage Astarion for a gift, even if it was not something to his liking. Knowing this did *nothing* to lessen the fear. He was reminded of how a small part of him prepared for almost every conversation he had with Karlach to result in her ending their relationship, due to some misstep he was not even aware of making. Foolishness then and foolishness now; these imaginary demons would *not* defeat him. He would make something for Wyll; if the Grand Duke did reject it and mock Astarion, then the vampire would simply crumble into dust and blow away, sun or no sun. Which would solve all of his problems at once, so really, this was a win/win situation.

Now what to make? Blast it! Another decision. There was a new one behind every corner. He would never be free of freedom. He giggled out loud at his own thoughts while he leaned back in the chair, staring up at the ceiling as though the answer would be written there. When that failed, he searched the walls. He blinked and grinned, leaning forwards as he laughed. The answer *was* written there for him after all!

Soon enough he was making excellent progress, why, what with the little shortcut he took, he would be able to finish this in time to bring it with him to the horned hero's house! His mind wandered as he reached the repetitive no thoughts needed part of embroidery. It was a very quiet afternoon on the streets, a brief rain shower had sent most people away. In search of entertainment, he let the various heartbeats he could sense enter his more conscious perception.

My, my, my! There were some in his very building, his very floor, why, half a dozen now in the flat next to his! Very animated too, lots of fast beating as their owners moved around the room. For a moment he was surprised he could not hear any voices, or at least footsteps, then he vaguely recalled hearing about anti-noise enchantments in the walls of this building; vampiric heartbeat sensing must be stronger.

The movements of the heartbeats kept him entertained for a while as he sewed, they moved about the flat with no real pattern, as if they were scurrying bugs, then would all leave, going down the stairs, only to return a short time later. Moving in day, he supposed. Would all *six* of them be in such a small space?

He laughed, the space he now considered small was so much larger than the dormitory the spawn had been crammed into. So much forced closeness with so many he despised. He was once again, very glad to be living alone. He laughed again. Living hrm? Unliving? Though really, he felt fairly alive most days, compared to his past two centuries of merely existing. The sheer amount of blood he was able to consume alone...!

Who needs a beating heart to feel alive? Not Astarion! Honestly, having one seemed like it would be a most annoying distraction. How could someone with a forever noisy heart hear their own thoughts over the racket of their blood flow stopping and starting over and over again. Astarion's method was *much* more civilized; instead, when he had enough blood to spare it leisurely meandered at a

consistent speed through his vessels, until all the life essence in the crimson fluid was depleted and it vaporized away to nothingness.

Astarion steadily worked, the sun so tortuously slow, crawling across the sky as the hours passed. He kept monitoring the heartbeats in the neighboring flat, but not paying much active attention until only one remained, the other five having been absent for so long, they must surely have departed. The heartbeat moved around the rooms, going faster and faster, both in tempo and velocity. The movements reminded Astarion of his wanderings his own flat, when Jaheira and the bald mobile hamster containment unit had *finally* left. He smiled, ah, that must be his actual new neighbor. A solo occupant flat, like Astarion's! Good for him and good for whoever owned that steady rhythm. Enjoying being off on your own now, little heartbeat? Family helped you and then departed?

He finished stitching in the letters and evaluated his efforts, clicking his tongue a few times. It was a good start, but he could do better. It was amazing how much easier it was to work when he did not have to constantly worry about being interrupted, he was able to fully enjoy the work, why he could sit here contentedly for hours more refining his craft. As he looked over his spools, starting to select the next color to enhance his project, he saw that the sun had fully set.

Astarion was out in the open air in front of his building as fast as vampirically possible, grinning as he looked around the streets, rubbing his hands together. He fully ignored any odd looks his race out of the building had generated. What to do on this fine evening of freedom? He couldn't or well, *shouldn't* go too far; he'd have to loop back here and grab some essentials he'd need for his engagement with the blade of non-frontiers.

There were so many more people here this evening than any other since he moved in. That flier in his mail box had been correct after all, the term was restarting the next tenday, no doubt. Baldurian spirit at work, if you weren't dead (or at least had not stopped moving) enough time had passed now, time to get back to the routine. He'd have *so* many neighbors soon...! He hoped their blasted loud heart beats would not be too distracting. He had never lived in a building with living people before, after all.

That was a problem for future Astarion. Current Astarion was going to use the sudden surge of students as a sign indicating where he should start his sunset stroll. He chuckled to himself as he meandered towards the University District proper.

He had never spent much time in the little academic nook of the Upper City. Well, not much time he *remembered* at least. One night when he was feeling a bit more mentally sound, he would grace the law school's registrar's archives with his presence. Soon, perhaps; he should at least confirm his attendance for years of true-life at a place where nothing at all felt familiar. If nothing else, it would be a bit of cold comfort to see his name written down on something other than a forgotten rock.

In any case, not only were 'Cazador's Finest' *strongly* discouraged from preying upon the denizens here in general, even when Astarion felt like disobeying that particular guideline, he never saw a high success rate in luring someone away from their studies. Sure, horny students would love a roll in the bushes, or between stacks in the library, but it was a bit too difficult to get them to *leave* the grounds. Thus, it was a good enough place as any to wander about this aimless evening, find some new locations and sights; ones not tinged with some horrid memory. Who knows, he might even run across a solo early returning student and be able to get a quick bite. Give others some horrid memories for a change!

Very soon he realized there would be no snacking opportunities. No longer were the campuses almost his private playground to wander about; they were all teeming with droves of students and variably worried family members.

No wonder there were less and less accessible flats in his building. He had hoped entering the units before they had confirmed owners would eliminate the need for invitations, but no such luck. At least the homes he had entered while tadpoled were still unbarred to him, regardless of invitation status. If only he had known at the time, he would have dedicated a few evenings to entering as many buildings as possible.

Astarion expertly navigated through the crowds, not touching a single person and moving in such a way most eyes slipped away from him without even realizing he was there. His quest was now to find the area with the least amount of heartbeats possible. This tactic led him to the medical campus, which was much less infested with the living, for some reason.

After a moment's thought he headed over to the building that had so unsettled Dalyria. It was as good a destination as any other. Looking up, he squinted; this was it, right? Really, seemed like any of the other buildings here, maybe a bit taller than most? The neural excitement had made its mark here; scaffolding covered one wall; the dark blue decorative trim was being repainted. It appeared they had decided to give the entire structure a new coat of paint, based on the number of paint buckets huddled under the framework.

Dalyria was there when he rounded the corner! But not really *her*. A larger-than-life painting of her smiling face, on the side of the building next to a marble plaque.

He stopped undead in his tracks, staring.

What in the bloody hells is this? A memorial?! She has a blasted public memorial?!

Astarion grit his teeth and passed his eyes over the text.

Adopted daughter of Baldur's Gate. Hailing from Evereska, Dalyria led the charge in revolutionized modern healing, integrating elven healing techniques with common healing principles, producing an immeasurable impact that benefited, and will continue to benefit, countless lives for generations to come.

He had to stop reading there. He was shaking with rage. *Godsdamnit*. She got a *memorial*. Look how *good* she was. Lovely little Doctor Dalyria. A bloody memorial! A maintained memorial! The protective glass over the painting was freshly polished!

What did *he* get? A single lonely tombstone. Nary a single relative buried near him. An untended tombstone, showing no sign it has seen any mourners in *decades*, if ever. Covered with grime, the vines pulling it apart. An object forgotten by the rest of the world. The only thing he had ever found that *proved* he had once lived, that he was not some amalgamation created in Cazador's hidden dungeon.

His unadorned abandoned tombstone. Her elaborate maintained memorial. It would be funny, if it wasn't infuriating.

He growled up at her picture, oh look, blue eyes. He learned what color eyes *she* had before his own! He didn't care about her eyes! He didn't want to know this!

Footsteps jerked him back to the present, he ducked around the corner out of instinct, slipping out of view before whoever it was could spy him. He peered out, just enough to get a glimpse; two women wearing university robes stopped in front of the memorial; one elven, the other human. Drawing back again, he pressed up against the brickwork and listened.

“They fixed it! I was hoping they would, I really didn’t want to have to bother Mom.”

“This is your aunt? She died seventy years ago... that’s so long...”

“For you.”

“Did you even know her?”

“Only a bit, I wish I knew her better. But I was really young when she left Evereska... but old enough to remember how angry my grandparents were about everything. She never came back... I still miss her.”

“She killed herself?!”

“That’s the official story. I don’t believe it... nobody in the family does. She got into politics.”

“More to the story than what they put on the side of a building, huh?”

“Isn’t there always? I’ll tell you later, we have to get to the opening ceremonies, I don’t want to miss the speaker. I heard she’s going to talk about some *really* gross parasites!”

“This is the most romantic first date I’ve ever been on.”

There was the sound of something being set down and then the pair left, footsteps, laughter, and heartbeats all fading away.

Astarion practically leapt out from his hiding place, shaking again.

There was now a vase with flowers in it sitting on the ground.

*A memorial and family that still **visits** it?!*

It was not fair. It was *not fair!* It was **not fair!**

He looked up at her painting again. Living Dalyria, smiling, oh *so* radiantly.

Astarion stood there, shaking, breath coming out as ragged growls, for a few moments.

He told himself over and over again that the city remembering and honoring Dalyria had absolutely nothing to do with his situation at all. Jealousy was unbecoming and irrational.

I still miss her. Her niece had said. *Still miss her.* The words echoed in Astarion’s head.

He slammed the vase into the portrait, shattering the glass.

Slam! Slam! Slam!

He hit it again and again, until the vase itself came apart in his hands, falling into razor sharp chunks.

Gripping some of the bigger shards of ceramic he sliced jagged tears in the canvas, then started attacking the marble stone, doing far more damage to his hands than the stone.

Laughing hysterically, he smeared the blood pouring from his hands all over the inscription.

Once his hands stopped providing fuel for his rampage he stepped back, silently looking over his efforts.

It was not enough.

More! More! More!

He wrenched open one of the conveniently nearby paint cans; flinging the dark blue paint all over the memorial, making sure to pour a healthy amount on the remains of the canvas and the rubble that once was the vase.

When the paint can was mostly empty, he started bashing it against the stonework, not even realizing he was splashing himself with the remainder.

Bash! Bash! Bash!

Take that, perfect lovely Dalyria! Who was so beloved that Godey did not even strike as hard when he beat her! Noble selfless Dalyria!

Dalyria, who believed that Astarion would save her from the Underdark!

Dalyria, who argued on his behalf to the others!

Dalyria, who Astarion had resolved to kill in cold blood, trading her soul for his own freedom!

How dare she believe he was capable of any goodness or charity! How dare she! How dare she believe in him!

He would never forgive her.

Using a different technique, he slightly sharpened the edge of the metal paint can against the stone, then started striking the marble.

Ting! Ting! Ting!

Victory! Now he was successfully scratching the edifice. He cackled like a madman as he pondered what he could scratch into the marble. Maybe he'd dust off his elvish! Like all good school boys, it wasn't just his name and colors he knew, but a decent command of profanity as well!

Chime! Chime! Chime!

Wait. *Chime?* What was making a chiming sound? How was he making a chiming sound? He scraped the paint can against the memorial again and was rewarded with a scratchy-ting sound once more.

Chime! Chime! Chime!

Oh. That was coming from under his shirt. The stone on the chain around his neck. He blinked, stepping back as the haze of his destructive rampage begin to lift, automatically touching the stone with a hand.

Ah! There you are! Good evening, Astarion! I hope I am not disrupting your evening overly much?

It was Gale. Of course it was Gale. Why in all the hells did Astarion answer!?! Well, nothing to do for it now.

“No... no... I’m just... engaged in...” He stared at the ruined memorial to Dalyria. The painting was unrecognizable now. A tattered canvas covered with blood and paint.

Astarion? You are not coming through that clearly. Is the stone blocked somehow?

“Engaged in a spot of...” he dropped the bent and bloodied paint bucket, kicking it towards the ruined display.

You can simply think your message instead of audibly communicating it as well! That can be more reliable.

“Ah.” He stared down at himself, finally noticing all the blue paint he was covered with, mixed with a healthy amount of his own blood.

Evening, darling. Thank you ever so much for the lovely reminder. Just engaged in a spot of, oh, let us call it ... art therapy.

Gale’s response came immediately as Astarion peered at his hands, investigating how deep the lacerations truly were. Answer: extremely.

If you are free this evening, I would be most appreciative of your company! I invite you to witness a most momentous event indeed!

Astarion had fallen under a ‘fit of temper’ in *public!* There were people here, oh Gods, had any one heard him? He focused on the heart beats; there were *so many!* Dozens and dozens, but none moving towards him. The not at all feral, just angry, vampire started to leave the campus via the route that he sensed the least amount of living hearts, very grateful for how loud they could be at this moment.

Astarion? Tara will be there as well. I would really like you to attend.

Argh! Blasted wizard!!

Sorry, Darling, yes, yes, I am free now, my dear, what is it you want me to do—Shit!

Someone was approaching. Astarion shoved himself into the narrow gap between the boundary wall and decorative hedge, cursing the groundskeepers for picking a bush that seemed to have as many thorns as it did leaves; each and every thorn was very eager to dig into his flesh, pulling the wounds on his hands open once more.

Astarion?! Are you alright?

A bloody campus guard patrolled by, whistling. He would surely find the results of Astarion’s little fit of temper very shortly.

Yes, my dear, fine. Everything is fine. As it always is. Never better. Always amazing, darling.

I suspect those words are less than fully truthful, but I am choosing to believe you! I will send you our meeting coordinates very soon.

Astarion extracted himself from his hiding spot, cursing the bush that seemed to regenerate *more* thorns every moment.

You invite me out and don’t even know where you want me to go?! What blasted ‘momentous’ event is this with no location?!

There was a surprised shout from behind Astarion. No mystery as to what that was about. Astarion was once again deeply jealous of *every other vampire spawn ever* and their ability to easily climb up walls, as he glared at the enclosing wall of the campus. Ugh, why must there be *wall* here as well as the blasted thorny bush! Where was the bloody exit?!

One that depends on the capricious nature of the weave and other ethereal wonders, my friend! For you see—

I decided I don't care. Send me directions when you know them. That will give me time to... freshen up, my dear.

He spied the decorative iron finial of a gate up ahead, rising above the hedge. An opening in the wall! Finally!

Astarion dashed through it eagerly.

On the other side he found himself in the direct path of a handful of adults and a gaggle of children. Blasted wizard! Gale had him so distracted he didn't even bother to pay attention to the heartbeats in front of him, only tracking those behind him! Foolish spawn, he could have run headlong into an ambush!

The group of people stared at him.

He stared right back.

I shall be back in communication as soon as I have ascertained the proper position! Send you soon!

It was as if the wizard broke some sort of spell, for as soon as the first word from his sending message arrived Astarion bolted down the street.

“Mum? Was that a drow?!” was the only thing he understand out of the cacophony of sound he left behind him. Mistaken him for a drow? Really? Children must be getting dumber and dumber.

Wait. Oh, gods the paint! Blue paint and red eyes ...

Really had *that* much had splashed back at him? He ran a hand over his face, oh, he was *coated*. Perhaps they'd determine a destructive drow was the culprit? He could but hope!

One of the various campus events must have ended, there were even *more* people milling around in front of his building than when he left. The various conversations quelled, many eyes following him as he silently walked up the front stoop stairs and pushed his way into the building.

Gritting his teeth he pushed down the urge to hiss at the people behind him as he felt their eyes burning into his back. He forced himself to walk up the stairs, like a *normal person* and not sprint up them, possibly on all fours, as he truly desired very much at this particular moment.

Frustration only built as he attempted to open his own damn front door. The drying paint had made his fingers very gummy, causing supreme difficulty when it came to manipulating the lock picks. He pushed down a growl again. Damnation! If only he could scale the outside wall and enter through his blasted window!

“Um... are you okay?”

Stupid, stupid boy.

Once again, he didn't notice a living person *right next* to him.

At the exact same moment, he finally successfully picked the lock he looked over to see a drow woman clad in brightly colored clothing standing in the doorway of the adjacent unit, holding a stack of empty boxes folded into one another. He 'recognized' her after a couple of beats; his little heartbeat neighbor.

“Shiiiiit, did one of the paint buckets fall on you? I saw that happen to somebody else, bummer!”

Astarion wordlessly nodded at her, then slipped inside his flat, pulling the door shut behind him, cutting off any possible reply, his back thudding into the door heavily as he leaned against it, shutting his eyes.

For a few moments he was unmoving, utterly silent, not even breathing.

Astarion let loose a scream that transitioned into a growl-like roar at its crescendo.

Resisting the urge to bash his head against his own wall, he smiled as he detected every nearby heartbeat suddenly becoming much faster. Ah, that did make him feel better. His heart did not beat at all, let alone faster when he was enraged, so why not distribute the task to the mortals around him! Let them be good for *something*.

He started trudging to the bathroom, if nothing else, Gale was always good at making him forget whatever had previously enraged him, replacing it with something brand new and wizardy to become furious at! A distraction from the storm inside his own head would probably do him some good.

Really, whatever the wizard had planned could not be worse than the mess Astarion had already made of this evening. If the fates had conspired to take away the vampire's privilege of solitary free roaming this evening, he could not really argue against their decision.

Chime! Chime! Chime!

As he put his fingers to the sending stone once more Astarion mused that in the worst-case scenario, he could always deliberately become feral and start eating everyone in sight. He probably wouldn't even have to go work the next day if he did so!

Chapter End Notes

Hey I didn't say Astarion wouldn't cause problems for himself!

Ok next time gale for reals!!!

Chapter 11: The De-Orbing of Gale Dekarios

Chapter Summary

Time to see what the fuck Gale wanted.
Astarion had one meltdown already this evening he's surely done for the night, right?
This can only go well, right?
...right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

At the end of a pier, gazing out over the River Chionthar, Gale held an amulet out, dangling it from a shining thread. The device was at first perfectly still; then started swinging rapidly back and forth, without the wizard having moved a muscle.

“Excellent... optimum readings,” he muttered to himself. Tara was sitting on one of the wooden mooring posts directly adjacent to him, but Gale knew perfectly well she was paying little, if any attention to his words. She was far more captivated by the nearby ducks that managed to survive contact with the waters of the Grey Harbour.

A jolt of pain shot through him.

The amulet dropped to the wooden boards with a clatter as he put both hands over his chest, trying to soothe the orb in vain. The pain passed, mercifully quickly; he calmed Tara with a smile while kneeling down.

Only for his smile to freeze on his face, his eyes drawn to the scorch marks on the edge of the pier; the amulet having landed right at their periphery. Yet more evidence of how little the gods truly cared about any of them.

The twin unpleasant reminders strengthened his resolve; it was time for him to close this chapter of his life. Why, perhaps this was even the end of an entire volume chronicling Gale of Waterdeep's story.

“*There?* All the way out there?!” Astarion signaled his arrival, calling out from the top of the stone stairs at the shoreline portion of the dock, either oblivious or indifferent to the attention his shouts were drawing from evening passersby.

“I understand your reluctance to return here, trust me; I was not delighted when I scried this location as the most suitable confluence of ley lines. However, I thought I was rather exacting when telling you the location for our rendezvous. Pardon me for the miscommunication.”

“You didn't tell me I'd have to walk out on the blasted pier itself! I didn't agree to that!”

Gale turned and tilted his head to the side, confused for a moment before glancing back at the river. “Oh!” he exclaimed, hitting his palm with a fist, “Yes, it burns you again! I must confess that aspect

of the vampiric curse slipped my mind, what with the numerous bodies of running water you splashed though with the aid of our now bygone larvae.”

Astarion hissed at him, while digging into his pockets, looking for something expendable he could fling wizard-ward, “How are you so smart and so dumb simultaneously!?”

“Ah, you see, what we commonly refer to as ‘intelligence’ is actually several different aspects of mental processing that are erroneously grouped under one umbrella—”

“Shut up! Who would really want an answer to that?! Not enough room in your blasted bloated brain to know about rhetorical questions?” Finding nothing suitable on his person, Astarion started in on using a dagger to pry up the loosest cobblestone he could find.

“My apologies, I am rather a-thrum with excitement! Come, Astarion, the sky is calm and there is no fast ship traffic here, you needn’t worry about an errant aquatic assault!”

The cobblestone sailed through the air, right on target to hit Gale square in the forehead.

Only to ping off his automatically generated magical shield and plunk into the river.

“Have *you* ever been splashed with acid?! That is what it feels like!”

“Why, I have! A very unfortunate, but common, incident with Melf’s—” Another cobblestone bounced off the shield to enjoy the waters of the Grey Harbour.

Astarion glared down at him, hands on his hips.

“Could I trouble you to come at least a smidgen, well, several smidgens closer?”

“*Fine*. There are too many of Wyll’s little Fisters about to enact my back-up plan, so why not?” He moved towards Gale, traipsing down the stairs, but stopping right before stepping onto the wooden pier itself.

“This is sensitive information!” He motioned for Astarion to come closer still.

“I can hear you from there! I just ate!”

Gale said at a normal speaking volume, “Tell me the square root of 49.” The combination of distance and late-night dock noises typically would prevent anyone at Astarion’s position from understanding his words.

“Seven!” The vampire frowned. “Would you like me to roll over or play fetch next?”

“Fair enough,” he replied while waving a hand to the side of his head; his ears glowed a light blue for a moment.

“No one else joining us? Am I the only one foolish enough to come when you call? Oh! Another trick you got from me after all...”

“You are the only person that I invited to this momentous occasion.”

“... normally when I was specifically requested it never ended well for me.”

“This matter is—”

He grinned. "I'm talking about being forced into—"

"Yes, I am aware what you are—" Gale tried hurriedly to intercede.

"Forced into *unwanted intimate activities!*" Astarion shouted, leaning forwards and cupping his hands around his mouth.

"I assumed that was what you were referring to, yes," he muttered, extremely aware of all the various Baldurians now paying attention to the pair.

"Merely assuring that we do not have any more... misunderstandings," he said with a giggle. "Mmm, this is more of the crown thing, yes? Godhood and de-orbing and all that?"

"Yes!" He calmed himself and lowered his voice again, "Wyll reconsidered his decision to rescind his forces, with the manpower he supplied, I was able to promptly reclaim the final fragment and deftly reforge the crown. All that remains, conveying it to Mystra's realm, is but a minor quibble after the great labor I have already accomplished. Even so, the transport cannot be initiated at any random locale. I have determined the confluence of a great amount of arcane vector trajectories here will offer the smoothest possible passage."

"Aren't you impressive. Don't even have to kill seven thousand 'people' as part of the deal." He made sure to make the most elegant air-quotes ever seen in all of Faerûn. "Is that why I'm the only one you sent this exclusive invitation to? In order to rub it into my face, personally?"

"Not at all! For you see, well, perhaps it will be easier if..." Gale performed some elegant hand motions of his own.

The completed crown of Karsus appeared floating right in front of the smiling wizard.

"Mayhap I am a mote impressed," said Astarion, his eyes wide as he took a step back.

The man behind the crown laughed. "Now, I will go to Mystra and I—"

With no fanfare, no portal, not even a *POP!*, the wizard and the crown both vanished.

Astarion blinked, waited a moment, then called out, "Very funny. You can stop being invisible now."

No reply. Closing his eyes and focusing, he could hear no breathing or heartbeat from the end of the pier. The rest of the harbour was bustling; dockworkers loading and unloading ships, random citizens passing through the harbor, and a few Fisters hassling merchants for import tariffs.

"... Gale?"

Opening his eyes didn't help at all, there was no sign at all that Gale had ever been at the end of the pier, let alone with a powerful Netherese relic.

Blasted wizard! He hadn't even gotten around to telling Astarion why his presence here was so bloody important! At least he left his not-cat here. "Any suggestions, my dear? Does he need somebody toooo... bring him back...? Maybe... we can track that horrible odor of his?"

Tara was absolutely no help at all, sitting on her post still, now grooming.

Astarion nervously babbled as he crept down the pier. "There is so much debate about what counts as dangerous water to my kind. Debate in those rude books I have taken to reading. Making like it is a

great unknown mystery. You can tell not a single author has ever spoken to a vampire about the matter. . . . not that I blame them, really. For the most part, that would be a very risky research method. . . .”

Tara flew above him, swapping to flying in circles as his pace slowed. “Mages do much riskier things for their craft. They are rather silly things, honestly.”

He nervously swallowed, paused for a second, then crouched, glancing left and right at the river passing underneath, very cognizant it was just one set of wooden boards keeping him from dropping into its burning depths.

“But if they did, oh if they did. . . interview one of us, all the mystery would vanish. Trust me, I know on sight what is safe and what is not! Every vampire knows! Something primal in me, a fear that cannot be quenched. . . no reasoning with it,” he laughed, covering his face with his hands, unable to bring himself to keep going.

Tara landed next to him, rubbing against his shaking legs, until he petted her with equally shaky hands. “I do not think Mr. Dekarios will be assisted at all by your distress. Turn around.”

He started to crawl back the way he came. “You do not have to tell me twice. See how agreeable I am!”

The tressym leapt onto his back and started washing a paw.

“Ugh, I’ve spent enough time on my hands and knees on these boards. I returned, once night fell, and what did I find? Naught but a single grommet. . . .” He shook his head and nervously giggled. “Wyll, prince that he is, found more! I suppose his eyes were less clouded with fear. . . .”

Astarion reached the end and flung himself from the pier to the relatively safety of the shoreline. Tara took off as he jumped, pulling off a cute little back-flip for anyone watching this weird performance.

He watched her fly around and prattled onward, “We didn’t arrange to search together, you know. . . . I was clinging to the slats, almost paralyzed with terror, when he called out to me. . . .” He shook his head. “I must have been quite the pathetic sight indeed. . . . he has been oh so much nicer to me since. . . .”

A flash of bright light at the end of the pier brought him back to the present.

“Ugh, took you long enough,” he spat out, pointedly looking away from the freshly re-appeared Gale, crossing his arms.

As the chuckling wizard approached, Astarion deigned to give him a good look up and down; he sure seemed like the same old Gale, for the most part. The only immediately detectable differences were brilliant white luminous lines now demarcating the orb’s location rather than dull dark markings.

“If you are a god now, your new form really leaves a lot to be desired, my dear. Do you take constructive criticism or will that earn me a smiting?”

“Sorry to disappoint, I am still very much mortal. Flesh and blood throughout!” He looked down at Astarion. “Was I gone overly long?”

He glared up with a huff. “So, what was the bloody point of all this then? Bit of a letdown, honestly, darling. Please tell me you *at least* are no longer in danger of just up and *exploding* sooner or later.”

“You can rest easy. Mystra removed the orb from me in its entirety, no mere suppression subject to her whims any longer.” He motioned to the stairs; Astarion eagerly raced up them on all fours, standing up to casually lean against the metal railing once he had solid stone under his feet once more. Tara flew after the pair, landing on a stack of lumber, her eyes intensely fixated upon Gale.

“It is nice to know that at least one threat to me and mine has been eliminated. You know, I only recently have possessions of my own *and* a home in which to store them. It would be such a shame to lose them to a Galesplosion after all that hard work,” he commented, looking down his nose a bit at Gale. Which was somewhat of a challenge, as the wizard was the taller of the pair, but Astarion was very talented.

“I have had my fill of being an incipient realm shattering cataclysm. Rest assured, even *if* I ever happened across such a seductive opportunity to attain more magical prowess, I will refrain. I shall return to old fashioned scholarship. Slower, but ah, far less risky...”

“Mystra did not take your attempt to keep the crown for yourself floating down, did she? What a pity. I’m crying for you, really. The tears are just invisible.”

Gale laughed, “I saw reason, I did not do anything but offer her the crown, after confirming she would assist me with my spherical dilemma, and then depart, as quickly as I was able.”

Astarion raised his eyebrows in shock, silent for a moment before smirking at the neverwasGod. “Well, well, I suppose Karlach and Wyll’s firm disapproval of your plans finally paid off. What is the appropriate congratulatory gift for that? Biscuits?”

“Ah, no, they cannot take the lion’s share of the credit...”

“Oh, but of course.” He bowed at Tara, “Well done, my dear. Let me know when you would next like to borrow my thumbs for some more exciting hunting. I still owe you a visit to the aquarium...”

“Astarion, it was *you*. That is why I invited you here this evening. To witness the moment of handover. It was your words that finally penetrated the veil of delusion I had wrapped around myself. Thank you.”

“No.”

Gale blinked. “What?”

“You heard me! No, no, no!” he wagged his finger right in his stupid wizard face.

“I am confused as to the source of your objection.”

“Don’t look to me for explanation, Mr. Dekarios, I tried to tell you, you did not listen to me then, so I will not repeat myself now.”

“You chose this. *You!*” Astarion poked Gale right in the gleaming white scar on his chest left by the orb before snarling and stepping away, kicking out at the base of the metal railing.

The very confused wizard slowly nodded, “Yeeees... that is an accurate assessment, I was merely expressing my gratitude for your assistance in helping me make said choice.”

“No! You don’t get to have something to hang over my head! I do not need a bloody archmage upset with me if you regret your choice! I have more than enough problems already!”

Gale blinked, then blinked again. "I won't regret my choice."

"Yes. You will! *You will!*" he practically hissed in Gale's face, whipping around.

He took a step back, holding his hands up, palms out. "Even if I did come to rue my course of action, Astarion, I would never retaliate—"

"Exactly right! As you are *not* giving me any credit for this! I won't be your scapegoat!! I never told you not to seek ascension! I was always very much in favor!" He paused and looked away for a moment before glaring at Gale again and stepping forwards. "Well. No. I was not. *But I never told you that!*"

The wizard took another step back as Astarion advanced upon him; staring down at him, for once silent as he bumped into the stacked lumber Tara was perched upon.

"What the hells are you even on about! You never asked me!" He hissed; his eyes wide.

Eye contact was something Gale struggled with at the best of times, and now it was practically impossible for him to look anywhere but at Astarion's bared teeth.

"Er... it was very recently. Your words to me, in your flat. After you er... tried to kill me? Possibly? I will admit I have pondered your true goal at that moment."

Astarion stepped away from the wizard, still looking displeased, but his teeth were off display.

"Your reaction made me realize how truly abominably I was behaving. How I was treading over people—"

"*Literally!*"

"I am sorry. If it helps it... it was not merely you. I was rather, *erm*, unmannered with a host of others."

"Mmmhrrm..." he narrowed his eyes, looking askance at Gale.

"However, no one else was as sharp in word or tooth when it came to expressing their displeasure with my actions. I was so blinded by the possibilities of... making her see me as more than... ah, no matter my motivations. What matters is, at that moment, I realized what I was on the path to becoming, and it horrified me to the very core of my being. *That* is why I was thanking you, Astarion."

"... you are forbidden from blaming me if you ever become upset at your lack of... divinity."

"I pledge upon my reclaimed lack of incendivity, I shall not."

"Ugh, you're right." He dismissed Gale with a wave, putting the hand on his hip afterwards. "What will *you* have to regret... returning to your charmed life of power, privilege, and prestige."

"No, I meant..." he trailed off and addressed a different point, "My full complement of magical abilities are not available to me just as of yet. Mystra said they should return in not too much time. Past experiences with her perception of time leave me with more than a modicum of trepidation. I'm sure come the morrow I will care much more about that possibility. For now, though, I am just relieved it is *over*."

Tara took flight; doing a quick lap around the pair, inspecting Gale from all angles. Unsatisfied, she hovered next to her wizard and gave Astarion a meaningful look.

“Very well, dear,” if you insist. He sniffed at the air, then stepped forwards and sniffed Gale much closer, taking a big snort.

“Uh?” Gale tried take a step back, but froze when Astarion grabbed the collar of his robe.

“Mr. Dekarios! Don’t move. That’s a good little love.”

Astarion took one final close sniff, snorting right at the orb scar, below the hollow of Gale’s throat, before stepping back himself.

“Your wizard is no longer stinky,” he said, with a bow, while motioning towards Gale with an arm.

Tara let lose a meow of pure delight, her tail standing straight up behind her for a second, before she landed on Gale’s shoulder, immediately rubbing her cheek against his own and purring loudly.

Gale’s very mystified eyes flicked between Tara and Astarion. “Would one of you like to tell me what in the name of Mystra’s philtrum that was about?” He plucked Tara off his shoulder.

He grinned and let the wizard wonder for a few seconds before answering, “When I gifted you with the wake-up concert, I could not help but notice you had an... odor about you. I mean, you always did, well, *everyone* does, but you had a distinctive off-putting fragrance in our travels. It had... matured. Become rather well... *bad*.”

“I knew the orb had an impact on my physical form, but I was not aware it had progressed further still after Mystra calmed it.” He stroked his beard and then added, “Tara did say I was sleeping more. What did I smell like?”

“The scent of...” Astarion twirled one hand about as he fruitlessly searched for the proper word, his other hand on his hip while he sighed exasperatedly. “Ugh, something foul. I often find that I just do not have the proper vocabulary necessary really explain to others what I smell. And no, I do not think elvish would help.” He laughed, amused as his own joke, even if Gale did not seem to be, but his amusement was of course secondary to Astarion’s.

“Could you try perhaps? I have a hypothesis as to what occurred, but would like to hear a bit more from you first before I elucidate the specifics.”

He huffed while rolling his eyes. “Fiiiiine. It put to mind decay but yet not. Trust me, darling, I am very familiar with the scent of true rot. It was different in a way that is hard to verbalize...” he trailed off as he chewed his lip, thinking. “Perhaps it had a tinge of the scent that lingers after a powerful spell has been cast.”

“You can smell magic?”

“Maybe,” he said casually with a shrug.

“Spell rot. I had developed spell rot...” He stroked Tara for a few seconds, holding her close.

“Not ideal, I am gathering.”

“The orb must have not been fully sated with the weave that Mystra allowed it to siphon. It began consuming my own magic, not what I used to cast, but that of my very soul. We all have our own

personal weave, in a way, even those who never cast. It is very distinctive... but hard to describe. Why, for me it is rather like scents are to your perceptions.”

“Don’t make us out to be similar, wizard.”

Gale laughed, then looked cross, wagging his finger at each of the pair in turn. “You both were aware I was afflicted with a mysterious orb related malady and did *nothing*?”

“I did *something*! I told your flying caretaker. *She* felt it was best not to tell you.”

“What good would it have done? None at all, just worried you needlessly as you worked,” Tara chirped up from Gale’s arms, wiggling out of them.

Gale glared at her as she took flight. “Tara! I am not a child. I deserve to be told of su— stop flying away from me!”

“Annnnd,” Astarion interjected while buffing his nails on his shirt. “You *do* have something you can thank me for!” He grinned, explaining just as Gale was about to ask, “Didn’t you think to question how our Grand Duke friend went from giving you no resources to offering you full assistance for your little crustacean catastrophe?”

“You know... come to think, I should have wondered more on that. It was most surprising with how vehement he was when he revoked his aid, but I was just... very relieved.”

“Once again I am pristine and without fault in my actions.” He spun in place and then bowed at Gale.

“Astarion, I have a gift for you. Let us say it is to repay you for informing Wyll about my odor problem. This way, please!” Gale then promptly moved up the second set of stone stairs, leading from the docks to the city streets proper; after a moment’s hesitation Astarion trailed behind.

Next to a pile of ruined rubble that used to be a building, was a table with a matching pair of chairs; all crafted out of metal, with fancy cushions for the chairs and an ornate stained glass mural table top.

Astarion peered at the table, it was some arcane nonsense he could not decipher. He muttered, “The amount of preparation you have done for whatever this is makes me want to run away screaming. I assume you are not gifting me this for my balcony...”

Gale sat down, motioning for Astarion to sit as well; he did so a bit reluctantly, keeping the chair a bit away from the table for easier fleeing. Tara landed on the table, an envelope in her mouth, she dropped it in front of Gale, then gave Astarion a sympathetic look before flying up to perch on the nearby rubble.

“I will cut right to the chase, Astarion, after our last conversation, I had a number of hours in which I was unable to make any progress towards the reforging of the crown. Fortunately, you provided me with inspiration for another, less magical, avenue of research to pursue.”

“Wizard, what in all the realms are you getting at? I may be immortal but the night is not.”

“Ah, right, right, yes, cutting to the chase.” He opened up the envelope, creating a small burst of light. When it faded, sitting on the table was a fairly substantial stack of papers, bundled with a ribbon.

Astarion tilted his head to the side, peering at the papers, frowning when Gale covered the top of the stack with a hand.

“Based on the scant few clues provided, I was not sure I would have any success but by the grace of all, not only does this city rival my own in archiving its records, but the storage facilities were not damaged in the attack.”

“It should be impossible but I feel myself growing older.”

Gale nervously laughed and then actually cut to the chase, as much as he was capable of, anyway.

“While the name Astarion may be somewhat common, elven Astarions that served the city as magistrates and died far too young are not.”

An Astarion fitting that description exactly stared at Gale, his face unreadable.

“I located records with mention of you, Astarion! They can tell you much of your lost life, your last name, details of your family, and much more!” He exclaimed with a broad grin.

The grin vanished when Astarion’s response was to growl, baring his gritted teeth.

“Ah, you would probably like to read for yourself—”

“*Shut up!*” he roared out. “Oh gods, *this* is your idea of a bloody *gift* for me?!”

Gale wordlessly slid the stack of papers at Astarion.

Astarion snatched them up, untying the ribbon binding them together as he stood.

Only to fling the stack of papers back at Gale; the sheets quickly separating from one another to scatter widely.

The wizard gasped and leapt from his chair, scrambling to collect his hard work before it was lost to the wind or water.

“I am not an idiot! If I desired to investigate my past there are many possible routes I could take, I am very aware! I didn’t forget my blasted *name!*”

Gale’s panic was lessened as confusion overtook him, “I just assumed that—”

“That I was too stupid to think of *looking up my name!*?! You don’t know anything about me! What I want! I don’t want this idea of... a *gift!*” He was practically shrieking at Gale now, gesticulating widely. “*Stop it!! Stop trying to help me!!!*”

The wizard stared at Astarion, once again feeling nothing in his life up to now had remotely prepared him for how to respond to his friend. Therefore, the worst possible words started to leave his mouth again.

“Astarion, please calm—”

He was silenced by a combination of a yell and a growl.

One chair went flying through the air, barely sailing above Gale’s head, failing to make contact as he just at that moment started to bend down to gather up more scattered papers. It cleared the railing to clatter on the dock.

In the back of his mind Gale noted with surprise that vampires could emit such a noise; looking up at Astarion he was once again greeted with clenched teeth and wide eyes.

“No, I didn’t gather these materials because I thought you lacked the ability to consider the idea yourself!”

Astarion scream-growled again, flipping over the table, the glass top cracking as it crashed against the stone street. “Yes, you do! *You obviously do!!* Have you always thought such of me or is this a new assessment now that you are *finally* aware what I was *used* for!”

A sinking feeling erupted in the pit of his chest, almost as if the orb had returned. “No, Astarion. No, I... how *can* I be so smart and so dumb simultaneously...” He chuckled, shaking his head, then fell silent at the intense glare Astarion shot him. Gale picked up the last few papers he could find, slipping the whole packet into a pocket of his robe as he stood up.

“Mr. Dekarios, at this point, I simply feel I must remind you, that I also advised against this course of action,” Tara spoke up, not moving from her perch.

“While I admit, I did suspect you had forgotten your surname, I was fully confident you could find it if you desired to do so. It wasn’t that I thought you were without the means to do so yourself, I was instead operating under the assumption you were too...” Gale trailed off, realizing his real rationale might also be taken as an insult.

“Too what?!” Astarion hissed out.

“Scared. Of what you might find or that you would find nothing.”

“Scared. Me. Of words on *paper*?”

“I’m sorry, that is unfair—”

“No,” he interrupted, raising one hand, then dropping it with a sigh. “That’s exactly correct. Damn you, wizard... am I truly so transparent even you can see through me such?” He shoved the other chair over. It just felt proper to complete his assault on the furniture set, even though he was already starting to regret his outburst. At least this time he had not tried to put his fangs into anyone. The most minor victory, but he would claim it.

Astarion pinched the bridge of his nose, then dropped his hand down, waving it about aimlessly. “I am trying to figure out who *I really* am. What *I truly* want. This is a difficult enough endeavor for me as it is, I do not need the added complications knowledge of my past would bring...”

“I confess, I am not following your logic.”

He scoffed at Gale, clucking his tongue before saying, “Would I cling to anything discovered? Try to replicate my past self? Would that be a victory over Cazador? Or should I forcibly diminish any aspect that was revealed to have persisted? Banishing any remnant of the Magistrate Astarion Ancunín? What use does anyone have for a long dead fool...”

“Gods, of course, it is so obvious in hindsight. I allowed my ambition overrule my sense once more. Though...” he stroked his beard, pondering unsaid words.

Astarion frowned, looking down at the results of his latest fit of temper. “Mmm. At least I know there *is* some material of substance to discover...” His gaze snapped to Gale and he wagged his finger at him. “You read all those papers you tried to present to me, didn’t you?”

“I must confess, yes, how else could I be sure they related to you?”

“You are not to breathe a word about whatever you learned. Not to me or *anyone* else.”

“Consider my lips sealed as if commanded by Mystra herself.”

Astarion slowly drug a hand down his face, then looked up at the heavens, drawing strength, before steeling himself and addressing Gale, “You want to help me, you say? Ask me what I want! Instead of just groping around in the metaphorical dark for ideas. You’re the only one who hasn’t been badgering me with that question, as of late, come to think of it...” He laughed and shook his head. “And I actually know what I would say if you asked!”

“What is it you do want, Astarion? I can accomplish much, now that I have shed my own personal shackles. I am yours to command, how can I help?”

“What the tadpole did for me? The way it started to dismantle my curse? It was unheard of! Not just daywalking! Runningwaterwalking! ... uninvitedwalking too! It had to only be possible due to the Netherese magic they were infused with... and you are the realm’s greatest expert on that school now. As you made sure we were aware. Many times...”

“Ah! You want me to find a way for you to walk in the sun again? Of course! I will—”

“No. Beyond that. Find a cure for vampirism! A universal cure... one that doesn’t depend on the sire’s peculiar quirks or earning the favor of a god... any of that one-time nonsense. The powers of an archmage at my disposal? That can deliver me almost anything, yes? Then... *that* is what I want.”

Gale fell silent for a moment, but as he *was* Gale, it was a short moment. “Even at my nadir in reasoning, I would have found that goal overly ambitious. Astarion, I’m sorry to be the one who relates this too, but you acquired your curse—”

“I know! I know what you’re about to say! Some twaddle about how the longer one has this affliction, this *curse*, the more it entwines with the soul, mingling with it until separating one from the other is well-nigh impossible.” He laughed at the relief on the other man’s face, grinning as he leaned closer to whisper, “I read that in a book only this past tenday!”

“While I’m glad I’m not the one who has to inform you of such, I admit I am now confused as to what you are asking? Two hundred years is...”

“Yes, yes, beyond all hope, the writing was very clear in that as well.” He shrugged. “Honestly, was not surprising... I somehow already suspected as such? Perhaps due to the aforementioned *entwining*? Ah, but for those far fresher...”

“Astarion, please, what is it you *are* asking for? I’m afraid I cannot follow the path you seem to think you’ve trod for me.”

“The bloody Gur children! The child vampires! Eternal children! Fix them! Ease a fraction of this guilt that weighs me down night and day!”

“Oh! Of course! Really, I should have... of course. Yes.”

“They’ve had *their* afflictions for less than a year.”

“Yes, that is *much* more potentially feasible of a request!”

“*Thank you.*” He bowed and then straightened up with a grin, motioning at himself. “Annnnnnnnd if you ever find a way for yours truly to walk in the sun? As just ooooooh, I don’t knooooow, a byproduct

of your efforts? Why it would just be rude of me to turn it down.”

“While I may lack certain instrumentals at my tower in Waterdeep, I have connections to Black—”

“Great! Lovely to hear it. Have a good evening, tenday, month, rest of your life. I bid you farewell.” He motioned vaguely in the direction of his flat. “Think of me here, in my little flat that you barged into, while you are having a grand time once more with all of your powerful *important real* friends back in your fancy tower, as you are now free from having to sully yourself with company such as my own. I’m *sure* wizard parties are very...” he trailed off and then said with a tilt of his head, “exciting?”

Before Gale could answer, Astarion turned and starting heading down the street, not caring where he was heading, simply wanting to put distance between himself and this place as quickly as possible.

“Ah, I was never invited to any ‘wizard parties’, as you put it. Not that anyone would call them that, but I know what you are implying. I did hear tidbits, such as when a sorcerer in attendance at the Blackstaff faculty mid-winter celebration triggered a wild magic cascade that transformed every living being within a 50-yard radius into mice! Tara and the other tressyms were very enriched that eve.”

Astarion slowed his ambled away down as Gale kept prattling on. He debating bolting, but figured that would be a bit *too* rude. After all, wizards can send lightning shocks faster than his legs could carry him.

“But no, I was never a part of such gatherings. Nor did I host any, come to think. Why the only recurrent visitors my tower ever welcomed were Mystra, Elminster, and my mother. I did not realize this prior to our quest in ceremorphosis avoidance, but I had centered the totality of my existence around Mystra... leaving Gale Dekarios almost completely subsumed... without a single friend waiting for him now that he has returned.”

Astarion completely halted his steps.

“Ah, do not blame Mystra really, I shan’t. I do not think I ever really had friends, not truly. What a wasted life, by some measures. Perhaps the more important measures. Nothing to do for it but move forwards! Plenty of time left, plenty of time...” by the end, Gale was more muttering to himself than speaking for anyone else to hear.

Astarion turned around, slowly, peering at the wizard as if seeing him for the first time.

From behind Gale, Tara made eye-contact with him, her little kitty eyes very round. After a moment her ears drooped slightly and he could swear her eyes began shimmering.

“Ah, my apologies, my loquaciousness has only been increased by this exhilarating feeling of freedom and opportunities. I’m sure you have a most exciting evening planned. Thank you again, Astarion, though I know you do not wish to hear it, you shall survive.” He laughed as Astarion rolled his eyes in response. “It was truly wonderful to make your acquaintance, I am richer for having you in my life, even if it was just for this brief window in which our paths converged. I hope you will not begrudge my mistakes too harshly. I am... still learning. Which in and of itself was something I had to learn, honestly.”

“Do you want a tour of the city at night?” Astarion blurted out, not allowing himself to reconsider it, ignoring his inner voice screaming at him in disbelief.

“Oh!” Gale blinked in surprise, taking a moment to consider the offer. “Why... that would be marvelous. Marvelous indeed! I’ve been so consumed by my efforts that I have barely left Rolan’s tower.”

Astarion waved for him to catch up, plotting out possible destinations as Gale did a little jog towards him. “Well, come on. Mayhap some shops are still open. I am *not* giving you a tour unless you upgrade those ratty robes. They can stand up on their own, at this point, I have no doubt!”

“I’m most amenable to new fashion directions.”

“We can get you something to better show off that fancy glowing scar of yours.”

Gale blinked and said, “My fancy what?”

Chapter End Notes

hey guess who got diagnosed with like a worrisome vitamin D deficiency?? IT’S
MEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!! Laff

I have pills now. Don’t worry I don’t have to go outside w/ the death orb.

In more important notes, you won’t miss out! Next time its nightlife with Astarion and Gale
yaaay!

as you can see I can't update that often but don't worry we're gonna keep trucking!! I have a full
time job and all, alas.... :<

Chapter 12: Tour Time!

Chapter Summary

Time for a night on the town! ... and by that, I mean sitting mostly in one bar.
It's a Gale safe tour.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By the time the pair reached the nearest Astarion-approved clothing shop, it had *just* closed. Proper application of lock-picking, charm, and coin quickly solved this minor little hiccup in their plans.

Gale was now clad in expertly fitted trousers and a short-sleeved tunic with a deep V-neck, showing off his glowing orb scar. The look was somewhat ruined, in Astarion's opinion, by the long coat the wizard insisted on adding to his ensemble. His justified objections only ceased when Gale purchased a new shirt for him as well; a black and purple number he had been eyeing for some time. It had an intricate pattern on the front, with skulls that glowed ever so slightly in the dim light; glowing objects were *so* much harder to steal!

After the uneventful shopping expedition, Tara flew away, off on important tressym business, no doubt; leaving the pair with a final, "Be good, dearies!" as she took wing.

Astarion stood motionless for a moment, thinking, before declaring the Upper City was far too boring and monotonous for a proper evening out and promptly started giving Gale a walking tour of the Lower City.

At first, he led him around rather aimlessly, pointing out various alleys, street corners, and buildings, never having much good to say about any of them. Astarion was most delighted by the wizard's reactions to the assorted debaucheries, brutalities, and downright atrocities he kept relating to him.

"Ah! Yes, this heap of rubble used to be an alehouse, a rather rough one, especially in its later years. I procured many a victim for Cazador here, and if I may be honest, these ones did not significantly add to my accumulation of guilt. Alas, I had to move on to new hunting grounds when I had my throat slit one evening... in the middle of the main room, of all places!" He shook his head, "Barbarians! Throat slitting is *properly* a back-alley activity, at the very least move to a backroom; *pretend* to be civilized!"

"What transpired after that?"

"*Hrm?* Oh, I flopped to the ground, like a good little corpse, then stabbed the ruffian in the groin as he started to riffle through my pockets. It was no trouble at all to make my escape after that."

"I suppose a slit throat is not much of an impediment to you."

"Hah! No, not really, though that did mean I had much more serious... impediments waiting for me upon my return home, as I failed to procure *Cazador* his supper-sacrifice." Astarion stopped suddenly, "Oh!"

Gale managed not to bump into him, but just barely, “Oh?”

“I know where to take you, the end of the tour, come, this way!” He dashed off, retracing their path before turning off into a side street.

“Please, slow down, I told you, I cannot keep up with your alacritous pace!”

Rounding the corner Gale found Astarion had actually stopped to wait for him. He laughed as the wizard approached, breathing heavily, “You know, darling, I keep hearing how this ‘being alive’ thing is tremendously enjoyable, but whenever I watch one of you pant like that, huffing to try to catch your breath and all... I can’t but wonder... *is it?*”

“I have... merely had a... very long day and... had a spot of... insomnia... last night,” Gale managed, between pants.

“I shall refrain from my standard pace for the remainder of your tour, my dear,” he said, accompanied by a slight bow.

“Is your normal manner to sprint down the city streets?”

“Now it is!” he said with a grin.

Gale followed Astarion down a series of narrow dark alleys, turn after turn; before he quite realized it the pair were in a part of the Lower City far rougher than anything he ever witnessed prior. He made sure to keep close to his vampiric escort; while Gale *probably* had enough magic available to him to easily deal with any ruffians, he was not eager to test this hypothesis.

The buildings looming above had so many additions that extended over the street, he doubted sun ever shone on the ramshackle cobblestones, even at midday. At least not for many decades, probably over a century, the obvious later construction reminded him of reading that some of the direst Lower City neighborhoods used to be areas of high repute. Much more willing to collect evidence concerning that supposition, Gale paid careful attention to the buildings they were passing. Soon, everywhere he looked he could spot traces of long-lost opulence; the rare remaining decorative window, ornate wrought iron ornamentation, and elegant brick work.

Ahead he spotted a street sign bearing a familiar name; it was one he had read many times in the documents relating to Astarion’s forgotten past. He chuckled, shaking his head at the coincidence, not too surprising really, the city was not *that* large.

Astarion turned down that very street, quickly proclaiming “Ah! Here we are!”

He motioned at one of the more run-down looking taverns in the area, yet another of the buildings that predated the district’s fall from grace. A good proportion of the original stone facade was long since replaced with wooden boards and not a single intact window remained, allowing the cacophony inside to drift to the streets.

Gale raised his eyebrows as he looked over the building. Perhaps not a random coincidence.

The clientele inside was most unusual, even for Baldur’s Gate, and would have been unheard of in Waterdeep. There were a few half-orcs present, but most of the patrons were goblins; just as apt to be standing on the bar as they were sitting at stools in front of it, with a number of them contentiously chasing each other, shouting out obscenities.

“This used to be the tasting bar for a local vineyard! I remember that much, even though I have no firm memories of being inside. I’m sure I used to frequent this establishment... before. One of the scant few things I *am* sure on. I trust you know what I mean by that?”

“Yes, Astarion, when you were alive...” Gale softly said, looking between Astarion and the dilapidated structure.

“In the first few decades of my *remembered* existence, I would, on occasion, stand some distance away. Concealed. Watching. Studying all those fortunate enough to still possess freedom and suitable tongues. With no idea of what, or *who*, even I was looking for... both fearing and hoping for the barest glint of recognition to awaken within me. That I might remember... *something!* Anything... anyone...” He chuckled, shaking his head.

“Never any success, I take it?”

He grinned, laughing, “My dear, of course not! I do not even know why I kept trying... I dimly recall having visited the Elfsong in life as well, but I never lurked outside its doors in the early days...” he tapped his nose in thought, then shrugged, putting on a more theatrical voice once more, “Then, after the *prior* Bhaalspawn crisis, when *maaaaaaaaster* finally let his spawn scurry over the city once more, I returned here to find its doors shuttered closed. Never to open again. At least not as it was...”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Why in all the bloody hells do you care? Bad, I suppose... Forgive me, I cannot remember a single drop of ill feeling from the ocean of misery that I was mired in, drowning, unendingly.”

“Hey! Do you know that you look like Gale of Waterdeep?” The pair were interrupted by a laughing human woman, obviously very drunk already, stumbling towards Gale.

“I have... been told that, on occasion, yes.”

“You’d look even more like him if you got rid of that beard!”

Astarion grinned very brightly, leaning against the wall.

“Really? I think the beard adds something...”

“I wonder what he’s up to now anyway... he used to have a huge article in every issue of Popular Arcana. Who would have ever thought he’d pull such a blunder. Gale’s folly!” She laughed a bit too loudly and close.

Gale chuckled nervously, taking a step backwards.

“*Chantelle!* Leave that man alone get back here, we’re leaving!”

She laughed once more, before waving at Gale, turning to totter off.

“I never realized I was traveling with such a famous *and* well-known *and* acclaimed individual! Alas, *Cazador* was not a big reader of... what was it, Popular Arcana?” He tilted his head to the side, raising an eyebrow, managing to wipe most of his grin away.

“This establishment changed hands, yes?” Gale attempted to redirect the conversation; Astarion gave a chuckle as he acquiesced, stepping back and looking up.

Astarion stepped back, looking up at building facade, motioning towards it. “If you look closely, you can see the elven fineries now covered with so much muck. Classic, refined, and elegant, once. No more! Now its patrons are creatures known for their wanton violence and debauchery, about as far away as one can get from its former incarnation... no? The metaphor is not lost to me, you do not have to have such a horribly awkward look upon your face.”

“You were telling me of your history with this building?”

“Once it was obvious no one was claiming this establishment, I broke in! Crafted a little nook inside for myself, in the walls, space enough to hide and store a scant few items.” He grinned at Gale, miming ripping something up in front of himself.

“Did you feel drawn to it? Do you still now?” he asked softly, sounding a bit distracted as he looked between Astarion and the building once more.

Astarion raised an eyebrow at Gale. “I... suppose? Drawn feels an *awfully* strong word to use. It was just part of my routine... so much was automatic. Of my wanderings when sent to... collect. No reason to alter my course really.”

The wizard nodded. “But... of course.” That earned him a snort and eye-roll.

“This became a refuge, of sorts. I would spend my evenings here when it was pointless to hunt. If *Cazador* was obviously in a foul mood, my next tending, *at least*, would be spent in the kennel and there was absolutely *nothing* I could do about it. He’d find fault with whoever I brought back for supper. So! He got nobody! And I would get some rest before discovering the next horror planned for me.”

“Very pragmatic of you.”

“Then, decades back now, the greenskins moved in and revamped it... or I guess, unvamped it?” He grinned momentarily at his unintentional pun. “And I assumed that was the end of that. No more little sanctuary for me.”

“I hope tonight isn’t the first time you’ve been back since.”

Astarion laughed, “No, no, no, I’ve been here many a time since then. It began again one *spectacularly* horrid night. I made a most costly blunder in selection, where my assumed prey was the real predator... I found myself here rather than ugh, *home*. It was hours and hours before dawn, I had really outdone myself in how quickly *things* transpired that evening. I must have caused a bit of confusion when I arrived and then just... crawled to my hidey-hole and rested. I recall not caring at all how upset any of the brutes were. Hells, I probably was at least partially hoping they would be *very* upset and perhaps end my miserable existence! Alas, they let me be... so I started using it the same way I had when it was abandoned.”

“I’m glad you found comfort here again...”

Astarion gave the confusing wizard a sideways glare. “What the devil is the matter with you all of the sudden? Where’d all your words with overmuch bloody syllables go? Are you too good to drink with greenies? Which gives you pause; the half-orcs? Goblins?” he grinned and loomed closer. “Vampire?”

“No, Astarion, no, that is... no, it is nothing.”

He raised an eyebrow at Gale and circled around him, pondering, stopping in front of the door. “Ugh! If you do not want to drink here, then *fine*, we’ll go someplace less... less rough? I suppose...?” He tapped his nose, pondering where next to lead this picky wizard. Ugh, the not-cat was so much easier to please.

Behind him, above the doorway, some of the original brickwork still remained, most of it was barely visible, almost covered completely by shabby wooden boards. Still exposed was a small fragment of elvish; in a style of extremely fancy calligraphy; it was already archaic centuries ago and was unreadable to many, even those of elven blood.

Not, however, to those educated by Blackstaff Academy. Gale jerked his eyes away from the extremely fancy symbol representing the phenomes ‘Ancu’ and softly said, “No, Astarion. I think we should drink here. I would *like* to drink here. With you.”

Astarion gave him a look, what was going on with the man this evening? After a moment’s thought he decided he had enough things to worry about and this would not be yet another one of them, and thus pushed open the door and strode in, Gale trailing after.

Most of the interior walls were long gone, creating one large room, which was currently filled with a large number of goblins, a smattering of half-orcs, and a couple of bugbears. A good portion of the goblins never seemed to sit still; constantly on the verge of interrupting a game of cards, darts, or billiards, as they dashed to and fro around mismatched tables.

Above all this chaos was a partial second floor, more a mezzanine than anything else. The staircase leading up had been left to rot; remnants of a few stairs and most of the banister were all that remained.

Acting as if no one else in the bar existed at all, Astarion promptly started hoisting himself up the ruined staircase.

The patrons paid much more attention to the out-of-place high elf than he paid to them, though his appearance did not cause as much of a stir as Gale would have predicted; the only real change was the addition of muttering between the goblins with a small portion obviously staring.

Gale watched his friend transverse the ruined remains of the staircase almost effortlessly, quickly passing up and over the surviving railing; he was reminded of Tara scurrying over banisters and fences.

The bartender, a half-orc woman, plopped a fresh keg on the counter with just a bit too much force, glaring at her patrons as she shook her head. A lady goblin perched on her shoulder looked very smug, picking her teeth with a dagger. The muttering turned back into raucous shouting and not a single goblin was even trying to sneak peeks at Astarion any longer.

The little goblin on the barkeep whispered something at the bartender, Gale’s steps slowed as the large half-orc looked him up and down.

The wizard started to cast a fly spell; the instant he summoned the glow of magic to his hands the almost overpowering chatter of the bar fell silent. He looked over and was greeted with every pair of eyes staring back at him, two goblins had even interrupted their brawl, both staring at him while one had his arm pulled back, a punch interrupted, with his other hand clinging to his foe-friend’s shirt collar. The half-orc behind the bar reached for the axe on her back while the goblin sitting on her shoulder stared directly at Gale, dragging a finger across her throat once she was sure she had his attention.

He banished the spell.

The festivities resumed, the punch connected, and two other goblins happily joined into the brawl, smashing their glasses on the ground.

“Right then,” Gale muttered under his breath, “This won’t be that difficult, child’s play.”

A good 10 minutes later, grunting and panting, he finally flung his body over the railing, safe on the mezzanine.

“Greetings, darling, nice of you to finally join me up here. Did you get lost?” Astarion was perched on the table, legs crossed, leaning forwards with his folded hands on a knee, all the better to grin down at Gale.

“Astarion, I see it now, you were right,” he said with a groan, rubbing his knees.

“I’m *always* right. Now, tell me what I was right about this time, my dear.”

Gale rubbed his knees again. “Perhaps I should have tried for godhood.”

“I will allow you to rest your poor *aging* mortal body in my *private* chair.” He motioned at the fancy chair. It looked rather out of place, not matching the table at all, having much more in common with what remained of the railing.

“No argument for me.” He sat in the chair, sighing in relief.

Astarion pivoted, sitting cross-legged now, facing Gale still. “And it is *my* private chair. One day when I wandered in it was just... here! A present from the greenies I suppose...”

“They seem fairly unfazed by your arrival... less so mine. Friends of yours?”

“*Mmm*. Never spoken to them. Not a single one. However, a number of times I... managed to find my way here; desperately trying to escape from a failed mark, vampire hunter, or some other hooligan seeking to do me harm.” He glanced downstairs. “They would permit me passage, never interfering as I scurried up here, diving into my little hole. While stopping my pursuers at the threshold. *Mmm*. Generations of these short lived greenskins. Gods...”

“Little hole?”

He grinned and practically leapt off the table, vanishing through a hole into the wall. A hole not even as wide as Astarion’s shoulders! Gale openly gaped when he started hearing movement from the hollow cavity of the wall.

“How are you *moving* in there?!”

“I’m very limber, darling,” Astarion’s voice drifted out.

“That... my friend, is a grand understatement, if there ever was one...”

“Oooooo! Treasures!”

“Extract yourself at once!” Gale did not realize he was using the same tone that he aimed at Tara when she was disobeying. “I do not want you getting stuck!”

“Piss off!” Astarion moved about in the wall again, deciding to explore another little nook rather than emerge like he first planned.

Gale slowly rose from his chair, intending to peer into the hole, but he was interrupted by a thudding noise behind him.

“Oi! Whuzt’s goin’ on up ‘ere?” The goblin asked, getting to her feet. Through the remains of the mezzanine railing, Gale could see the half-orc bartender glaring up, a huge club now in her hand.

“Ah. Astarion? I think the staff objects to your escapades?”

A confused noise heralded Astarion’s head poking out of the hole.

“We ain’t give a hag’s tit ‘bout none of that.” She clearly addressed Astarion, jerking a clawed thumb at Gale, “This magical twit bothering you?”

Astarion grinned for a moment, obviously debating his answer, before pouring the rest of himself from the hole back onto the table top. “Not overly much, no.”

“Youse sure? Boss says she’ll deal with him like alla the others if yahs wants.”

In the midst of dusting himself off Astarion burst into laughter. “No, no, no, my little dear, I am out of that line of work now!”

“Wha? Really? You been doing that since... a long time! My great-gran had stories ‘bout you!”

“Oooh, I am *well* aware. Believe me. But now I am... retired!” He put his hands behind himself, leaning back on the table while kicking his legs a bit.

Gale retook his seat. “Ah, yes, we are here to drink. Not for. Uh. Other matters.” He did his best to ignore Astarion’s snickers.

“Aite then. What yah want to drink?”

He casually kicked his leg up again, wiggling a foot around as he pretended to ponder. “Oooh... could I trouble you for some... blood, my small darling?”

“...bloody Mary?”

“No, just blood, my dear.”

She stared at the pale elf.

The pale elf sat up straight then leaned forward, looming over her as he stared right back.

“So, wes got a bit of a betting pool here ‘bout you and that’s pretty good—”

Astarion gave the little goblin lass a broad grin.

“Woo! Right away, sir!!” She ran over to the edge and shouted down, “I was right! He’s a vamp! He’s a vamp!!” She leapt down into the bartender’s arms, cackling.

A chorus of cheers and groans came from the patrons, winners and losers, respectively.

He slipped off the table, dusting himself off further, "I am going to *demand* at least ten percent of the prize. I feel it is only fair."

With that he easily shimmied his way back downstairs, leaving Gale alone. His attention quickly turned to the hole Astarion had used to access the wall's interior, it still seemed far too small to admit the vampire, was there some trick he was missing? He was feeling the edges of the opening, slightly peering into to investigate, when Astarion scurried back up.

"They're compensating me in blood! Their blood!" He grinned, holding a tankard aloft for a moment, before setting it down and spinning around to catch the bar-stool flung up over the railing by the bartender. He plopped it down and took his seat, snatching up the tankard again.

"You claim they're no friends of yours, but their actions strongly contradict your words," Gale said as he sat down again.

Astarion firmly ignored the wizard's words, taking a swig. "Mmm... half-orc is surprisingly delicious really... far better than human I would say! Though... not as scrumptious as elf. Would you like to try some? No? Yes? Ah, I imagine it is a firm *no*, darling, no offense taken."

Gale looked curious and held out his hand. The vampire blinked as his bluff was called and offered the tankard.

He took a small sip, rolling it around in his mouth. "It is thicker than I thought it would be. Very metallic."

Astarion giggled, most amused by this, though he could not explain exactly why. "Well! A reward! For you!" He tossed a bottle of liquor at Gale. "You seem like a brandy man," he said while buffing his nails on his shirt, awaiting his confirming praise.

"Rum is more my preferred drink, but I won't turn down a brandy," Gale said while inspecting the bottle, taking a test drink, then nodding approvingly.

"Mmm, not my preferred tippie but... you are allowed to have a wrong opinion or seven," he said with a roll of his eyes as he leapt up again and reached into the hole in the wall. "Time to see what treasures I had squirreled away!"

Astarion flung two books on the table then upended a leather pouch, three gold coins tumbled out, plunking onto the table. "My unlife savings," he explained. He plucked up one of the books, staring at it for a moment before exclaiming, "Oh! Mystery novel, never finished. How fun, I bet the ending is *utter* rubbish." He waggled the book at Gale before slipping it into his pocket.

"I thought you hated literature."

"I do! It is naught but meaningless tripe, a true waste of time and effort for all concerned." He flipped through the other book, making thinky noises. "Now what *was* I up to..."

"A journal?" Gale leaned forwards, trying to peer at the pages.

Astarion jerked the book away, pointedly huffing at the nosy wizard, "If you *must* know it appears to be the plan I drew up to repair the very chair you are currently sitting in!" He deigned to allow him a glimpse of some pages with a sketch of the chair and a list of materials needed to repair it, before slamming the book shut, almost on Gale's nose, with a laugh.

“That poor chair was in *terrible* disrepair when first it appeared. Was a decent project for a time... I had never sewn upholstery before...”

“Would you like to swap seats?” Gale asked, starting to stand.

Astarion dismissively waved him away. “Don’t trouble yourself. You can enjoy the fruits of my labours. I feel rather... energized.” He yonked up his tankard, lounging as if on something much more comfortable than a badly varnished wooden tabletop.

“My knees and back both are most appreciative.”

That earned him peals of laughter. “I knew it. I saw it in you. Regret... I imagine it is even harder to enjoy walking away from power with such *aged* mortal bones.”

“Let us drink to the both of us coming to our senses.” He held out his bottle, ready for a toast, blinking when Astarion *ugh*’ed and pointedly moved his tankard farther away.

“Please, no need to patronize me. It was not really my choice. I knew it would be almost impossible to talk her into assisting me in killing the other six, but *perhaps* doable... when the depths of *Cazador’s* cruelty were revealed? That he did... *this*,” he motioned at himself with a huff before continuation, “to *everyone* we brought back? All my protests after that were just so much pageantry knew then... she would never permit it. Nor would anyone else... another decision made for me.”

Gale rolled some brandy around in his mouth while thinking, then looked past Astarion as he commented, “I think I would have. I recall thinking you had passed up a most remarkable opportunity, once in a lifetime, even for immortals. Strange, I cannot remember why I found it so appealing any longer, though it made so much sense at the time. I suspect now, with the benefit hindsight has allotted me, that the orb was impacting me far more than I realized, not merely tainting my body and magic, but mind and soul as well...”

“Hah! Well, what a different outcome that would have been. A different *now*... I doubt we would be drinking in a dive such as this. Vampire ascendant and god of...” he tilted his head to the side. “Books? Rubbish beards? Flying cats? What were you aiming for, my dear?”

“Ambition,” Gale said, after a moment’s reflection.

Astarion wrinkled his nose and rolled away slightly with a groan, “Ugh! One of those nebulous emotional gods? Darling, *please*. Come up with something better if you try again, *mm*?”

“What domain would you preside over?”

“Oh, come now, you cannot possibly expect me to have a pat answer to that to give you! ... is... is this a thing normal people tend to ponder?” He raised an eyebrow, rolling towards him again.

Gale took a long pull from his brandy. “Ah well, perhaps not outside of my former professional circles...”

Astarion purred out, “Those who lay with Goddesses, is that what you mean, my dear? Alas, I am still adjusting to not being a *slave*.” He grinned, waiting just long enough before saying, “Of the ... intimate variety.”

“You never will tire of reminding me of my verbal blunder, will you?”

“Never! Come now, darling, you cannot be surprised. I mean really, *should* I?”

“Hah, probably not, probably not...”

“If you live to be as old as Elminster, as wrinkled and grey, with a long *nonrubbish* beard, I will pop up behind you, when you least expect! Looking just as beautiful as I do this very eve, to make sure any new companions you have collected know exactly what you said to me once, in *your* first century.”

“... you would, wouldn't you?”

“Look the same? Yes dear, forever young and beautiful vampire, do try to keep up.”

“Fair enough.” Gale held his bottle up, trying for a toast once more. This time successfully; Astarion snickering as their drinks clinked together.

“Why did I never bring Karlach here?” he mused, taking another long pull of the surprisingly delicious half-orc blood. “I guess when she was... with us, I never was miserable enough to recall its existence.”

“My regrets for casting a pall over your evening.”

“Bah! Egotistical wizard. I'll have you know I am *perfectly* capable of having an absolutely horrendous time completely without your contribution!” He grinned. “Why your table was not even my first bit of property damage this evening!”

With a laugh Astarion launched himself from the table to perch on the railing, hooking a foot between two of the slats. “I *suppose* am I sorry I ruined your table? That is what people are supposed to say after destructive rampages, yes?” He leaned forwards, impish smile still on his face.

“Ah, do not let it trouble yourself, my friend. Even though it was a unique creation, worth roughly as much as this establishment.”

“What.” The smile froze.

Gale leaned back in his chair, seemingly oblivious to Astarion's distress. “The jewels inlaid upon it were all enchanted! One such as I could activate these stored enchantments to conjure myriad varieties of food, that all would remain at the proper temperature until removed from its surface. Ah... upon reflection, I might have underestimated its value.”

“Can you fix it?” Astarion swallowed once, setting his tankard down.

The wizard dared to laugh! “My skills are not that impressive! The mechanisms one would call upon to store a vast quantity of quality spellwork into such a small amount of material has been lost for many an age. Why, even Elminster would balk at such a task...”

“And you just... had it on the street?! Where any mad thing could get its hands upon it?!”

“I requested Mystra provide a table to me after our... discussion.” He put a hand to his orb scar. “I was quite surprised with what she proffered.”

“It was Mystra's?!” The vampire was utterly pale once more, the freshly consumed blood draining from his face.

Gale grinned, meeting Astarion's gaze for a moment. “Forgive me, I could not resist! All a purposeful confabulation; what you damaged was but a tacky bauble of Lorroakan's. The only magic it held was

the capacity to display rudimentary arcane runes, incorrectly, I must add. Rubbish work. You have done all of magic a service.”

Astarion tumbled off the railing, thudding onto the floor. He laid there for a moment before weakly croaking out, “Fair.”

With a sigh, Astarion wrenched himself off the floor and plopped onto the barstool, grabbing his tankard. “Mockery *is* preferable to abandonment. I know I am... sometimes... ooooooh, let us say, *complicated*, to interact with...” He took a swig, relishing the flavor.

“I was surprised by the intensity of your reaction, I will admit. However, Astarion, you are far easier to interact with than some I have known.” Gale hesitated, reflected, then corrected himself. “Even when I blunder... the consequences are not as off-putting.”

Astarion raised an eyebrow at that, then frowned as he peered inside his now empty mug.

“Why, one professor emeritus was well known for being so sensitive to the most milquetoast of criticism he would attempt to shrink his perceived attackers and transport them to a labyrinth of his own design; he succeeded more than a few times!”

“Do... universities permit professors to do such things?”

“If they have a have wealthy enough patron funding their arcane research? Oh yes.”

“... huh. I still do apologize. I have found lately my emotions flare with an unfamiliar intensity. I spent so many years so... flattened, worn down to but a wisp of whoever I once was... rotting in all but body...” Astarion looked down at his hands with a small chuckle, flexing his fingers.

“I regret dismissing the possibility of curing you so quickly. I have been churning my knowledge of vampires over in my head this evening. Really, I question how much an effort to cure older spawn has really been made, most of the literature barely even bothers to distinguish spawn from true vampires. The curse is much less intense in your kind, why should the same growth patterns apply?”

“Ugh, stop, I force myself to endure enough pity, don’t heap more on me for what *I am*, of all things. I have accepted this is what I shall be, for the rest of my days.” He motioned at himself with a grin, before shrugging.

“I’m... surprised you are so lackadaisical about the prospect.”

“A rather *recent* acceptance, I shall admit. But a true one! Why... the entire reason I first wanted that damn necromantic tome was in search of a cure. The poor sod who owned it prior was seeking to bring some dead love back to life after all. *Ugh*, how cliché.” He tilted his stool back, so much so Gale was amazed he did not tip over.

Astarion stared up at the ceiling. “In those early days of our little journey, I had no real hope of successfully confronting Cazador, regaining my mortality seemed as likely a possibility as securing any allies. And to be honest, the possibility was most appealing... undo *everything* he did to me? *Mmm...*”

He leaned forward, the legs of his stool loudly thudding down. “But now I realized I very much linked this *affliction* with my slavery, twined together, one and the same. I mean why would I not? They occurred to me at the same time, but this existence is rather... *different* now, in freedom. Even

without the tadpole; being hampered by my restrictions and fairly powerless once more, I am having a *far* more enjoyable time.”

“Now, Astarion, do not sell yourself so short! Vampires as a rule are limited necromancers, but the ghoulish summoning capacity given to you by the Necromancy of Thay is something that you could leverage into much more impressive capabilities, I have no doubt!”

He grinned at Gale, not saying anything, holding the grin for way too long.

“... have I misspoken?”

“Ah, foolish wizard. Do not worry, I forgive you for this particular verbal blunder. Your charmed life has done *nothing* to familiarize you with how events typically proceed for me.”

“Could you elucidate your point for me in a more explicit fashion?”

“I am nothing if not most gracious. The most powerful secrets the book bestowed upon me vanished along with my ability to stand in the sun!”

Gale blinked, taking a moment to flip through his knowledge banks. “But... why would that occur?”

Astarion shrugged. “The fates hate me; have you not been paying attention? No matter anyway, nothing I am *terribly* upset about. I have many other things to be most terribly upset about, after all, one has to make sacrifices. Otherwise, you just cannot give each upset its proper attention, I do not want to be accused of neglecting any of my various worries.”

As the wizard’s only reply was to stroke his beard in thought, Astarion kept prattling on. “At least I do not have to worry about more practical matters. Such as where would I *put* them? I do not wish to have ghouls in my flat! Ugh, the *smell* alone! Would I need to register them? Do they count as people more than I? Would they explode? Just endless potential complications!”

“Interesting, I wonder if somehow the knowledge was adhered to your tadpole rather than you by some happenstance...”

“I’m sure that is what occurred and that it was no mistake! The arcane arts and realm in general are in universal agreement the tadpole counted as more of person than myself, a mere vampire spawn.”

“Please be aware, Astarion, I am by no means in agreement with what you feel is the prevailing sentiment...”

He laughed and waved off the wizard. “Aren’t you sweet? Appreciated, my dear, but irrelevant. I *am* going to complain about it! I plan to *never* let any of you forget that while you were grouching unendingly, saying parasites weakened you most terribly, our little friends made me stronger than ever before... or ever after. My pinnacle of power. *Hrm...*” He trailed off, tapping a fang for a moment before continuing, “Though I suppose our duke of non-frontiers is powerless as well. *Hrm.* I am still the bottom of the heap, I have decided! For he still draws breath instead of being a frail, no, broken spawn...” He held a finger up in victory!

“Ah, Astarion, you should not use such terminology on yourself. Not that I am attempting to police your self-description, mind, I have said harsh things of myself as well, though not as liberally, but it is important you are aware that the phrase ‘broken spawn’ is the proper term for some of your kin who are... most unfortunate.”

“Oh, really, is it now?” Astarion put his elbows on the table, resting his chin in his hands, and smiled oh so very brightly.

“Yes, it is. I dabbled in a few necromancy modules during the course of my studies, it is not as forbidden of an art in proper wizarding circles as one would first believe. I found defects and aberrations a most fascinating topic!”

“Oh, did you?” The broad grin was still on his face.

Gale nodded, gleeful to be in his element finally in a conversation with Astarion! “Indeed! I even attempted to study broken vampire spawn in detail for an experiential learning credit, alas, they are very rare creatures; typically, they do not survive even as long as your typical vampire spawn, I was never able to locate a specimen for in-person examination and experimentation.”

“Ooooh? What a shame!” He giggled, “But really darling, are they all *that different?*”

“It’s been many years since my fleeting interest, but I do recall they are somewhat paradoxical creatures; lacking abilities typical of your particular variety of undeath, but also lacking all memories of life, very odd for vampires, as your kind is almost defined by how you cling to your former living states!” A snort from Astarion reminded Gale of exactly who he was addressing. “Ah. Sorry if my words are insensitive.”

“Oh no, no! No offense taken at all, my dear, please, tell me more of these mysterious ephemeral aberrations!”

“The literature describes them as volatile creatures, tormented by a ravenous hunger beyond that even of the standard spawn! But the accounts were not very robust in their methodology. I would go so far as to say they were rather poor.”

“*Mm*. If only you had one to examine. Alas...” Astarion started to have less fun with this little game, forced to ponder his recent fits of temper. That was not true... was it? No, there was no way he was any *more* ravenous than the others. All of it had to be so much hogwash.

“Actually, considering the great quantity of spawn your master sired, I would be very surprised if there was not at least one with a broken curse in their number... though the mechanisms which result in their creation are very poorly understood. Still though, I must admit, I would be eager to be able to behold such a rare permutation of the vampiric curse.”

Astarion tried to respond again but his words were lost in a torrent of laughter as he succeeded in banishing away his worries, for now.

“I know that it can be enjoyable to think of those in more dire circumstances than oneself, Astarion, but this is really unbecoming, the condition as I understand it is no laughing matter.”

This only made Astarion laugh even harder. He composed himself and said, “Yes, yes, of course. How uncouth of me.” He managed to hold a straight face for roughly three seconds before he laughed loudly once more, giving up, folding his arms on the table to rest his head in them, soon laughing silently.

Gale stood. “I will go refill our cups and relieve myself. Perhaps you will be able to compose yourself while I am gone.”

As he began to determine the best way to get back down to the ground level, Astarion's mirth-filled voice followed him, "Pitiable mortal failings. I suspect gods are also free from such banality as having to... tinkle." He dissolved into laughter once again.

Gale did not dignify that with a response, flicking a wrist before he stepped off the broken stairs, floating like a feather to the ground floor. He proceeded to the lavatory in the back, the other patrons of the bar paying him no heed.

When he emerged, he was pale, wide eyed, with slightly shaking hands, as he stumbled forward, muttering to himself, "Twice I have cast prestidigitation and yet..." Why had he not prepared levitation that day?

His plan was to shrug off the sights he had just experienced, as much as he was able, then head to the bar, but the distinct tug of an enchantment starting to falter drew his attention. The sensation was coming from behind a door just to his right; Gale hesitated for a moment, then concluded that nothing behind this door could be worse than what he had just witnessed and slipped through.

The room was once an office, long ago, now in great disrepair, including a poorly bordered over broken window. Gale gazed over the mess, the decades upon decades of damage from wind, rain, goblins, and simply time itself. He focused on following the hint of magic, flickering, at the very edge of its existence.

There! On the wall, a small oval frame, covered in dust and cobwebs, with a preservation incantation within it, keeping whatever was contained in the frame safe and firmly adhered to the wall. Gale dispelled the enchantment very easily, it had been weakening for years, no doubt.

It was not an overly complex spell, but still much more effort than would normally be expended to preserve any object that was not the prized artifact of a museum or some royal vault. Whatever contained in this frame had once been very precious to someone.

With a flick of his wrist, he magically cleaned the accumulated grime and dust away, revealing the skillfully painted portrait laying beneath.

"Of course..." he softly muttered. It all made sense now, in some way, at least.

The face staring back at him from the frame was both very familiar and yet still remarkably different from the vampire Gale knew. The same white curls, in a slightly different style - a bit longer, pale skin - but not *too* pale, intense blue eyes, and a broad smile without a single pointed tooth.

At first Gale thought Astarion was trying to make him look foolish by pretending to not know the ties he had to this establishment in life, mocking his research into his living past; but no, he really had no idea, did he? No idea where he was currently sitting, no clue why he was drawn to this location, even now. He slipped the small frame into his pocket, nestled among the papers, then proceeded to the bar.

"Greetings, madam! A gin and tonic, if you would be so kind." He set the tankard down. "And my friend requests a second round, if possible...?"

The small goblin with the shock of pink hair scurried down the half-orc, dashing about on the bar to prepare Gale's drink while the bartender yanked up the closest of the goblins from his barstool, holding him over the tankard. He struggled and swore only to fall silent and still after a single grunt. A quick slash with a claw and he had donated to the Astarion Drink Fund; she flung the goblin back onto his seat before slashing her own palm, contributing as well.

Gale watched, fascinated then asked, “Do you serve many vampires here?”

“No.” She pushed both drinks at Gale, then notably stopped paying attention to him.

The lady goblin spoke up as Gale turned to leave, “Hey! Beardy!”

Gale hesitantly turned, “Yes?”

“Anybody ever tell you that you look like that Gale of Waterdeep bloke? Got any idea what he’s up to now?”

He gave her no reaction, turning away promptly, ignoring the laughter behind him. Even more laughter from above succeeded in drawing Gale’s attention. Astarion was hanging upside down from the railing, his feet hooked between the slats. Managing to cast sans goblin objections, Gale flew back upstairs. Astarion flipped over the railing and slid off it; by the time Gale landed he was casually leaning against the banister.

“I must say, I *do* wonder... what *is* this amazing, oh so well known, Gale of Waterdeep doing right now, do you have any speculation?” Astarion grinned, reaching out to take the offered tankard.

“It is a grand mystery,” Gale said, retaking his seat. “However, I can tell you Gale Dekarios is going to regret the richness of these libations.” He held up his glass of gin.

Astarion gasped, putting a hand on the side of his face. “No more Mr. Of Waterdeep?”

“Possibly no... I cannot say for sure, for you see, it is not a self-appointed title. Bestowed by the Masked Lords of Waterdeep upon the magi most suited to represent the city.”

“What, are they going to dismiss you for lack of attendance? You just saved the bloody realm! That should give you bonus qualifications!” He took a drink, then commented, “Well, assisted in saving the realm, at least, some of us pulled our weight more than others, darling.”

Gale chuckled, “I think they will be far harsher concerning my prior actions and present dearth of magical potency. Gale’s Folly... we have heard from the lips of several random Baldurians tonight alone! Just imagine how much talk there is in my city of origin...”

Astarion *mm*’ed, looking down into his mug, thinking.

“Even if they proffer forgiveness for my misdeed, I very much doubt I presently have the proper qualifications, and I perhaps might never again. Why, I could not even control the weather currently!”

“You’re not joking. You could *do that*?”

“Ah, yes, and so much more... all beyond me now. I know such a feat seems fantastic to many, but I once could do so effortlessly! Sad state of affairs for the one-time prodigy of magic, heralded as the true inheritor of Elminster’s legacy.”

“I’m sure you’ll survive. *Somehow*.”

“Truth be told I would welcome the formalized dismissal. It would allow me to focus on more important things. Such as attempting to soothe my poor Mother’s worries.”

“Your not-cat did say you treated her rather terribly.”

Gale took a contemplative drink, the packet of papers and framed picture in his jacket pocket both feeling many times heavier than their true weight. He fixed his gaze upon Astarion once more. “May I ask a personal question?”

“What novelty, requesting permission instead of just blurting it out?” He waved a hand Galeward. “Fine, I suppose...”

“Why have you come to the conclusion that you do not wish to reach out to the family you left behind? I just question the wisdom of this decision as you have no concrete information to base it on.”

“I am questioning the wisdom of my decision to say you could ask.”

“My apologies, you need not answer.”

The pair were silent for a few minutes, the cacophony from downstairs washing over them as they both nursed their drinks.

Astarion drained his mug then promptly flung the empty vessel over the railing, where it hit someone in the head to the cheers of the short and green patrons.

“What good would I be to them? What good at all? What good might they be to me? Perhaps you do not understand me when I tell you that I do not remember *anything* about whatever family I might once have had. Maybe they also beat me. Maybe that’s just my lot in my life, to be hurt by those who should care for me. Maybe they were lovely. Maybe I was lovely once. It does not matter.”

Gale, wisely, said nothing and kept his face blank.

“What I *can* tell you is, no high elven family would want someone to return from my... journey through undeath. Let alone 200 years after they first mourned me. I’m a memory, if even that, and it is best I remain as such. Gods, how would a reintroduction even proceed?”

He shifted voice, putting on a false grin and chirping out, “Hi! Sooooooo, I’m back! No, do not remember you *at all!* Where have I been? Why, I’ve been a vampire whore! Oh, offensive term? Prostitute more palatable? Well, alas, that is not even suitable either, they make money, do they not? What is the proper phrase...” He snapped his fingers. “Ah! Yes, how silly of me. Sex slave. Sooooo... that is where I’ve been. 200 years as an undead sex slave; while all the time you thought I had the good sense to stay in the ground! Funny story, really, if you stop to think.”

Astarion leaned forwards, smiling brightly as he blinked at Gale a couple of times before tilting his head to the side to ask, “So! How are yooooooooou?”

He dropped the act; upending the wizard’s cup right into his lap. Plopping back down on his stool with a frown and scoff at Gale.

Gale winced, simply picked up the glass and said, “I think those who cared for you would want to know you now, know that you are still here, even if you could not remember them.”

“Well, I do *not*,” Astarion firmly clipped out.

“If you would permit me a hypothetical. What if Karlach returned, but did not remember you?”

“I would hope she enjoyed the best of all things, in her new lease on life. Without me.”

“You cannot mean that!”

“I *can!* I *do!* I would not inflict myself upon her again. Let her have freedom and true joy without the burden of my myriad complications weighing her down once more...”

At Gale’s raised eyebrows and lack of reply Astarion growled, turning away slightly, “What good would she be to me anyway. I have no wishes to retread the path of humiliating exposure that led me to her arms...”

“Apologies, consider the topic dropped. I will respect your wishes.”

“First time for everything, *mm?*”

“This puts me in mind of how tenuous relationships can truly be... what is life if not a series of connections formed and then broken.” He waved a hand over his trousers and with a flash of light, he was dry once more.

“Cheating wizard. That little trick puts me in half the mind to pour another one upon your loins. Forbid you from magicking it clean... under threat of cymbals.”

Gale leaned back, searching for something to fill the silence with, finally landing on a somewhat relevant bit of information. “I have heard that in elvish culture it is considered quite romantic to take a short-lived love in one’s youth; to savor the loss—”

Astarion slammed both his palms on the table with a growl, glaring directly at Gale. When Gale opened his mouth to respond, he was met with a hiss, the glare continuing.

Once he was satisfied the wizard was not going to continue that particular line of inane prattle, Astarion responded to him with more traditional words, “Gale, I must know. I *need* to know. Do you even process the words that come out of your mouth? This may surprise you, but, I do deeply ponder each and every word I say... most times, anyway. I never offend by mistake or happenstance. That would just not be as fun nor effective! Typically, deliberate offense is much more rewarding. You have a special gift.”

“Um, well, I—”

“Do you just hear a vague collection of sounds and some alarm falls over in your brain? Shouting out to you: ‘oh, I know things about that topic! Time to say all of them!’ With no nuance? Nary a notion if it was necessary, notable, or needed?”

“... oh! You’re doing that on purpose!”

Astarion raised an eyebrow, palms still on the table.

“The alliteration!”

“... *of course I am!*”

Gale *hrm*’ed with a nod, churning over the past few minutes of conversation in his mind as he stroked his beard. After he had waited long enough, he was in danger of having his eyeball poked to see if he was still paying attention, he said, “You are correct! Deciding to offend on purpose is much more enjoyable.”

Astarion froze, finger in mid-air, then started laughing so intensely he almost fell out of his chair.

“My words were drawn from my reflections upon Mystra and myself. Not your relationship with Karlach. Though, in hindsight, I can see how of course that was your interpretation. Please know, I may have my failings, but I am not that gauche!”

“... that’s dumb enough I somehow believe you.”

“I suspect I might possibly never see her again. Mystra.” He ran his finger over the rim of his glass, wishing more of the drink had gone into his mouth instead of his lap.

“Oh. Uh...” He laughed nervously. “And... how does that make you... feel?” He put a hand to his forehead and muttered, “I cannot believe I just asked that...”

“I do not know.”

Astarion waited for more words to tumble from the wizard’s mouth. When none emerged, he softly *mm*’ed before saying, “How unexpected. Why, at the start of our little journey you were so maudlin over her I half expected you to trip over your own lower lip.”

“Mystra was... so much more than my world. She was my everything. For almost as long as I can remember. A constant comforting presence since my childhood.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Astarion expertly contributed, peering over the railing and pondering how to best incite the below goblins to a spot of rioting.

“She used to be a mortal; did you know that? I... perhaps clung to that too much. In my efforts to perch upon the same footing as Mystra... can an immortal and mortal really ever be said to be equals? Godhood or not? For a time, I thought so... I’ve suppose you wonder what we could have in common besides magic? As if that was not—”

No more of that.

Astarion stopped processing Gale’s words, letting the man just drone on and on and *on*. Not a single fraying thread of his tattered soul wanted to be a part of this conversation any longer. Perhaps the wizard would shut up if he slit his throat. The vampire meant his own throat of course, no need to be *overly* rude. Or maybe he could offer to get on his back on this table; surely *that* would be preferable to hearing more. Ugh, no, on second thought, Gale was the type to complain about a past lover *during* the act. *Also*, he would no doubt get horrible splinters in sensitive places, judging by the poor quality of the wood. Worst of every possible world!

Loudly barked out orcish from below interrupted Astarion’s thoughts and Gale’s speech both.

“Oh, what bloody awful timing, darling, alas! Time to go!” He promptly leapt over the railing, landed on all fours. By the time Gale floated down next to him, he was standing up and brushing himself off.

The bartender shouted again; the remaining patrons scattered! Most running out the back, but a few vanishing into other parts of the establishment.

Stepping up to the bar, Astarion caught her eye and responded to her in orcish. A bit stilted, but she clearly understood him. She laughed, saying something else as she shook her head. He smiled and bowed, handing over his recovered three gold coins to her, before bidding her good evening, or well, close enough.

“You know orcish. But not elvish,” Gale comment as Astarion moved past him.

Astarion twirled his way out the door, “What can I say? I’m a man full of surprises!”

The pair started walking down the street, even this part of the Lower City was very quiet in this hour; so late it would soon be early.

After a few short blocks, the neighborhood already looking far better, Astarion broke the silence, “Wyll has a rather... foolishly hopeful plan. He wants to assist the spawn in the Underdark.”

“Oh! Yes, I heard inklings of this.” Gale stifled a yawn.

“If you are interested in *my* foolishly hopeful plan, his will, *heh*, aid you. My... one of my fellow spawn. Dalyria. She’s the leader down there,” he paused, realizing he never actually had any confirmation on that point. “More or less,” he continued, with a wave of his hand.

“That name is somehow familiar...”

“Ugh, of *course* it is. Dalyria. Doctor Dalyria. Made a big name for herself here, decades back, before she, you know, *died*.”

“The first physician general of the modern parliament?! Astarion, how could you never have told me! I read a number of her papers while at Blackst...aff...” he trailed off, his words withering under Astarion’s glare.

“Ahem. *Anyway*. I am telling you *now*. She’s working on studying us. Vampire spawn.” He shrugged. “Perhaps useful?”

“More than perhaps...” he stroked his beard as he thought.

“Hey! You ever read Popular Arcana? You look like that guy that used to write the stuff about the things!” A man commented, in the midst of trying to drunkenly unlock his front door.

“Ugh! And you look like someone who might have a brain, but *that* is obviously not true, *shoo!* We are *talking!*” Astarion made repeated shooing motions while scowling. “Go! *Go!*”

After the man obeyed and meekly went inside the building, he huffed out, “Honestly, whatever happened to basic manners?”

The pair resumed walking, Gale was the first to speak this time, “Astarion, I am sorry. For many things. Trust I will not press you again... but if you do ever wish to know...”

“Yes, yes. Fine. I am not *fully* discounting the possibility that one day I *might* care to peruse what you have assembled.” He rolled his eyes. “You needn’t incinerate the papers. Knowing you there are two duplicates in secure locations anyway...”

“Three, actually.” He stifled another yawn.

“I suspect you are up far past your wizard bedtime, my dear.”

“Significantly so...”

“You have eliminated *one* of the early morning wake up concerts you earned, let that help you rest well!”

“... dare I ask how many remain?”

Astarion grinned. "At least one more. Always at least one more."

"Fair enough." Gale started to cast a portal to Rolan's tower, then paused. "I could send you to your flat, if you would like. I have enough power for that, at least."

"Don't trouble yourself. A leisurely stroll before bed might be good for my health." By health, he meant his appetite, thus, bad for someone else's health. It had been too many nights since Astarion had found an excuse to pursue a deserving heartbeat through the alleys... maybe he would get lucky before dawn!

With a nod and another yawn, Gale finished his cast and stepped through the portal. "It was a most wonderful tour, Astarion!"

Walking briskly away, he found himself hoping the wizard did get at least *most* of his powers back. Not because he felt Gale didn't *deserve* to be forever humbled due to his little 'folly', but, well, *Astarion* was not going to stumble into any more power anytime soon... having powerful associates was as close as he could possibly hope to having true power ever again. An archmage would be very useful indeed; he could trade canceled early morning concerts for favours!

Astarion hadn't consumed enough blood to be remotely inebriated, but he was *so* tired that his thoughts felt rather slippery all the same. Plenty of time till the sun would rise, he could afford to meander a bit. Stifling a yawn, he debated how much he really wanted to be a greedy little thing and keep on the lookout for another bite along his way. His warm shower and soft bed were *mighty* alluring right now, more so than hunting, really. Who knew that having multiple... destructive outbursts in one evening would be so tiring?

With a chuckle he admitted to himself that *he* certainly knew; Astarion had experienced enough of those in his existence. Ah, well, nothing that bad resulted from them this evening. Gale didn't seem overly bothered. He deliberately pushed all thoughts of Dalryia from his mind, concluding nothing this evening would make its way to a certain Grand Duke's desk.

Astarion paused, *why* did thoughts of Wyll tickle the back of his mind so? He had forgotten something...

"Oh hells."

The Ravengard homestead, he was supposed to be there *now*. Starting this foolish 'advising' idea that Wyll had *somehow* talked him into! The wizard had been so infuriating he completely forgot! It was *his* fault, not Astarion's! Now he had so far to walk! He was not even in the Upper City!

With a growl of rage Astarion grabbed a nearby trashcan and flung it through a storefront window. He watched the display shelves crash beneath the added weight, not feeling one iota better. Gods, the shoes toppling down to the floor were *utterly* ghastly; he had done the city a favor. Maybe he should set them on fire really quick, before he departed...

"Oi! What's all this then?!"

Fantastic! Lovely! One of Wyll's little Fisters was on patrol? This early? And actually paying attention?!

Astarion bolted off, leaving a string of curses in his wake that would do Karlach proud as the guard futilely chased after, frantically whistling for back-up.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, just a bit more public destruction to round off the day!

Night. Whatever.

GET YOUR ASS TO WORK VAMPY-BOY!!!

HAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Did yooooou forget he had workies? mwahahah!

PS the vitamin D pills are good all better toot thumbs up

Chapter 13: Time for workies!

Chapter Summary

Work time at Wyll's!
I'm sure nothing at all will go wrong! :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wyll jerked awake, automatically checking the time on the grandfather clock in the hall. Closer to four in the morning now than three. They had agreed on three bells past midnight, he was certain of it; he made sure to record it in his pocket calendar at the time then transcribe it to his official master calendar, kept in his office.

With a yawn he got to his feet and started pacing, quietly, taking care not to disturb any of the servants. Or worse, his father.

As he walked the halls, he mused how much larger this grand mansion felt than when he was a child, wasn't it supposed to be the other way around? In all the storybooks when the hero returned to childhood haunts, not glimpsed in almost a decade, Wyll could not recall a single tale in which the homecoming led to an estate that somehow felt even more intimidating and mysterious.

It was growing so late it was almost early. Where was Astarion? Had he run afoul of trouble? Wyll reflected it was a good thing he left their linked sending stone in his room, if he had not, he was unsure he could resist the temptation to reach out. He resolved to only do so if it was half past the *next* hour and he was still waiting.

This did not stop him from once again checking the emergency contact stone that all the Flaming Fist commanders could use to reach him at any hour of the day. Nothing. No missed messages.

One of his new policy changes was giving every Fist squad standing instructions to forward all matters concerning vampires to him before taking action, unless there was the threat of immediate harm to the public. Disturbingly enough, there had already been existing protocol regarding possible vampire related incidents, keeping them *far* away from his father's eyes.

Instead, all such matters would be sent to another high-ranking commander of the organization, with no other record kept. This man had died when Wyll Ravengard himself, along with his companions, stormed the keep at Wyrms Rest. While he would have greatly enjoyed the ability to interrogate the man, his death did not result in much mystery. Investigation of his meager estate revealed multiple repeating, albeit small, contributions that were eventually traced back to the Szarr estate.

A knock at the door saved him from his ruminations. Wyll did not try to fight the smile of relief that spread over his face when he opened the door, "Good evening, Astarion!"

"Is it? If you say so, then I suppose it must be so, a form of official decree..."

“Thank you for knocking this time,” he said as he stepped aside, shutting the door after his friend entered, noting the satchel over his shoulder.

“An early mid-winter’s present for you. And not that I was too tired to even think about sneaking in.” He stifled a yawn.

“Did you have an exciting evening? Trust it was more so than my own, no matter your answer.”

Astarion had been looking around the hallway, obviously churning something over in his mind. “Mm? Ah, no... well,” He paused then grinned. “If you have not heard any reports from your little Fisters, then it has been uneventful.”

“Please, I have asked you to stop calling them that.”

“And I have heard your request, with my very own pointy ears.” He tilted his head, laughing as he slightly wiggled said ears.

Wyll shook his head, softly laughing. He was too tired to push further on either matter. “Let me show you to your room, my friend, this way. You are in a mostly unused wing, part of the original estate, to keep you from being disturbed when the rest of the house awakens.”

His guest nodded and followed, oddly silent during the short walk, casting his eyes about, as if searching for something.

Once at the destination, Wyll did not linger much, stumbling back towards his own room with a yawn; thus, Astarion was quickly left alone in a most grand room indeed.

This bloody bedroom had to be bigger than his whole flat. He could not help but be a little impressed as he gazed about the room that Wyll had given him for the day.

As always, there was an implied offer to stay for far more than this one day.

For a moment he truly did reconsider his refusal to reside permanently at the Ravengard manner. A turn as a kept vampire *here* would not be the worst thing he could do with his unlife. Look, there were even bells on the wall above the bed, with which he could summon servants to tend to his each and every need!

Or not.

He quickly discovered the bells were disconnected from the system. Fine then, no pet vampire for you, sweet Wylliam!

After recovering from the immense disappointment of the bells, Astarion went about accessing the other amenities in the room. There was a copious number of pillows and extra blankets on the bed, so much so he had a bit of a giggle, imagining the Grand Duke instructing his house staff that, no, that was *still* not enough bedding provided!

As he started building his vampire nest for the day, Astarion encountered a pile of red crystals, each about the size of a fist.

Holding up one to the light, he peered at it, what in the blazes *were* these things? They were not *nearly* gemstone quality, even the worst of costume jewelry held a greater luster. He sat on the bed and started inspecting each one in the pile, as if one of the identical hexagons would have the answer written on it. Alas, none of them did.

However, he *did* feel a slight tug from each, the same arcane whispers that most enchanted objects softly emitted when dormant. He pondered, then shook his head, growling at his own paranoia; if Wyll wanted to harm him, there were much simpler ways to go about such a task.

Still, he tensed as he activated the unknown spellwork.

The gem started softly glowing and emitting a gentle warmth.

“Oh! How extravagant...”

He had heard of these little delights, but never seen one himself, let alone gotten to avail himself of their heat. Very expensive little wonders. Provided by Wyll, unprompted, so Astarion would have some warmth as he tried to rest here; corpses were not known for producing their own, after all. His hands began shaking for no discernible reason and he had to cover his face, the gem dropping down into his lap.

A *short* few minutes of absolutely *no crying at all* later, he began once again arranging the bedding to his precise standards, kicking the elegant but unwanted silk sheets off to the corner of the room. Let the servants ponder *that* little wrinkle as well! Astarion, traveling servant enrichment. He really should charge Wyll for his services; they had to be worth more than the cost of the gems.

Wait.

He *was* getting paid for coming over here today. As if he was a *real* person or some other ridiculous notion.

Astarion was not going to cry again. Not that he had cried the first time either. Nothing like that had happened. He was merely... very tired, and thus, his mind was, oooh, wandering... dipping into odd valleys.

Shaking his head he laughed as he started disrobing. He was so tired that he could not even lie convincingly to himself. It was time to lay down and attempt to rest, be as fresh as possible for this mysterious advising meeting that was scheduled at really a most rubbish hour if Wyll wanted his vampiric assistance.

Now if only this pervasive sense of *deja vu* would disperse. It had dogged him since he first stepped into the estate. Honestly, it dogged him *every* time he stepped foot into the place, but the feeling was much stronger than previous occasions, in this wing of the mansion.

No matter, time to rest. Nothing was going to happen to him here, he was safe. This uneasy feeling did not forebode any misfortune, he reminded himself, slipping into the blanket and pillow nest.

It was simply that, *really*, if you have seen one Upper City mansion you have seen them all. Each and every one was remodeled so *often* due to the various reoccurring bouts of property destruction. If your estate was *not* damaged? That's no excuse not to have renovations! You did not want to be left out, fall behind in architectural fashion, now did you? How shameful it would be to have a floor plan that was in fashion three disasters ago!

The Szarr palace saw far less unneeded renovations than most of the patriarch estates, but it could not escape needed repairs following several of the exciting times in the city. Astarion chuckled, recalling how three spawn at once had found their freedom after the prior Bhaalspawn times, managing to loosen the already damaged attic ceiling beams enough that glorious sunlight split into the space, delivering them from the unending torment that was their shared unlife.

They had told Astarion of the plan, and he had declined to join them. Mostly as he thought they were doomed to failure and more punishment for the attempt. How he had regretted that decision when he was made to pay for allowing his ‘younger siblings’ to come to harm. Astarion could practically hear Cazador’s insane shrieking mixed with the crack of the whips.

Ugh, and then there were the renovations, decades later, when Cazador decided it was more beneficial to keep some repair expertise ‘on staff’ so to speak, and thus, Yousen had been plucked from the construction team and joined their unmerry band.

What in all the bloody hells am I doing?!

Why was he thinking about this?! Enough! Stopping at once. New policy, no more thinking about *Cazador*.

... well, that would be frankly, depressingly, *impossible*. Fine, revision of policy. No more thinking about the bastard after he’s in bed. There. Much more attainable. And preferable, even...

Astarion re-situated under his blanket, making sure all the heat generating gems were churning away, then hugged a pillow before scanning the room in search of something else to occupy his mind with.

Oh, well, look at that ...

So much of this room had obviously been modernized since the original construction, but the intricate carving in the ceiling beams, depicting a griffin with its wings spread, had to date to when this section was first built.

Astarion stared at it, unable to drag his eyes from the figures, the *deja vu* washing over him once more.

For several minutes he stared, mystified, until, suddenly, he knew.

Laughter filled the room, Astarion rolling about in the blanket, tumbling to the floor, giggling all the while.

Well. Well! Well ... well !

Mystery solved! He *had* been here before. Over a hundred years ago. Hells, longer than that. Prior to the last Bhaalspawn kerfuffle. Possibly before Jaheira was even born!

In this very room, staring at that carving, focusing on it so he could ignore what was happening to him at the time. He was still rather *new* then, you see, and not as practiced at pushing through the unpleasantness, needed something else to help him drift away from himself. From the role he was playing. The hands upon him.

Astarion laughed again, rolling about on the floor.

Well! He cannot recall any specific details relating to his activities, not even who he was providing his services to that evening. Great success! Wonderful work, past Astarion.

Of course! Of bloody course! How could this feeling have been anything else?

He laughed, curled up, then screamed into a pillow, before dissolving into laughter once more.



Minutes before it was due to ring, Wyll turned off his alarm clock, slipping out of bed at 6:57 am, exactly as he did most mornings. He set about immediately making his bed, humming happily to himself. As he proceeded to the middle of his room to start his morning stretches and exercises, he paused, blinking and then rubbing his eyes to make sure he was seeing correctly.

Astarion was curled up, hugging a pillow, on the rug in front of the roaring fireplace, clad in only his pajama bottoms, his legs tangled in a blanket.

Now that Wyll stopped to reflect, it was warmer than usual.

He approached, as quietly as possible, not finding any clues to alleviate his confusion; Astarion did not appear injured and was surrounded by the warmth generators Wyll had provided for him, the small crystals softly glowing.

After a moment's consideration, he decided not to bother the sleeping vampire. If Astarion had wanted to talk to Wyll, he had *no* doubt he would have not hesitated to wake him up. He collected his clothing for the day and exited as quickly as he could, trying not to disturb his friend's rest.

Hours later, Wyll returned to his private quarters to make sure Astarion was awake in time for the meeting. At first, he thought his guest had been asleep this entire time. However, all of the pillows from the bed and couches had joined him in front of the even more raging fire. Glancing at the time, he reflected Astarion need not be roused just yet; he moved to pull the door shut and depart again.

"*Mmm*. They say a vampire changes the world around them... maybe my power is generating pillows?" He sat up, yawning and blinking a few times. "Ugh, that joke was far better in my quasi-wakeful state. Disregard it... I suppose they cannot all be winners." He stretched and then flopped on his side once more.

Wyll pulled the door shut as planned, but stayed in the room. "Did you rest well?"

"For the most part. I *did* terrify one of your servant girls. She most rudely flung the curtains wide open, so I made sure to convey my utmost displeasure."

"... how?"

"Oh, just a spot of hissing with some growling. All the while my skin was burning to ash as I scrambled for any remaining spot of shadow."

"I should have put up a sign."

"So, my dear Grand Dukeness, if you hoped to keep my nature a secret... well..." He sat up again and flashed a fanged grin. "That bat is rather out of the belfry."

"I'm sorry to say, Astarion, I feel that one also could stand a bit more workshopping."

"Criticism received and noted. You're *wrong*. That was *brilliant*. But! Acknowledged," he said with a nod, wagging his finger with each and every word.

"I am glad you are awake; you should get ready so we have time to make sure the room is suitable for your needs."

He grumbled as he got to his feet, yawning and kicking pillows away.

“Did you bring breakfast with you?”

“Oh hells, no!” Astarion gasped, putting a hand to his cheek.

“Well, I—”

“Of course I did!” He glared at Wyll, hands on his hips, then scoffed and rolled his eyes, turning away. A moment later he turned back, smile on his lips and purred out, “Unless forgetting would mean I could hunt some of your little servants instead?”

“No.”

“Such a cruel ruler... does your father know what you have become?” He frowned deeply.

“Astarion, I must confess, I am very curious as to why you came here. Did something happen?”

“I’m so scandalized!” He put a hand to his chest. “Here I thought you were too much of a gentleman to ask the attractive non-stranger why he just appeared in your room without a shirt on...!”

“If there’s anything else you need, please ask, I will try to provide.”

“No, no, don’t doubt your provided hospitality, my dear, it was beyond sufficient. Luxurious even!” He picked up his satchel, wagging it at Wyll.

“I won’t pressure you, if you don’t wish to tell.”

Astarion grinned. “How about you guess?” He said, his eyebrows-a-wiggling.

“No. I am not playing this game with you, Astarion, I am very bad at it.”

He cackled as he retrieved a shirt. “Aww, very well, if you shall not play my little game, I suppose I’ll just take the boring route and *tell you*.” He paused to grin, then leaned very close and whispered in his ear, “Cruel ruler.”

“I am forever grateful to my most understanding subjects.” He pushed Astarion away.

Astarion laughed again, before stepping away, tugging on the shirt, then holding his arms wide, regaling Wyll as if he was on a stage. “I’ve been here before, you see! In that very room you put me in. Long ago, before the name Ravengard was even a whisper at the very edge of politics. Before Jaheira was born, I suspect! *Ages ago*.” He grinned, enjoying the trepidation on the younger man’s face.

“I did not fully understand at first, was merely a bit of an odd feeling. Inexplicable unease. Then as I tried to rest, my gaze drifted up the ceiling. And, lo, realization washed over me!” He laughed, clasping his hands so quickly there was an audible clap.

“For you see, I recognized the very distinctive decorative carving. Those intricate feathers were burnt into my brain... at the time, most welcome distractions. Now? Most unwelcome reminders. Understanding settled in and I did not wish to remain there any longer. And as I do quite like this new power of mine to simply *leave* places I do not wish to be, I did so! Then sought you out.” He smirked. “Eventually.”

Wyll put his face into his hands.

Astarion grinned, leaning forwards and patting him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, my dear, your wing of the estate seems *much* newer. Nothing is jogging any unwanted memories here.”

“I am glad for that...” he weakly said.

“I know, darling, I know, I am rather ridiculous. I’m sorry for how... well-traveled I was.”

“Astarion, you are not ridiculous. Do not apologize for ... for anything of this nature.”

“I know I am not! It is a joke. Joooooke!” He rolled his eyes and jammed a finger on Wyll’s forehead, right between his horns. “I must admit, I *do* find it rather funny, honestly. You can laugh! You *should* laugh! My past is a biiiiit darkly hilarious when you consider the sheer scale of my... *hrm...* experience? More than a bit really...”

“I do not find it an iota amusing.”

“Well, I do! *Hrmph!*” He crossed his arms and turned away, side-eying Wyll. “Karlach would have appreciated the humor in it.”

“I’m sure she would have.”

“Shadowheart would laugh, you know she would. Gale... would not!” he grinned and pointed accusingly. “You’re in the same bin as *Gale!*”

“... I am not *that* bad!” He said with a laugh.

Astarion giggled as he spun in victory over to a table. “Behold, my extensive traveling provisions,” he said, retrieving his breakfast, hairbrush, and pomade.

Wyll motioned to a corner of his room, “You can use my vanity if you need a...” he then trailed off, coughing to suppress a laugh.

The very amused vampire moved in a slow arc around Wyll, waiting and grinning, grinning and waiting, before finally saying, “What, my dear? Not going to finish that statement?”

“No, I do not think I will,” he said with smile and a shake of his head.

“I see now why you need me to come advise you, if you are just going to make such terribly embarrassing blunders,” he said, cackling.

“You did not have to sleep on the floor, Astarion; you should have woken me.”

“I have slept *far* worse places than the bedroom floor of a Grand Duke, darling. Do not guilt yourself with it. That will ruin my plans to guilt you with it *later.*”

“Another way in which I am a cruel ruler, I am afraid.”

Astarion did make use of Wyll’s vanity to do his hair, perching upon it as he unscrewed his pomade jar. “Now that we are both less apt to topple over, let me tell you of my past evening, and how you needn’t worry yourself about witless wizards, obnoxious orbs, or captivating crowns.”



Following Wyll into the meeting room, Astarion flinched, shielding his eyes. Only half the curtains were drawn, so the sunlight was securely contained, but the ones that were open still made it *awfully* bright.

“Oh, is it too bright for you?”

“No, I just broke into a spontaneous dance.” He glared at him for a moment before he had to turn his face away from the light once more.

“Here, take a seat, I’ll adjust the shades. There has to be a level that will be suitable for every eye in the room.”

“Oh, *must* there? Ever the optimist...” still squinting, he moved to a chair, selecting one next to the head of the table, facing away from the open windows as much as possible.

Soon enough, yet another half of the curtains were down, and more candles lit in order to compensate. Astarion grumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“Astarion, is this suitable for you now?”

He dropped his hands down with a sigh, looking around the room, fighting to keep his eyes open. “It will have to be... as you seem to insist on not drawing all of the drapery... nor do you have the thickest of fabrics in here either, I note.”

“Ah, no, those are restricted to the sleeping quarters. My apologies I—”

“Was not aware just how pathetic my vision is in the sunlight?”

“I was not going to phrase it like such...”

Astarion laughed, shaking his head. “Of course you were not, my dear, of course you were not... tell me, can you, with your pathetic *low* light vision, conduct your business in these conditions?”

Wyll picked up one of the documents off the table. “Yes, it is not ideal, however, but—”

“Wonderful!” Astarion grinned, clapping his hands together. “We shall *all* be rather miserable! The very essence of compromise. Ah, politics!”

Taking his seat at the head of the table, Wyll handed a copy of the meeting agenda to Astarion. “It hopefully will be a rather short meeting. We are starting much later in the day than we would normally meet, everyone will be eager to make it home for supper.”

“Oh, the travesty if we run long, imagine the lot of you not eating on time. *Such* a shame.” He snatched the paper, glancing over it.

“I have told others you are my invited guest, observing, and you may give your input. But do not feel as if you must speak up.” Wyll paused and then said, not a hint of mirth in his voice, “As you are well known for your silence.”

Astarion glared at Wyll for a long moment, then laughed, examining the other papers at his seat. “For me? Spared no expense, did you, a notebook *and* pen!” He picked up the pen, turning it over in his hands. “Oh, this is a rather nice model.”

Ugh, look at him. Impressed by things such as *pens*. It was as if he was, until recently, a kept slave, who was denied such things. Glancing around the table, he pondered how many of these fancy pens he could collect during the meeting.

Each chair also had a pitcher of ice water and glass. How fancy *indeed*. Astarion poured himself some water, if for nothing else, the novelty of the experience.

“Are you alright? Forgive my earlier jest, you have gone rather silent... and it has not escaped my attention your eyes are watering.”

“*I’m fine*,” he snapped back, with a frown, then forced himself to restate. “It is truly fine. My eyes are adjusting. They’ll stop that soon. I am simply... adjusting, myself. This is... rather new. All of this.” Astarion paused, then grinned impishly, leaning towards Wyll and tilting his head down slightly. “The only time I was in meeting rooms such as this prior well... I was typically nude. Except for perhaps a collar. For the leash you see! So that people could—”

“Point made, Astarion. Point made,” Wyll quickly said, ignoring Astarion’s cackling and the flush on his own face. “It is almost time to begin, allow me to give you a quick primer on the other members of the advising committee.”

“Wyll, dear, there’s a *reason* I call everyone darling, you do realize, yes? I could not easily recall any of your names for days...” He paused. “Except for Shadowheart, because, honestly, how could one forget such a *nom de plume*?”

With a smile, Wyll picked up a pen, uncapped it, and handed it to Astarion, who took it automatically, tilting his head in confusion. “I suggest you take notes then.” His confusion turned to a scowl, but he complied, opening up his notebook, sighing while jotting down notes when the quick primer on the other members and rules of procedure began.



The meeting was well underway, opening preamble long past, which included Astarion’s *very* brief introduction to the others. Wyll simply said he was trusted friend, and that was that, much to Astarion’s surprise. Minor small talk then occurred, no one mentioned the dim lighting in the room, but he caught the others stealing glances his way, when they thought he would not notice. The vampire made sure to take a drink of water during a few of those occasions. So many people thought his condition prevented him from even imbibing water! Fools.

“It is fitting I am not the only elf present for this next item.”

The statement obviously directed at him roused his attention; Astarion sat up straighter.

“A missive from Evereska’s Hill Elders was delivered to my office.” The woman speaking was clearly a full high elf, light blond hair styled in a very fancy and elegant up-do, dressed in the latest of

fashions. She was the head of ... labour was it? Close enough. Something to do with laws concerning employment matters.

“Rare for them to contact us; not rare for them to eschew official procedure. Are they requesting an elvish Grand Duke?” Wyll commented with a shake of his head and a chuckle.

“If only. They want us to adopt evereskan policy for the elven age of majority. Preferably for all elves, but they are ‘willing to accept’ the age of one century for adulthood applying only to high elves, and if need be, only moon elves within the group.”

Astarion barked out a laugh before contributing, “What, are the sticks in the mud upset too many of their ‘*children*’ run off to have *actual lives* instead of clinging to mummy and pappy’s legs for decades more?” All heads turned towards him, silence descending.

“Um. Hello. What? I had nothing to *say* before.”

Wyll softly said, “Typically we allow the speaker to finish introducing the matter, giving their position, before others comment.”

“Oh.”

“For what it is worth, his position is the same as mine. Though he phrased it more colorfully. Baldur’s Gate is open to all to prove themselves, there is no need to adopt an artificially high age of majority. It would only weaken us. This has been a request time and time again, they send it, always to the highest elf in power, every time there is a change in leadership in the city. I suggest at the full parliamentary meeting we draft a firm refusal. I now open the matter up for discussion.”

“*I think we should look into this matter more,*” said a middle-aged human man. The money man, head of the treasury and budget supervisor. Wyll had not said anything negative about him, but he *had* positive things to say about all the others seated at the table, this hadn’t escaped Astarion’s attention. “There’s something this poor pitiful *human* finds very interesting about such a proposal being rejected by two elves that would not be sitting at this table if it was adopted.”

The labour secretary looked most incensed, glaring at the human. Astarion took this moment to speak again, “While I *greatly* appreciate the flattery, I was born over two centuries ago.” He put on his most charming smile, tilting his head and raising his eyebrows just so.

There was a clatter as the only half elf at the table almost dropped her water glass. She muttered apologies as she took a drink, her hand suddenly shaking. Odd. What was her role again? Something to do with trade? Astarion looked her over, but nothing at all came to his mind, so he disregarded her once more, smiling at the table as a whole.

“You look... remarkably young for someone claiming to be that age,” the elf woman said, “I am just twelve years shy of my first century, I was sure we were roughly the same age.”

Wyll interceded, “Astarion is telling the truth regarding his years. I am verifying that in case it matters for the debate.”

“Staying out of the sun is good for your skin,” he commented, buffing his nails on his shirt before examining them.

“Lord Winterpeak, does that change your criticism? Knowing that one *far* my senior agrees with my position?”

“No. This should be debated by the parliament as a whole. Baldur’s Gate is, at its heart, a human city, we should use this *tragic* reset of our governing body to evaluate if we are being used as a... training ground by *children*. No offense, merely stating my opinion; shared by many, who deserve to have their voices heard.” He smiled at the elven woman.

Before Astarion could speak, he felt Wyll’s hand on his shoulder, the man softly and evenly saying, “I would like to hear what our other three members think of this issue.”

“I see no reason to change our policy due to some pointy eared foreigners,” the only human woman in the room said. She was in charge of city defense, if Astarion recalled correctly. Which he was roughly, oh, 80 percent sure he did.

“Uh... I...” the half elf stammered, then took a deep breath, sitting up straighter and speaking out stronger, “I agree. It would be a dangerous precedent.”

“I think both sides raised good points.” The final member of this little crew spoke up; rather a mountain of a human man, in charge of... what was the word Wyll had used? Astarion could not recall it, the man was occupied with the day to day lives of citizens; making sure the streets were not *completely* overrun with orphans, public charities were stocked with food, that sort of thing.

Winterpeak cleared his throat.

The large man added, “We should debate it at the next full meeting.”

How transparent, ugh, there was a *much* higher level of subterfuge at similar sorts of meetings held at the Szarr palace.

“So it shall be,” Wyll said, “Moving on to our next—”

“Wait! What are you saying? Most of us realized it was a bloody stupid proposition! That was four to two! Three to two, even if I do not count for the tally!”

The elven woman sighed, “Policy is if two members support any item moving to the main floor, then that is the end of our private debate on the matter, all further discussion will be left for the public forum.”

“That’s also bloody stupid! Who came up with that fool idea?”

“My father.”

“That does *nothing* to change my opinion.” This statement drew a couple of gasps from around the table.

Wyll sternly said, “Astarion. This is our policy.”

Astarion grumbled, hunching down in his seat, opening up his notebook to busy himself with making mindless marks on paper if that was how it was going to be, ignoring whatever was the next item raised for discussion.

Two faux pas already, and the bloody meeting had barely started. Three, if you count how he had forgotten there was a *real* elf in the room, who would clock Astarion’s age as roughly shy of a century, as they always did.

Part of him wished he actually had written down the rules of procedure Wyll had rattled off at him, rather than elvish profanity. These people's names too, while he was at it. The rest of him still did not care. The bigger part, honestly.

He was in the middle of designing a coat he had no intention of ever truly making when his ears twitched, picking up very quiet elvish. Slightly lifting his head, he confirmed; the elven labour woman was whispering, so softly no one else would be able to hear her.

"I don't know elvish," he whispered back, just as softly, going back to his design the instant he saw the shocked expression on her face. No further message came. Astarion supposed he wasn't worth gossiping with if he wasn't enough of a *proper* elf for her.

It was always oh so very amusing when humans assumed he was fluent in elvish, but when the same assumption came from someone who had ears just as pointy as his own... rather less amusing. Roughly zero amusing. There had to be *some* reason he didn't know elvish, had never learned it in the far ago time, when he drew breath for more than prattle, but it was lost to him, just as so much else...

"In any case, before such an undertaking, the repeated incidents at the Grand Aviary will need to be further investigated," Wyll said, drawing Astarion's attention once more. What in the hells were they talking about *now*? He really should try to pay better attention. He wouldn't, most likely, but he recognized he should try.

The large man sighed. "You're right. It would be a shame to establish a zoo only to have the animals stolen out from under us."

Astarion grinned and oh so innocently asked, "Oh, troubles at the aviary? Shame."

Wyll stared at Astarion.

Astarion grinned back.

Wyll narrowed his eyes.

Astarion grinned even more.

"Still, we should keep this prospect in mind, using some of the space cleared by the attack for a zoo would be a positive use of our resources." The half elf said, rescuing Wyll from his growing suspicions.

"A zoo is *such* a lovely idea! I suggest you keep bears well in stock. Oh, and some elk. That's something I've always wanted to try... to *see*!" Astarion cheerfully contributed. Wyll nudged his leg with a foot under the table, eliciting a giggle from the vampire.

A snort from across the table drew his attention to that Winterpeak fellow again. Astarion made sure to give him a most charming smile, blocking the tips of his fangs with his lower lip.

"Pray tell us, Grand Duke Ravengard, how do you plan on acquiring enough materials for this project, we are already in danger of running low on stone due to your sudden *mysterious* reluctance to continue our relationship with Lord Pendry. Need I remind you that all other feasible sources of good quality stone will drain far more coin from the cities rapidly depleting coffers?"

Astarion's fangs were even more hidden now, behind a deep frown.

“Not as much as you first suspected,” the half elf woman said, “I’ve have not yet finished collecting all the needed data, but preliminary findings regarding alternative sources for construction materials suggest we needn’t rely solely on Pendry in order to find reasonable costs. If that is the direction we decide upon in the end.”

“I motion we table this discussion for now, and wait for the report that our chair of commerce has reminded us she is actively working hard on,” said Wyll.

“You have given us no compelling reason, or reason at all, for this change. Why should we bother with all this effort? Lord Pendry’s quarries have provided stone to the city for decades,” the human woman countered.

Winterpeak nodded at her then added, “Exactly. Why must we alienate a fellow Baldurian and seek to trade with foreigners? This is a mystifying course of action you propose, Ravengard. Especially considering the recent losses we have had, so many of our grand noble peers lost, we are fortunate Lord Pendry was not among the deceased.”

Astarion swallowed once. Gods, could this Winterprick man *please* stop saying *that name*. Oh, how he hated always being right, he had *told* Wyll, that foolish man, how much trouble he would find for himself if he committed to this ridiculous plan. Astarion should have kept his mouth shut, lied to his naive friend, told him *all* the patriars involved in the *unpleasantness* had been slain.

“Ugh!” The high elf woman threw her hands up. “It would make sense if you stopped to *think* for once. You should try it. You never know, you might find you like it.”

Wyll cleared his throat.

Once he was sure he had everyone’s attention, he said, “As I told you all during our last meeting, I can see no reason we should not explore our options. I do not wish to rely on a single supplier. Not for this, or other key resources.”

“If you would but speak with Lord Pendry, he would put you at ease. Yet you refused my offer to invite the man here today, for this oddly timed meeting. Would you refuse to speak to him if he was suddenly present?” asked Winterpeak.

Astarion’s head whipped to the door, staring at it, fearing it would open, revealing the subject of this discussion. He felt the room begin to dim, heard a page ripped from his notebook, by his own hand, as if it was some distance away.

Then he felt something else; Wyll’s foot again upon his own, this time not a correcting nudge, more a centering presence. Astarion stopped drifting away from himself, nodding his thanks at Wyll, sitting up a little straighter.

“Speaking with him would not change my view. We would be wise to, if I may draw on a somewhat archaic example, not to put all our Ancuníns in one carriage,” quipped Wyll, much to the amusement of almost everyone else at the meeting table, the tension draining as they chuckled.

One of the greatest advantages to not needing to breathe, Astarion had found over the centuries, was you were able to simply *stop* all of that nonsense on occasions. Much preferable to a cough or increase in breath rate, such things apt to draw unwanted attention. With a carefully curated neutral expression he tilted his head to one side and raised a single eyebrow at Wyll.

“Ah, my apologies friend, rather an inner circle term. The Ancunín family was an elvish noble family, known in the gate since almost its founding.”

“Oh, *were* they now?” he asked, just a bit too quickly, grateful his heart was forevermore still.

“Sadly, the family line is completely extinguished, I do not recall all of the details, but during a pilgrimage to Evereska their train derailed. All recognized lineage bearers were aboard.”

“How utterly foolish of them.” Astarion cleaned nothing at all out from under his nails then casually asked, “How long ago did this hilarious example of shortsightedness occur?”

“Roughly a century ago, if memory serves.”

“Over that, by a score at least. Around the time of the previous plague of Bhaalspawn,” the high elf corrected, then added, “Honestly, I’ve always found it a rather thoughtless saying...”

Astarion *MmmmHrrrm*’ed, with a stupid closed lip smile, as he fought the urge to burst into hysterical laughter and then start draining as many people in the room as he could. Starting with the Winterprick.

“Bad memories of those times?” The high elf asked him.

“With all your *many* years, I would think you would know this already. Being from the city, as was claimed,” said the Winterprick, each word increasing his culinary appeal.

Answering both at once Astarion flatly said, “I was rather indisposed during the excitement.”

He blanked his face and jotted down some notes to himself. “Well, that’s more than enough time spent educating me on the minutia of long extinct noble families that do not have any relevance to the current situation nor anyone in this room at present. I’ll let you return to explaining what you meant with your little silly analogy,” he said with a very well-practiced casual dismissive wave.

“By determining other possible sources, we will not be caught flat footed if disaster does strike. If Lord Pendry had been slain, who would control his quarries? What if they did not wish to trade with us? Honor the previous contracts? Without an alternative source, we would be, well, as my father would say, up a certain creek without a paddle.”

That started another round of debate, which Astarion at first tried to follow, but soon gave up. He stared down at his notebook barely seeing the random marks he was making. He had given up on designing anything, his mind oddly blank under the weight of this Ancunín minutia, instead writing the letter A again and again, in every script he could recall.

This time it was Winterpeak’s annoyingly high-pitched voice that broke through Astarion’s shield of ignoring. “I’m tired of this farce, Ravengard. Simply admit that you are very eager to look to the Underdark as a source of stone.”

“Lord Winterpeak, I cannot admit to something that I do not understand.”

“It is rather transparently obvious, what with your new *little friend* here.”

Astarion raised an eyebrow, letting his honest bafflement show on his face.

Winterpeak motioned at the drawn curtains. “I realize now why this meeting is taking place in such dim conditions and why you were so opposed to the evereskan request. Albino drow are very

commonly sent to the surface to spy upon us. Sending a man, much rarer... they must be getting smarter down there.” He leaned forwards and stage-whispered, “If you had a glamour upon your eyes, it has expired.”

There was much muttering in the room, as others took note of Astarion’s red eyes.

Astarion opened his mouth, but before he could speak Wyll interjected, “He’s not a drow. Not that such heritage would be a negative, but you are mistaken in your assessment.”

“I promise you, no drow blood is *currently* flowing in my veins,” Astarion could not resist adding, thinking over his most recent hunts.

Very quickly Wyll spoke again, “I promise you, there were no drow owned quarries on the list for consideration.”

“Not a one,” the half elf added. Astarion noted she was staring at him once more, with a grunt he leaned back in his chair and looked down at the table. Perhaps he should invest in a glamour for his eye colour; he had considered it, but discarded the idea when it came time to select a hue. Despite his best efforts, he could not manage to work up any ire towards Wyll for not considering this aspect of his little visit.

Winterpeak was silent for a moment, then slowly said, “Very well, let us wait for this report.” Unnoticed by Astarion, he kept his eyes on him, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

The high elf said, “Wy—Lord Ravengard, this talk of stone reminds me. You’ve put forth plans for statues concerning heroes lost in the battle fighting the invaders, but what of the citizenry?”

“That is an excellent suggestion, we should have a grand monument for all. My condolences once more on the loss of your fiancée.”

“Some of those lost were more important than others, we should commemorate lost nobles by name,” said the human woman in charge of the cities defense.

Winterpeak leaned forwards, addressing the men sitting across from him more than the woman next to him. “Indeed. At very least their last names, many noble houses have suffered losses in these recent times, Tillerturn, Eomane, Whitburn...”

Astarion could not hide his reaction to that list of names, staring at the man, eyes getting wider and wider as he kept going. Why was he listing *those* names? What did he *know!*? As delighted as Astarion had been to discover they were dead, being reminded in this manner was not comforting.

Wyll put his hand on Astarion’s shoulder. Perhaps one of the most welcome touches he could remember, in all his unlife.

“And, *of course*, we cannot forget Szarr,” he finished, staring directly at the pale elf.

Astarion only remained in his seat due to the centering hand still on his shoulder, pressing down, giving a reassuring squeeze. Wyll’s face was still neutral, but he could not hide his rapidly beating heart from the vampire.

“It is so unfortunate, Lord Szarr survived Gortash’s betrayal only to die during the attack on the city! From what the rumors say it wasn’t even mind flayers that took him from us, but common looters who broke into his mansion during the chaos,” the large human said, “Such a tragic loss for the city,

senseless and random; why must we turn on each other? The last of the Szarr family... the end of such a noble legacy. We must remember his generosity.”

Astarion took a moment to imagine a huge red tiefling slicing this very large and very stupid man’s head open with an axe. Then she could decapitate the other smaller, but no less infuriating human man. This made him feel roughly one percent better, which was *something*.

His eyes darted around the room, he did not recognize any of these people, no matter how much he wracked his brain. They were never guests of any type of event at the Szarr palace, not even the man singing his praises; a giant moron through and through, echoing whatever it was this Winterpeak proposed. Astarion understood this type of man very well; a yes man who never did and would *never* do anything of note, not worth further scrutiny.

It was the other one’s game that baffled and concerned him; Lord Winterpeak, not even his name was familiar to Astarion. The noble obviously knew of his connection to *Cazador*, but what would he gain from making sure Astarion knew so? He was especially off put by the smug smile on the man’s face and how he kept *looking* at him.

Wyll calmly said, “I will prepare a list of lost parliamentary members for a memorial to be presented at our next meeting. You will find some names absent.”

Even after all the push back and suspicion levied at him today, this foolish devil-touched man, one of the most powerful in the entire city, was still committed to keeping his word to the nothing that was this undead former slave. Astarion could not help but chuckle softly, what a naive prince of a man...

“With that, our duties here at present are complete. Motion to adjourn?” Wyll said, picking up his pen in preparation.

“Hold that motion.” Winterpeak said, “I have one more bit of new business to introduce, sir, if you would be so kind.”

Wyll glanced at Astarion, who nodded slightly, signaling that he was fine. Try as he might, he could not be annoyed at the man for checking, he did feel rather spent; but despite everything he did still feel safe in the former monster hunter’s presence.

“Forgive me for possibly speaking out of turn, but I do feel it is very important. Could you please explain to us the proposed items in the budget line for an expedition to the Underdark? Including setting up supply lines...”

“You *are* out of turn, that was a preliminary inquiry, it was not forwarded to your office for input. I am not nearly ready to send the motion to the full parliament, thus it has no relevance to this council’s purpose.”

“The Underdark?” The large human man asked, “Why would we be concerned about the Underdark?”

“Why indeed? The answer might clear up multiple lingering questions at once. Such as what special expertise our newest *fellow* is contributing to this collective...” Winterpeak said, standing up, meeting Astarion’s glare with a smirk. “And if the rumors relating to a large number of *vampire spawn* originating from our fair city being freed to run into said Underdark are correct.”

Wyll kept his expression blank, watching the man casually step away from the table, as the others started all talking at once, shouting out many overlapping questions, concerns, and statements of

disbelief. Wyll coughed, once, firmly, and the voices fell silent. Taking a moment to compose himself, he likewise stood, moving closer to Astarion.

“As you have forced my hand, very well. Yes, the rumors are true. After I returned to the city, during my efforts fighting against the Absolute, we discovered a large number of Baldurian citizens that had been infected with the vampiric curse. This man,” he paused to motion at Astarion, “assisted me in freeing them. He was instrumental in their freedom, in truth, it is more accurate to say *I* assisted *him*.”

If only Astarion was not so nervous, he would roll his eyes. He resolved to do so as soon as this rubbish meeting was over.

After waiting a moment for Astarion to speak, Wyll continued, “They are in need of our aid, no different from the rest of our people impacted by this disaster.”

“They are not *people*. They are monsters,” replied Winterpeak.

“This matter is also not being introduced for debate. They need help. We *will* provide it. I will provide it. No matter if this council agrees with me or not.”

“They require *extermination*. Your bleeding heart can think of it as easing their suffering. It would not be difficult. Allow me to demonstrate!” He tugged firmly on a rope.

The largest set of curtains jerked up and away, sending sunlight streaming into the room.

Astarion leapt out of his chair, skin already smoking when he hit the floor, scrambling towards the remaining shadows.

Wyll vaulted over the table, frantically working to restore the dislodged drapery, struggling with the jammed mechanism.

Astarion threw his body into the nearest patch of shade, groaning as he started to assess the damage.

Winterpeak ran from curtain to curtain, flinging them all open, the west facing windows flooding the chamber with late afternoon light.

His refuge only *just* found vanished, the vampire screamed at the second volley of biting sun, frantically searching for any remaining safety, knocking over chairs much too small to hide behind, though he did try.

Crouched behind a chair, managing to shield his face, if nothing else, he panted, looking around for his next move; realizing with dread that he had jammed himself right into the corner farthest away from the door. So much horrible sunlight was now between him and the blissfully dark hallway.

Whimpering, he looked down at his smoking hands, charred bone already visible at his fingertips.

I am going to die in a blasted meeting room.

There was a hand on his shoulder!

He hissed, reflectively, jerking away, yelping as that put him even more in the sunlight.

It was the high elven council woman, looking down at him with wide eyes, her hand raised, frozen for a moment.

But only a moment.

She grabbed his arm again, much more firmly, and stood up, jerking him back the way he came.

Astarion hissed and struggled, breaking free again, falling to the floor, then stopped, blinking as he realized there was a distinct *lack* of further burning sensations.

Wyll had successfully lowered the largest curtain, bathing much of the room in shadows again, he breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing Astarion was safe, then promptly spun to advance upon Lord Winterpeak.

The latter man attempted to stand his ground, but found himself stumbling backwards into the wall under the force of Grand Duke Ravengard's glare. Shrinking back more when he closed another curtain, keeping his eyes on Winterpeak the entire time.

The hand was on Astarion's shoulder again, this time he refrained from hissing and jerking back, merely looking up, shaking slightly.

"Will you be alright now?" The high elf asked, kneeling down next to him. "Would a healing potion help? Healing magic doesn't work on your kind, correct? Do you *need* blood?"

He stared back up at her, mouth slightly agape, skin letting off final wisps of smoke, unable to fully process what she was asking him.

"*That thing was sitting at the table with us?! You let a monster in here?!*" the human woman shouted, erupting from her chair and racing out the door. Once she was in the hall her cries were loud enough to be easily heard in the room: "*Guards!!! Monster!! Guards!!! Vampire!*"

Ah, yes, that was the much more expected reaction.

"*No guards!*" Wyll shouted, his voice booming out into the hall, as well as projected throughout the public areas of the estate due to the sending stone on his necklace.

Astarion clambered onto the table, ignoring the pain in his healing fingers; on all fours, he scurried towards the big man, who was still petrified with fright in his seat.

The vampire lunged at him, jaws snapping at the air inches in front of the dullard's face.

His chair clattered to the floor and his screams accompanied his rapid footfalls as he, likewise, fled. Smartest thing he did all meeting, as far as his theoretical assailant was concerned. Astarion knew he must look quite the sight indeed, skin charred and blistered by the sun, bloodshot eyes, and wild hair; out of place in a most dramatic fashion.

*Yes, run, run from the **monster!***

Smiling, he took a moment to check in on the other members of this oh so wonderful advising council. The half elf woman was still sitting at the table, writing in her notes of all things. His odd savior of an elf was watching him, but it was concern he saw in her eyes, not fear.

He whipped his body around at footsteps, finding Lord Winterpeak attempting to escape the room; unfortunately, his escape route took him rather near the table. Unfortunate for the patriarch anyway, not the vampire.

“A monster, am I? Very well, I aim to please,” he growled, scrambling down the length of the table, the exposed bone of his fingers clacking as he charged directly at the Winterprick, knocking papers and other objects to the floor.

Mere moments away from fangs to neck contact Wyll’s voice boomed out once more, “*Astarion!*”

It was too late to stop, but leaping *over* his target was doable. He sailed over the patriar, landing gracefully behind him. The twit stared down at him in horror; Astarion bared his teeth at him in response. Winterpeak tripped over his own feet trying to escape, banging his face on the table as he fell.

“Astarion, if you are not in need of prompt medical attention, please wait in the hall. I will formally adjourn this meeting shortly. Lord Winterpeak was correct. We do have more items to discuss,” said Wyll, barely restrained fury in his tone.

Wyll’s expression killed any retort Astarion was preparing. The young man was furious; Astarion had seen him *very* angry before, during their journey, but this clearly was in the top ten on the ranking board of Angry Blade of Frontiers Looks.

If not top five.

Aimed at Astarion.

A stake through the heart would be preferable.

Astarion’s glare gave way to a frown as he wordlessly made his way to the hall.

The high elf woman held a healing potion out for him, he took it, nodding the smallest of thanks to her before he slipped out into the hallway, pulling the door shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Astarion, maybe you should have held off on the vampire jokes? Three was just too many!!

Eh, I’ve had worst first days at a job.

This took a while.

Whoops!

I was writing other stuff was part of it, peep my other works if you haven't - there's a cool Jaheira and Astarion 1 shot set in this same canon in there. But also the meeting scene took a while for me to figure out how to write it. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, I mostly just have Astarion talking to One Person at a Time. There were a lot more than that there! AAAAA. Also I had to make these people up! Scream!

I have no one to blame but myself.

Another thing I did was like plot out Where This is Going In more Detail, so I have the number of chapters sussed out now! I am bad at thinking how much stuff I can cover in one chapter a lot, soooooooo... it might get more than that. But! EVENTS have been figured out. (example: the next chapter was part of THIS one at first but no i think this is a good spot to end on. I will not drop more 15k chapters of talking on you again. Maybe.)

The meeting scene was such a bear to write that I spent some time working on the subsequent chapters, so much less time for the next one, I promise!

Chapter 14: After The Meeting

Chapter Summary

Astarion's first shift may be over but it's not time to leave! Partially because of that damn life-giving orb in the sky and partially because there's OH SO MANY PEOPLE TO TALK TO NOW. Time for talkies!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Almost as soon as the door to the meeting chamber shut, Astarion heard raised voices. He could not make out what was being said, or even be sure who was speaking. Some form of enchantment on the room, he surmised; he knew his ears had not been *that* damaged by sunlight. One could tell it was occupied, but yet could not (easily) eavesdrop on the room where it happened.

The worst of both worlds really, why must he know there was such shouting behind him, no doubt Wyll being one of them, without being able to hear what was being said *about* him. For he was certain, the vampire was the subject of the current discussion.

He could not even *leave*! Not easily. Astarion glared down the hallway at the sunlight streaming in through the uncovered windows. Blast it! Those shades were supposed to stay drawn! Wyll really did need to do a better job disciplining his servants, look at these slipshod efforts. As to be expected with such a gentle master of the house. Spare the lash, spoil the help and all.

With a sigh, Astarion sat in the corner of the hallway, between the doors of the meeting room and whatever superfluous room was catty corner to it. One hand clutched the all but forgotten healing potion tightly as he drew his legs up and rested his forehead on his knees.

Why had he done that?! He would have been in *such* an unassailable position of righteousness! A poor pathetic perfect victim, burnt by the light of the sun, when he had been *such* a good little *boy* and done nothing but sat in his chair during the entire bloody meeting. Even offering contributions!

But no, he had to make a whole *production* out of the matter, climb up on the table, snarling like an animal, hissing, even delivering pithy lines! Frowning deeply, he mocked his oh so distant past self, muttering into his knees, "*A monster, am I? Ugh... how cliché...*"

He just... he had been so frightened, at times; at each name or horridly familiar gaze upon him. Astarion was so *tired* of being afraid. Why must *he* be the only one to quake in his boots? He lifted his head up and peered at his shoes. Quake in his fashionable loafers.

Was it so wrong to want *them* to be afraid, instead? For once? Was that too much to ask? These men who wanted for nothing in their lives. They would *never* know fear such as had been Astarion's entire world, for oh so very long, but oh, to even make them feel a portion of it, for a moment... that was all he wanted.

Fine, yes, he was going to drain that Lord Winterpeak man to death, but really, Astarion didn't think that was too much to ask either. The prick had burnt him with the sun, so he could heal him with his

blood.

Thoughts of healing reminded him of the potion that would do exactly that, where had it gotten to? He quickly found it in his hand, helpfully enough. He uncorked it with a bitter giggle, shifting to sit cross legged.

He was already well towards the mend, the damn itching made that abundantly clear, he didn't *need* any assistance to heal, neither blood nor potion. It was normal sunlight that had struck him, after all. Not nearly as hazardous to his unlife as the celestially imbued radiance emitted from his mace that Jaheira so cruelly had *stolen* from him. However, this potion would allow the irritating process to be over and done with oh so much faster.

Now where best to use this little gift?

His hands certainly still looked rather frightful, they took the brunt of the exposure, no doubt. To confirm this assumption, he opened his mouth and wiggled his jaw about; he certainly did not feel as if his cheeks were apt to split open.

Hands it is!

Popping the bottle open, he let the cap fall to the ground, the rest of the container followed after he poured the slightly viscous liquid over his hands. He vigorously rubbed them together, his injured hands rapidly absorbing the potion. Astarion held them up, watching as they healed even faster than his natural healing, exposed bone quickly covered by skin, then his nails regenerating; elongating and becoming sharpened claws. Astarion shivered slightly at the strange, but not unpleasant sensation. He chuckled at his newly formed claws, the poor useless things, he must make sure to trim them again soon.

He flexed his fingers, clicking his claws against each other. When they grew back, they always looked so strong and sharp. As capable as those belonging to any other vampire spawn! Only to fail utterly if he tried to use them, breaking under the slightest force, harming him more than anyone else. He always suspected they were weaker than even a living elf's sharpened nails would be.

Looking down at his pathetic claws, he tried very hard not to feel as if his efforts in this lonely freedom of his were a more elaborate version of what his claws experienced, time and time again. Maybe the whole of him was as brittle and useless as they were...

The door suddenly opened, jerking him out of his unwanted pondering. He stared up, ready to bolt down the hall, through the gauntlet of illumination, if need be.

The high elf woman walked out, quickly shutting the door behind her, she looked down the hall scanning for something, taking a couple of steps before turning enough to spot Astarion. "Oh! There you are."

"Hello." He waved, peering up at her.

"Are you well? Well, not *well* but... er..."

Putting an end to this awkward moment, he stood up, holding his hands out, then flipped them back and forth a couple of times. "Thank you. For the potion."

"Wow... they look uninjured!" She blinked in amazement for a few moments, tilting her head to the side. Her eyes moved to his face; she wordlessly mouthed *wow* again before saying, "I can see your

skin healing before my eyes...”

Astarion gave a very practiced slow spin, then deployed classic Charming Smile Five at her, “Like what you see?” He waggled his eyebrows before coughing into a fist. “Ah, another, more serious query, for you, my dear... what *was* your name, again? If you would be so kind?”

“Maiela. Nothing else. Simply Maiela.” She smiled, then bit her lip, hesitatingly saying, “Um...”

“I may not know elvish, but rest assured, the habit of our people to embrace the elegance of the mononym *is* known to me. Known to me *very* well indeed.”

“Just Astarion, then? I assume,” she asked, smile returned.

“Yes,” he said, plastering Charming Smile Three on his face this time.

He imagined how much more *exciting* this already oh so *exciting* day could become if he answered differently. If he told her his family name. But no, that was enough excitement for one day, thank you very much.

Besides... *his* last name? Really? How foolish to even consider it such. Astarion Ancunin was long gone. It was exactly as had been stated; the family line was completely extinguished. One of the sons of the house was deeply unfortunate in that his corpse was being puppeted around still, but that made no difference to the truth of the matter.

He had been reluctant to breathe his surname to any, for as long as he could remember, even though *his name* was all that he had left. Astarion previously concluded that in itself was the reason. He had *nothing* but his name, why should he be expected to share the meager pathetic totality of himself. Let him keep some secret that was not shameful and heartrending. Only sharing it with *her*, in all his long memory.

Perhaps though, there had been another reason, the truth unknown, even to himself. Nudging about the edges of one of the innumerable voids of his memory, he was sure of it now. The fear that he would reveal to someone his mysterious surname, rattling in the gutters of his memory, to be greeted with *recognition*.

Astarion pushed such speculation to the side. Plenty of time for such rumination later, he chastised himself, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Don’t worry about *him*. Guards will soon escort him out. Wy—Lord Ravengard wished for me to tell you, while he settled matters,” said Maiela.

He was so out of practice, letting his mask of charm and surface pleasantries drop without meaning to. Luckily, she misattributed the source of his expression.

“Know *Wyllyam* well, do you? Perhaps from his hornless youth?”

She looked most enjoyably off balance at his question, stammering out her answer, “Ah, no... but... um. I didn’t know him before, not really, but he has been a refreshing...” She shook her head, trailing off, then starting with a much stronger tone of voice, “*This* Lord Ravengard is exactly what our city needs. A refreshing change.”

“The one embracing change is an elf, while those opposed are human... how ironic.” He raised an eyebrow, tilting his head to the side. “I think? It’s so hard to properly tell at times...”

“I was always much better at maths than matters of letters in school, so we’ll allow it.” She smiled, then said. “This was not the worst meeting ever, I have to say. Hopefully our next is a bit less exciting! But I should go now... I have a dinner to get to.”

“Ah yes, enjoy your ability to walk blissfully through this hallway!” He motioned, then said with a laugh, “Go now, flaunt it in front of me!”

Maiela did exactly that, her high heels clicking on the wooden floor, soon she was out of sight.

What a strange high elf this Maiela was indeed. He tested her with the ‘our people’ comment; she passed with flying colors! Not any hint of objection to the notion that he, one of the vile undead, counted as her kinfolk.

Astarion blinked as he fully processed her final words. *Our* next meeting. She had just... assumed he would be in attendance...

He stood there and blinked a few more times, churning the realization around in his mind. Only to stop when another realization interrupted.

Why hadn’t he asked her to shut the shades?! Why hadn’t she thought about it?!

He could do naught but laugh. Pair of pointy eared fools...

Said pointy ears twitched slightly: several heartbeats fast approaching, soon accompanied by footsteps. The sort he was very familiar with; boots marching in time. Guards. He flattened himself against the wall, grateful he was not wearing garish colors today, having opted for a brown and cream ensemble.

Astarion then felt quite the fool once more. Maiela scant few minutes ago *told* him the guards were coming. After a moment’s thought, he decided his position was the correct choice, in truth, and remained totally motionless, melding into the shadows against the wall.

A trio of guards entered the hallway, marched right past the silent and still vampire to enter the meeting room. Astarion stayed right where he was, not moving a single undead muscle.

Not even five minutes later they emerged, Lord Winterpeak between two of the guards, each holding one of his upper arms in a firm grip. Astarion smiled, noting the man was sporting a fresh bruise around one eye.

“You will be hearing from my solicitor, Ravengard! This is patently ridiculous!” The Winterprick sniveled out at the closing door. The guards jerked him forwards.

“Let go of me! I am perfectly capable of walking.”

His escorts did not reply, continuing to frog march him down the hallway.

After waiting a minute, just in case, Astarion stepped away from the wall, smile still on his face. *Wyll hit the man?* How utterly unbelievable!

Wait... maybe he hadn’t? The bastard’s face had hit the table when he fell...

Ugh, that was the more likely option; Astarion had a most grand and wondrous imagination indeed, but even he would be hard pressed to believe that noble fool would throw a punch outside of true battle.

Where *was* that noble fool, anyway? What other business could he possibly have in that blasted room? Hadn't everybody left? Was he so taken with this new vocation that he was holding court alone?

Oh. Wait. The half elven woman. The one who had seemed to find Astarion rather off-putting, but had not fled from the room in terror when the truth of what he was had been revealed. She was in charge of... something or other important, probably. He pressed his ear to the door and was rewarded with only the barest hint of voices, but it was enough to confirm the two were having some form of discussion.

He stepped back away from the door with a grunt of disapproval, frowning deeply. Enough was enough! Astarion didn't have to stand here like some sort of pet, pathetically waiting for his *master*!

He would go pathetically wait in Wyll's chambers instead. The sun had shifted enough in the sky, the sunlight no longer fully spanned the width of the hallway. Barely. He could safely move through if he pressed his body against the far wall as much as possible.

Perhaps he'd move all Wyll's furniture two inches to the side. Or swap the contents of his drawers about. Maybe sew his socks shut! Astarion quickly determined the last idea was his favorite, but he could be *very* efficient, there might even be time for multiple options!

If he did not simply take a nap instead. He sighed as he edged past the first patch of sunlight. This was *such* a mistake. How could he have ever thought he could do something like this, something so *normal*. Gods, look at him; shimmying past a fucking sunbeam, so tired he felt ready for bed already, and it was not even time for his night to normally begin! How ridiculous to think he could flip his schedule so quickly.

This would not be an issue if he was a *normal* spawn, not this *broken* version. Ugh. How he hated that name. Reason first among many being it was likely what *he* would have personally dubbed the condition. How dare the universe treat him as poorly as he treated himself inside the privacy of his own mind!

One sunbeam down, four to go. He took a moment to enjoy the darkness between the windows, where he did not have to focus so intently. Sunlight did not conjure the same unquenchable fear as running water, but it was not pleasant to be mere millimeters from contact for any length of time. Steeling himself, he began shimmying once again.

As much as he did *like* resting, now that he had some time to consider the possibility of only having to do so every other day, resting less *did* have its appeal. Such as today, when he slept *so* poorly, he resorted to trancing, only to *immediately* see that godsdamn griffin again in his reverie, so that was the end of *that*. Hrm. He now knew a *living* high elf who deigned to speak with him, despite the taint upon his soul. Perhaps he could ask her at some point if it *was* true that he should be able to influence the memories he revisited, or if that was merely a misconception he had picked up somewhere.

She might not even laugh at him! Well, if she was *such good* friends with Wyll, she probably actually would not. He sighed again as he stepped into the shadow between sunbeams two and three. Wyll. Now that Astarion had some time to reflect, he realized it was likely he was not the target of Wyll's rage, despite his somewhat *less* than stellar performance at the meeting itself. He found now he could barely remember half of the items discussed, if even that many. Gods, the way the session ended was *such* a disaster, surely resulting in so much more work for that unbelievably virtuous man. Now suffering for the crime of wanting to help this decidedly *not* virtuous broken spawn.

Oh fuck, there 's his father.

Ulder Ravengard was walking down the hallway, directly towards Astarion, or more likely, the meeting room behind him. Astarion gave serious consideration to draining him dry and then leaving the city forever, to at least get some good out of this wretched day.

Honestly, why were so many people such big fans of his? It was a mystery to the vampire. During his slavery years, Astarion did not spend much time considering the man; he was powerful, beloved, and had turned down each and every invitation to the Szarr Palace. Including his and Dalyria's personal attempts. Even *after* he lost his wife.

Cazador had *not* been pleased by the repeated rejections, to say the least, casting them both into either the kennels or the yard after each failure. The bastard was still frustrated with his inability to sink his claws into the man far after the punishments were over, which was always amusing to watch. Additionally, the Flaming Fist had, for a time, been a bit less apt to start roughing up citizens, or more importantly vampire spawn, when he was in command. So, all in all, Astarion supposed previously his view of the man was at least vaguely positive.

This, most assuredly, was no longer the case.

The vampire stood in the middle of the hall, right at the edge of the next patch of sunlight, watching the former Grand Duke approach.

Ravengard stopped a reasonable number of paces away, nodding at Astarion. "Greetings."

"Meetings over," Astarion replied.

The two men stood there, with no more words being exchanged. Then the sun shifted enough in the sky and light barely grazed Astarion's nose.

The vampire jumped backwards reflexively, growling as he rubbed the freshly aggravated burn.

"Ah. I see." Ravengard lowered the shade on the nearest window.

"Thanks," muttered Astarion.

The other man nodded again, then proceeded into the meeting room.

After taking a moment to glare at the door, Astarion hissed, on general principles. He then flung his body into the chair in front of the window, having decided he suddenly had too much dignity to wiggle past the remaining shafts of light. Sure, *he* got to interrupt private meetings, while Astarion was left to twiddle his thumbs out here! He glared at the door again, hissing once more for good measure.

Only for the elder Ravengard to re-emerge, when Astarion was in mid-hiss; he instantly clamped his mouth shut and proceeded to stare straight ahead. The man seemed to pay Astarion no mind, going into the door of the mysterious other room at the end of the hall.

Well! He was denied access to this mysterious private meeting of Wyll's as well. That made Astarion feel roughly five percent better, as he hunched down in the chair, glaring at the sun to either side of him, feeling as if he was in a most elegant cage indeed.

Gods, he made a right tit of himself with Wyll's father just now, hadn't he? So unlike him. Normally he would be his good charming self by default, no matter how distasteful he found someone. He was *very* experienced in such.

Why was he so off his game? It could not be due to tiredness, no, no, he had performed much more elegantly under much more harsh conditions. Perhaps due to this revelation regarding the Ancuníns? That even if he had not died in that alley, he would still be just as dead? No, correction, he would be *even deader*. Dead and *gone*.

No, no, that couldn't be why. Ridiculous notion. Twas naught but meaningless trivia, nothing to do with him, making no difference to his unlife.

The rage on Wyll's face came to mind again, as he sought explanation for this unease. Perhaps? It *was* hard to dispatch the notion that at least *some* of his ire was directed at the misbehaved vampire.

Well, nothing to be done for it right now. He would sit in this chair until the door opened. To cheer himself up Astarion began examining his collection of pens, taken from the table during his mad scramble. He grinned upon realizing a *most* fancy one indeed was emblazoned with the letters WP.

He was in the midst of ranking the pens by testing which one wrote on the arm of the chair best when Wyll finally stepped out into the hall from the meeting room.

“My apologies, Astarion, that took longer than—I gave clear instructions for the shades to remain down!”

“Alas! Despite your words, they *appear* to be most *up* instead!” Astarion motioned at them with an open-mouthed grin.

Wyll sighed and closed all the shades between himself and Astarion, then headed right past him to shut the rest. When he turned around Astarion was by the other set of doors at the far end of the hall, doing something with the doorknob.

“What are you...” Wyll shook his head, then said, “Our last remaining member wanted to have a few words with me, in private.”

“Oh, no trouble at all!” Astarion zipped down the hallway quickly, stopping right in front of Wyll to glare as he angrily waved his arms all about. “I only looked ridiculous wiggling around sunbeams until mercy was granted to me by one of my *bettors*, permitting the grace and luxury of sitting in a chair rather than in the corner like a naughty little boy.”

“I'd like to retire to my private quarters for a quick discussion, if you do not mind.”

“Darling, as I am physically incapable of leaving your *lovely* domicile currently, you need not ask twice!”



Upon arriving, the pair discovered that the curtains in Wyll's room were once again wide open. Fortunately, the sunlight did not reach the entryway. Astarion collapsed against the doorway, overcome with unhinged laughter, as Wyll quickly corrected the error.

“I keep telling them not to bother with this room so much, or preferably at all. I can keep my own bedroom.”

Astarion sauntered in, wagging a finger at Wyll. “Further *advice* for you, my dear. Beat your servants more.”

“Motion rejected,” he replied, securing the larger curtain in place, then moving to do the same with the smaller one near the fireplace.

“This display of softness is *surely* why others feel they can attack your *officially* invited guests at *official* meetings. Servants *do* talk to each other, darling,” Astarion lectured, sitting on the trunk at the foot of Wyll’s bed.

Wyll finished with the other curtain and turned around, walking the few steps towards Astarion as he said, “Lord Winterpeak is now very aware how mistaken he was for such an assumption. The future of this city will not be determined as if we were lions, roaring for control of the pride.”

“So, now is it *my* turn to learn such?” Astarion asked, turning his head to the side, looking at Wyll out of the corner of his eye.

“What? I am not following.”

Astarion propelled himself off the trunk, snarling at Wyll, “Time to lecture the feral spawn, of course!” He stepped back, motioning at himself. “So out of control, spiraling into a fit of temper, due to the smallest hint of sunlight! How unbecoming and embarrassing for you! Utterly *unacceptable!* Disgraceful! How you must regret inviting me today!”

Wyll stared at him for a moment, before softly asking, “Did you think that was why I asked to speak with you again?”

“Oh. No. Of course not... well...” He sat down heavily on the trunk once more, whispering, “Maybe...” He looked up at Wyll and weakly smiled. “Yes,” he finished with a shrug and a nervous giggle.

“Astarion...” was the only word Wyll could summon at that moment, sighing as he covered his eyes with one hand and massaged his temples.

The vampire promptly flopped backwards onto the trunk.

Neither man spoke, the silence growing louder and louder.

Astarion rolled off the trunk, thudding onto the floor.

“No, Astarion. I do not regret inviting you, save for how it resulted in your injury. Truthfully, even if you had bitten him, I still would not have overly harsh words for you...”

“Then why did you yell at me to stop...” Astarion muttered into the floor.

“My life is *easier* with him unbitten.”

“*Hrm.*” Astarion sat up in a flash, smiled at Wyll, then said, “That does make sense. Perfectly understandable, darling!”

“It seems to me, that of the two of us, you are the one truly bothered by your actions.”

Astarion’s smile vanished. “What. No. That’s stupid. I’m *fine*. Darling, I am more than fine!”

“Is that so? I suppose I was mistaken.” He proceeded to his wardrobe, taking off his jacket and hanging it up, brushing it off and checking it for damage, spending much more time on this task than it would normally take.

Behind him, Astarion slowly got to his feet, opened his mouth, but then shut it without speaking, nervously tapping various fingers against one another, glancing down at his useless claws. “Perhaps I... have *somewhat* regretted courses of action decided upon in anger a... *few* times, as of late. A *scant* few, mind... really only once... maybe twice. Or so. Rounding down.”

“I know how you feel,” he said, shutting the wardrobe and walking back towards Astarion. “It can be very tempting to give into rage.”

“No, you fucking don’t!” he hissed out, bristling, his ears lifting slightly.

“I do! Trust, I have done things I regret in anger. Both before and after my exile.”

“What, did you squash a fly?” Astarion huffed as he rolled his eyes.

“Two flies! And once, I trod on a flower, deliberately.” Wyll performatively sighed while shaking his head. “No, no, I must confess, I stomped upon it. Grinding it into the dirt.”

Astarion gasped putting a hand over his mouth

“May I now offer *you* some advice? A minor tip, if you would allow?”

“Ugh.” He crossed his arms and did his best to look *most* displeased. “*Fine.*”

“When you feel anger threaten to rule your actions, count backwards from one hundred. I found it worked best to do so out loud, at first, but in your head will do if need be.”

He *stared* at the horned fool for a moment before finding his voice. “That might be the most idiotic suggestion I have *ever* heard in all of my *long* unlife. And I had to bunk with *Petras* for a century!”

“Simply an idea, my friend.” He put a hand on Astarion’s shoulder and laughed. “Give it a try, it can’t hurt.”

“Most anything can hurt, I have found...” He shrugged Wyll’s hand off, shooting him a glare, then huffed out, “At least it cannot hurt more than your *last* brilliant idea.”

Wyll walked past Astarion, heading to his desk. “Other than that, I think the meeting went fairly well.”

“Oh, dooooo you now?” He followed after, nosily peering past Wyll at his desk, frowning when seeing nothing interesting.

“Do you disagree?”

“Yes. *I* think that *this*,” he waved his hands about, motioning at himself, the Ravengard manor, and Wyll all at once somehow, before continuing, “is not going to work.”

“We can adjust the time, find something that works better,” he softly replied.

“Oh Gods, not even *you* can honestly believe being tired, and don’t misunderstand —*I am so tired*— was the only or *greatest* of my... challenges at your little meeting.”

“No, but it is a fixable problem, Father always said not to overlook the splinters when you mend a limb.”

Astarion glared at him, then sighed while dramatically collapsing into a heap on the floor.

“You will not be attacked again in my home. I swear it.”

“If you think that is the broken limb in your little metaphor, you are sorely mistaken. A bit of... surprise sunlight is scarcely sufficient to send me scurrying to... submit my resignation.”

“Impressive, seven,” said Wyll, as he sat down on the floor next to the vampire heap.

“Alliteration is one of my *many* talents, darling, thank you for noticing.” He graciously became less of a heap, sitting up.

“Astarion, if that is not what vexes you most then...?”

“You *are* very bad at this game. Twice tried and twice wrong! I suppose I can flip over the card for you at this point...”

“I would be most appreciative.”

“Who could resist such a reward, mm?” He sighed, resting a pointy elbow on his somewhat less pointy knee, perching his perfectly pointy chin on his fist.

Wyll patiently waited, clasping his hands together.

“It was not the Winterprick’s actions, but his words that truly wounded me. I did not recognize him. Not his name. Nor his face. Not even his *scent*... but, oh, he *knew me*. Those names he rattled off... *mm*. How my face must have looked...” He laughed softly, closing his eyes and sighing.

“You were not in obvious distress, Astarion. I could only tell as I know you well; know of your history.”

He opened his eyes and smiled opened mouthed at Wyll, a smile that did not reach his eyes. “Ah, that is *exactly* the problem! Being known. If I appeared at one of your full parliamentary meetings, how many there would *know* me? Know me *oh so* very... intimately. While I sit there, an ignorant fool.”

“He didn’t realize your history immediately...”

“Even *worse*, my dear! My reputation proceeds me more than I ever even knew! I would have *preferred* he instantly knew, instead of deducing it after observing me...” He sighed. “Those vampire hunters did say there was a wait list for my *services*... Gods, did he make leaflets to advertise?”

“I highly doubt that.”

“You don’t *know*... Gods. Maybe he did...” He sighed and flopped over onto his side. “Ugh. No, he would have delighted in tormenting me with them if so. Also, it is *horridly* dusty under your desk, dear.”

“Please know, what others think of my decision to have you on staff, matters to me as little as spectacles would to a grimlock.”

Astarion pawed beneath Wyll's desk, seeing if anything of interest was mired in the filth. "That's a very nice and fancy way to say you don't care how much of a bloody embarrassment I am. A whore playing at politics. Playing *badly* at that."

"We all focus on our missteps, but I think you did well for your first meeting of this nature; most people do not start at this high of a level, with established parties, in the middle of a session's term."

"Come now, even without the sunlight, I was doing *terribly*." He rolled his eyes, then smirked. "I do not even *remember* half of it..."

"I find that hard to believe. I'm sure you remember the essentials."

Astarion simultaneously searched his mind for details and the bottom of the desk for anything hidden. "Uh... that insipid missive from Evereska. The tasting bar, oh excuse me, zoo proposal. Ugh. That debacle with the source of stone for memorials."

"The only other thing of any note we discussed was a proposal relating to cleaning up the debris from the river! See, you remember far more than half!"

His gentle smile was met with a harsh glare. "You cannot deny I failed to recall the procedures." He jerked his hand back out from under the desk, shifting his glare to the spider bite on his finger.

"That is my failing, not yours. I should have spent more effort on making sure you were aware of the procedures. The rules are most counterintuitive at times if you were not attending parliamentary meetings before you finished teething."

Astarion grumbled, "You told me the rules I bungled twice. I remember *that* as well. It all simply went into one pointy ear and out the other." He peered under the desk again, grinning as he saw the freshly expired spider fall to the floor, trying to ignore the feeling in the back of his head that all these rules and rigmarole were so natural to him once. In the lost before.

"You are being too harsh on yourself. No one will remember your minor fumbles."

"*I used to be better!*" he hissed out, inches from Wyll's face.

Wyll blinked, barely even processing Astarion starting to move before he was suddenly right in front of him. He said nothing, merely patting his friend's shoulder a couple of times.

Astarion sighed, sitting back on his haunches. "So, tell me, darling, how many former magistrates were sitting around that table today?"

"Two, counting yourself," said Wyll, wincing slightly.

At first there was only laughter, because, really, the way the naive horned fool phrased his answer *was* very humorous. Then, Astarion felt tears start to build, to his horror.

Please, no, not now, not over this, not in front of Wyll.

Alas, his tears cared naught for his wishes, and split down his cheeks. "Sorry, I don't... don't really know why this is... is happening," he managed, between snuffles, motioning at his face.

Wyll handed him a handkerchief, saying nothing, giving him time.

Astarion sniffled into the hanky, blew his nose, wiped his eyes, and focused on simply breathing in and out, waiting for this mortifying condition to pass.

Once recovered, he returned Wyll's property back to him, with the added bonus of a dead spider.

"What do I..." He separated spider from handkerchief, staring at the small corpse.

"Why, whatever you like, darling!" Astarion broadly grinned. "I don't know, have a funeral for it or something."

After staring at the dead spider for a moment, Wyll proceeded to the fireplace. He triggered the stored enchantment to relight the fire, then tossed the tiny body in, bowing his head in respect.

Astarion followed him, laughing once he realized the plan. He interrupted the spider send off, saying, "Perhaps he is not as... completely vanished from me as I supposed..."

"...Cazador?"

"My living self. Do try to keep up dear, we *were* just talking about magistrates."

"You think of him as a separate person?" Wyll softly asked.

Astarion paused for a bit too long before answering, chastising himself for letting that particular facet of his shattered psyche slip, "I... sometimes. On occasion. ...yes."

"I won't press you further. Though, if I may comment? I have not lost my memories, but I do tend to think of my younger self, before Mizora, as a separate person."

"... do you really?" he asked, one eyebrow raised in disbelief.

"Yes, Astarion, truly. I feel often these days as if I am trying to step into shoes that no longer fit, now that I again tread this path I was once groomed to walk. Perhaps this is a more common mindset than either of us suppose? A way to separate and process when someone feels they've changed too much..."

"And now you insult me by calling me common! Why I never...!"

"I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, one day." Wyll said, laughing as he shook his head.

This was too much sincerity. Astarion simply could not handle this at the moment. "Just open the curtains, put me out of both of our miseries, darling."

Wyll cruelly refused his very reasonable request. "I would prefer if you did not resign your position, but of course, the decision is yours."

"Mmm, I suppose it would be rather gauche to leave you having to explain why your *pet vampire* has stopped showing up to your little meetings, after you spent so much effort on the... accommodations demanded by my condition."

"Astarion. Stop calling yourself my pet vampire," Wyll said, very firmly.

Said not pet vampire took a moment to stare back, raising an eyebrow, "Why? Come off it, we both know that phrase does not describe what I am to you. I would not be *saying it* if I actually *thought it*."

Merely making a joke at the realm and its expectations, not at either of us, my dear.”

“I am glad to hear it. My apologies. I am just a bit on edge today... nervous as a gremishka in a room full of sorcerers.”

“Really, you are far more my pet Grand Duke than I am your pet vampire, darling.” He reached up and fashioned a bracelet with alternating black and white pearls around one of his horns, it slid down to rest against his forehead.

Wyll removed the bracelet, inspecting it. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say this is part of the parure that was my father’s reward for his actions on Stormwreck Isle...”

“Oh, couldn’t be, I just found this lying around, when I was on my way to your room last night. It was simply begging to be taken. The locks were so... pick-able, you see! A child could do so. A blind child. With one hand. And tremors. Surely something as precious as all that would be better protected. *Hrm?*”

“I have the oddest urge to conduct an inventory of the estate coffers.”

“Aren’t you busy enough already?” asked Astarion, with a dismissive wave.

“A private inventory.”

He grinned. “If you provide me a list of... misplaced objects, there may be a reward for your diligent efforts. Speaking of diligent efforts...” Astarion crouched down, reaching out to tap on a specific stone on the fireplace’s facade, then tugged it firmly. Another large stone shimmered, then vanished, revealing its hidden contents. An unmarked bottle and a faded portrait of a dark-skinned woman.

“Ah...” His grin became more of grimace. “If it was not for the picture, I would ask if the liquor belonged to the dead spider...” He chanced glancing back up at the Grand Duke.

Wyll did not look even remotely pleased. Astarion nervously giggled, resetting the secret compartment. “Sorry, my dear... I was more hoping for erotic literature with which to tease you... distract me from this brewing fear...”

“Is someone coming? Do you sense something?” The breach of privacy was forgotten as he glanced around his chambers.

Astarion laughed, sitting on the bear skin rug. “Ah, no, no... nothing vampiric, darling. Merely thinking. Which as we both know, can be far more dangerous. I am worried that Winterpeak twit might put some more pieces together... realize exactly *why* you no longer wish to source the lion’s share of stone from the Pendry quarries...” He motioned at himself.

“I would not have thought of that,” Wyll groaned. “Astarion, this is one reason I truly *do* value your input. You make realizations very quickly and are very often correct. Even when—”

“I’m *always* right.”

Wyll ignored him, continuing on, “Even when we both wish you were not. I confess my nerves currently are on edge as you were correct once more.”

Astarion narrowed his eyes and tilted his head, keeping his gaze trained on Wyll as he sat down on the rug next to him.

“I’m surprised you haven’t asked about my private meeting after the session.”

He winced, then cautiously asked, “With the half elven woman? In charge of... uh...”

“Commerce. She wanted to meet with me privately to make sure I knew of your previous employment history.”

He glared at Wyll, “Don’t put it so *nicely*, it feels *worse* when you do so! We both know what you mean...”

The other man looked away, then forced himself meet Astarion’s gaze. “She attended at least one of Cazador’s celebrations. When she was a junior council member.”

“Ah. So. Wyll? Would you prefer I slip under the bed, behind the couch, or fling myself out into the sun this lovely late afternoon? As you are my most gracious host, I’ll give you the pleasure of selection, darling.”

“She said your... that you precipitated her divorce. As her wife was *also* at the celebration and—”

Astarion withdrew his offer of selection, darting under Wyll’s bed with a nervous giggle, bunching up a portion of the rug in his haste.

After a moment, Wyll saying nothing, merely looking at the dimly lit vampire crammed under his bed, Astarion muttered, “I could also pitch myself into the fire... so many options in the Ravengard manor...”

“I would request you refrain from the sun or flames.”

“You would,” he grumbled, then paused, poking his head out from under the bed. “Ah, Wyll. Please. Use your big grown-up Grand Duke words. Did I have sex with *this* woman who I was in a meeting room with today for *hours* without realizing our connection oooooor her *wife*.”

“Her wife.”

“Well. That is... better? Yes? *Hrm*. Yes. That is *better*. We are still not at *good*, mind, but that *is* better...”

Wyll smoothed out the rug, then motioned for Astarion to rejoin him. “I am fairly sure she assumed you were a sort of espionage courtesan?”

“You could just say ‘sex spy’. It rolls off the tongue easier, darling.” Astarion oozed back out from under the bed.

“She wanted to make sure that I knew your history, that you collected blackmail material. She seemed very confused as to why I um... ‘took you on’, is how she put it.”

Astarion flung his hands up in the air. “And what, pray tell, did you, well, tell her?”

“Ah, I was not sure what you would want me to tell her. It is your story, Astarion. Your history. You should be the one to decide how much is shared. I told her I would meet with you first, then perhaps we would both speak with her. She agreed to return this evening.”

“Fuck you. How dare you respect my agency and privacy like this! Putting the choice into my hands! Instead of mercifully permitting me berate you after you made the wrong one!”

Wyll laughed. "I trust you can forgive me in this as well, my friend."

"I suppose it would be best to... talk to her...?" He started to worry at the lace on his sleeves before he realized that oh, he was not wearing something that had lace at the sleeves. Instead, he found a loose thread to occupy his fingers.

"I agree that *would* be for the best."

"Nooooooo... that means I *really* do not want to do it. Ugh, not if *you* agree with my decision! Can't you just execute her for some fictitious crime instead?" Astarion put on his best pouting face, fixing a rounded-eye gaze on Wyll until the horned man broke out into laughter.

"Ugh, what does she even know already about the whole sordid enterprise... obviously she is aware that *I* am a vampire, yes, but... as for Cazador?"

"I highly doubt she has realized Cazador was the Vampire Lord of the city. Another thing we will discuss later, how to make that public. I am also quite sick of hearing people sing his praises."

"Ugh... I suppose we must..."

Wyll hesitated and said, "She began by asking why I had one of Lord Szarr's pet vampires as my own now. That's why your joke landed poorly."

Astarion's eyebrows shot up so high they practically hit his hairline, then crashed down as he furrowed his brow. "Oh, I will *talk* to her indeed when she returns. Very well. Decision *firmly* made."

"Winterprick is a very clever turn of phrase, I'm surprised I never thought of it myself..."

"Maybe you *do* need me to stay on retainer..."

"Not quitting then?"

"Mmm... I *suppose* not."

"Perhaps we will have private meetings? Or smaller? I do deeply appreciate talking to someone else about these matters."

"Stop. Later. We will figure it out, *later*. Or I *will* pitch myself right into this fire, and I promise you, I will make *such* a mess." Astarion pointed at the blazing logs, keeping his face very serious as he glared at Wyll.

"Motion tabled for now, I think you have been injured enough for today... you are fully recovered, yes?"

"Oh, yes!" He grinned as he held his hands up, wiggling his claws in Wyll's face. "Thank you for the reminder, my dear. And the clippers!" He produced a nail clipper from his pocket, and started trimming his claws back into nails.

Wyll glanced over at his vanity, nothing seemed disturbed, of course, but the RG on the clippers erased all doubt as to their origin. Looking back at Astarion, he said, "I am surprised you are doing that without something to collect them; vampire spawn claw clippings are a very expensive reagent."

The vampire spawn paused. "Really?" He quickly started grabbing any fragment he could find.

“No, a complete lie,” Wyll said with a laugh.

Astarion glared then flung the clippings at him. “A gift, for you!”

Wyll continued to chuckle while carefully gathering them up, then pitching them into the nearby bin.

“Cruel,” Astarion said as he finished his initial manicure, “Mocking how little I know about myself, compared to the *glorious* monster hunter.”

“Sorry, Astarion, I—”

Laughter cut him off, as the clippers themselves were tossed back at him. “It was a good jape, my dear. Well done. I am glad *someone* I trust knows of such matters.”

“Anything you wish to know, please ask, I promise no judgment.” He motioned at his horns. “There are things I am still discovering about my own changed form.”

“When someone has their body altered so, would a provided pamphlet *really* be too much to ask?” Astarion flicked his wrist, producing a file to match the clippers, using it to finishing shaping his nails. “Alas, as we are denied such and we must rely upon other methods.” He wagged the file at Wyll. “For yooooou... I don’t suppose pact-breaker hunters are a thing? Mm?”

“Not outside the hells.”

“Shame.” He clapped his hands together, smiling brightly. “In more *pleasant* conversation... another gift for you, a true one!”

From his satchel Astarion produced a small pillow, longer than wide, mostly dark grey, with ‘*Sorry My Sister Tried To Eat You*’ in very fancy script embroidered on it in dark red.



Wyll stared at the pillow, blinking a couple of times. For what felt like a thousand years to Astarion, there was no other reaction. Then he took the pillow from him, laughing as he said, "Thank you!"

Astarion was very glad he was already sitting down while he watched Wyll place it upon his bed, getting to his feet he felt the urge to explain, "Not that she is actually my sister, you understand. Just... you know... for uh... the joke."

"Yes, I understand. I will treasure it forever, Astarion."

"I apologize; it is not mmm... up to my *usual* standards of quality. It could be better... I had grander ideas, with decorations and... time got away from me," he stammered, seeing only each and every flaw of his work. "It's Gale's fault. Yes. His..."

"It looks marvelous and immaculately crafted to me."

"We've already established you have no good judgment in some matters..."

Wyll patted the pillow once more, adjusting its position, then turned to Astarion and softly said, "At the risk of proving you right once more... have you read Karlach's letter?"

"Of course, I... have not!" He answered with a broad grin, "I've *looked* at the envelope more. Taken it out for air. Shown it exciting happenings outside my window."

"I tried to find any surviving family of hers. I found friends a plenty in her old Outer City neighborhood, some as close as relations would be, but no blood relatives," Wyll said as he walked back to the fireplace, watching it burn.

"Mmm... I... sought out that short friend of hers. Dwarf with child? Told her she had... she was no longer with us. Word has spread since, I am sure... she is... well missed." He stood next to Wyll, likewise staring into the blaze.

"Of that there can be no doubt."

"It is still... *mmm*. Some days it does not feel real. That never again will I be almost asleep, only to be jerked to full awareness by an almost infuriatingly chipper 'Hey, Astarion'. Other days... everything is all too real. As if she has been gone already a thousand years..." Tears once again split down his cheeks, reflecting the dancing lights of the flames.

Wyll handed him a fresh handkerchief.

Astarion muttered a soft thanks as he took it; he felt no shame for these tears. Not anymore. He stared into the fire for so long his eyes began to burn with more than sorrow. In the flickering flames he could almost convince himself he was looking upon not burning logs, but once again at magical flames dancing upon her skin. Those beautiful lights, that gave him such lovely warmth; harbingers of her doom all the while.

"I cry so easily now... I suppose that is an aspect of the man I am now. Impossible to deny." He wiped his eyes, laughing softly. "I had not wept in *so* very long. I truly thought I was empty of tears. That a body was only allotted so many, with my portion exhausted decades upon decades ago. Then the bastard was gone, and sometimes it feels like I have not stopped weeping since."

"I..." He accepted his handkerchief back, inspecting it for more hidden surprises, finding none. "I think it is a good sign, that your tears have returned."

“Don’t you have more spider funerals to officiate? Do you do weddings as well? Still one ring only or do they have four?”

“Not currently, yes, only one. I also do hatching day parties,” he said with a grin.

Astarion chuckled. “Tell me, is that power given to you by the Grand-Duke title itself, or as the Commander of the Flaming Fist?”

“That reminds me, no more drained bodies have been reported, still only the two. Did you put in a word with the others? Any information?”

“*Ugh!*” he flung his hands up, stomping away a few paces. “No! Why would I have?! It’s Petras. I know it was him! Trust me. You should go off and stake him. Make that a condition of any aid you supply.”

Wyll turned and leaned against the fireplace, not saying anything, merely raising his eyebrows.

“I have not even *talked* to another vampire since *you* last did,” he grumbled, “If only that would remain true... I would love to never see another vampire for the rest of my unlife.”

“A territorial Lord, are you?”

Astarion tilted his head to the side, raising an eyebrow.

“*You* are the one that killed your sire, the former Vampire Lord of Baldur’s Gate... therefore, *technically* then the title has passed to you.” He pointed at Astarion.

The *technical* Lord blinked once, twice, then giggled. “I... I suppose I *am*...”

Wyll chuckled, watching Astarion steady himself by leaning onto the wall, trying to play it off as if he was only mirroring his own pose.

“I will be sure to pass *that* delightful little morsel on this evening. For I *will* be seeing other vampires, unfortunately. Dalyria at least. And if she has *Petras* with her once more, then, well... It will be a very *short* encounter, but I will make the inquires you requested, nonetheless”

Wyll nodded. “Thank you, Astarion. Perhaps we’ll have your official title be chair of vampire relations?”

Astarion rolled his eyes, about to comment on the absurdity of such a thing, but refrained when Wyll held up a finger and turned slightly to the side, signaling he was receiving a message.

“She has returned. Our chair of commerce. Are you ready to go speak with her?”

“Ugh. I *suppose*. I can think of nothing else to talk about, and it is less fun rooting through your things if you are here *watching* me...”

With that, the two men exited the room, Wyll leading Astarion to the agreed upon meeting room, the latter muttering something about pet vampires under his breath as they proceeded.

He’d tell her, he’d show her that he was more than what she thought! That he wasn’t a pathetic wretch who had moved from one master to another. He was no one’s pet vampire! No! He was...

He was...

What *was* he, really?

He slowed his pace a bit.

She had seen him at his worst. As the *thing* Cazador had forced him to be, the mask he wore for so many years that he feared it melded to his soul. A carefree hedonist, aiming to have relations with as many people as possible, on the ballroom floor if the pleasure chambers were too much of a trek.

Then she saw him at the meeting. Clad in clothing that actually *covered* him. Participating even! Poorly, but still. Properly, not with flirtatious words. Speaking as if he was a true person.

Had this version of him started to win? Whatever it was he was *trying* to become? Had he started to erase the other Astarion she knew of all too well?

Only for her to see him drop his mask of personhood, revealing the mad thing that lay beneath.

Why wouldn't she have spoken to Wyll after?

Why shouldn't she have concerns about the Grand Duke's pet vampire?

What more could he do?

There was nothing he could do. Nothing else to show. Nothing he could say.

There truly was no way out. Not for him. Not anymore.

He slowed even more. Vaguely aware that Wyll was saying his name, somewhere, in the far away mist that the world outside of Astarion's head often became.

She had seen multiple Astarions and decided he now was the mask and before the truth. How many others like her would await him? Like the Winterprick? Who he would not even remotely recognize, but they would be shocked at his presence, wrinkle their noses in distaste, thinking they already knew all there was to know of him.

Even worse, they would then cast judgment at Wyll, assuming he was carting Astarion around for most lascivious reasons indeed. Taking his pet vampire on walkies.

He stopped.

What was he doing? Why had he ever agreed to this? To *any* of this?! He knew it was a bad idea and now he was sure it would *continue* to be a bad idea.

"Change of plans, dear. She is not worth my time, I have decided." He spun on his heels, marching right past Wyll, confident he vaguely recalled passing a side door recently.

"Astarion?" Wyll asked, failing to keep the worry out of his voice.

"Tell her whatever you desire. I care not." He was correct! A servants' door, leading right to the receiving dock, with no sunlight shining in through the glass panes. Night had come; he could be free.

"Astarion, *why* the change of plans? Is something wrong?"

"Yes," he said, smiling a smile that did not reach his eyes as his hand reached the handle. "Many things. But, do not trouble yourself. It is not your fault... well. It *is* your fault, but it is only fair that I

bear more of the blame, my dear.”

Wyll blinked, at a loss for words.

“I let myself be... taken in by you. Your view of the world; the ideals that somehow have not been squashed from your being.” He chuckled, wagging his finger at the Grand-Duke. “You are a very rare man, Wyll Ravengard, I hope you are aware. Despite it all, despite everything that has been done to you, around you, the truths of the world you have been shown... you still believe it can be better. No! That it is better. Seeing goodness, light, joy... the best of all possible worlds, even in wretches like myself.”

“Please, Astarion, tell me what is going on? You only a few minutes ago...”

“And for a time... I will confess, I was taken in, wholly. Seeing myself as *you* must see me. Living in this best world you have conjured. But, no... no... I am sorry, sweet Wylliam, such is beyond me for now. Most likely forever.” Before Wyll could respond, Astarion kept going, holding a finger high, smile still plastered on, “Know I do not begrudge you for believing that I can be more than I am... that I was not ground down as severely as is the harsh reality. Alas. I was! Soooooo... I quit! Consider *this* my notice of resignation!” He bowed, then twirled through the door.

A plaintive, “Astarion...” was the only utterance Wyll could summon in reply while following.

Astarion stopped at the edge of the stairs down to street level, smiling as he tilted his head side to side and wagged his finger at Wyll “Some final advising to you. Let me earn the coin I know you will *insist* upon giving me. And that, honestly, I will gladly take.”

“Astarion what... what changed? Why?”

“Be honest with yourself, dear. Is this what *you* want? For yourself? Is it truly? Take some time to reflect.”

Wyll fell silent, even more confused.

“Consider if you are treading the path you *think* you *should* follow, rather than the one you *want* to follow. For I fear too many hours in the room where it happens, so to speak, will grind you down as severely as the bedchambers and boudoirs have worn me to *nothing*.”

“Oh,” said Wyll, finally understanding.

“And with that, I bid thee good evening!” He grinned and trotted down the steps.

“Wait!” Wyll called. Astarion obediently turned around, raising his eyebrows as looked back up.

The two men stared at each other for several moments, before Wyll weakly said, “Remember the Midwinter celebration. In roughly tendays time. If we do not see each other prior...”

“Yes, yes. Of course. As I said, what else might I have on my docket... most assuredly not *family* commitments.” He giggled. “Make sure you do not book us all into one carriage, darling,” he quipped, before starting down the street.

Wyll blinked, then his eyes widened and he put a hand to his mouth, quickly calling out, “Astarion! Wait another moment! Please!”

He once more turned around, looking annoyed, crossing his arms as he tapped a foot. “*What now?!?*”

Silence fell once more, Wyll trying to find the proper words to address his growing suspicion. Before he could do so, a voice called out from behind him.

“Lord Ravengard? Your uh... your father is... stuck in the accessory conference room?”

Wyll turned to address the servant, “I’ll be with you shortly.” When he turned back around, the street was empty. His mouth went dry and his stomach flipped.

“Astarion?” He called out, starting to head down the stairs.

There was no reply.

As he began to proceed further, about to break into a run, the servant called out again, “Sir, please, your father is asking for you specifically.”

Wyll looked back again, frozen on the steps. Turning, he scanned the street and its surroundings for any sign of his friend, but he found not a single clue as to which way Astarion had gone into the darkness. Sighing heavily, he walked back up the stairs, nodded at the frantic servant, then went inside, shutting the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

WE HAVE A SECOND PILLOW!!

DANGIT! Astarion was doing so well... then... he was not! Ah, Wyll, don’t blame yourself, you did a good job. How could you know it would all unravel during a simple walk!

Wyll is /totally/ going to blame himself. Sorry you’re not high enough level in Astarion

Wrangling to deal with this level of spiraling self sabotaging, he was always going to run.

Karlach’s not suuuuper available right now, so I guess he would have needed Jaheira there to deal with this.

Oh... Jaheira...! Wonder what she’s up to...

Chapter 15: !!Real Astarion Depression Hours!!

Chapter Summary

Astarion avoids having a mental break down in the streets and instead comes apart in the corner of Jaheira's office. Like a civilized person.

Chapter Notes

HEY. HEY.

WE GOT CONTENT WARNINGS HERE IN THE PRENOTES

▶ ***PLEASE CLICK FOR CONTENT WARNINGS***

It IS real Astarion depression hours, after all.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Ninety-five, ninety-four, ninety-three...” Astarion counted, narrowing his eyes at the very confused man on the street below him. He supposed he shouldn't begrudge the patriarch for his confusion. Who would not be confused when you propositioned a harlot, very politely asking what their rate was for an evening's entertainment, only to have the harlot in question scale a nearby tree and begin counting down from one hundred?

He would begrudge him anyway. For the confusion and everything else. Gods, Astarion wanted to rip his noble throat out, right here, in the middle of this oh so elegantly paved thoroughfare, splashing his lifeblood on the perfect cobblestones.

“...seventy-nine, seventy-eight, seventy-seven, seventy-siiiiix...”

Alas, that would cause *so* many problems. Some of which would be Astarion's problems! Others Wyll's, and causing the newest Grand-Duke problems was exactly what the vampire currently counting down was seeking to avoid by fleeing the Ravengard estate this evening.

The extremely well-dressed moron finally turned away. Oh, it would be *so easy* to leap onto his back from this height. Fangs then meeting neck. He would be dead and mostly drained before he knew what was happening. Astarion gritted his teeth and clung tighter to the branches.

“...sixty-eight, sixty-seven, sixty-six...”

There were not any members of the Watch around! Neither in sight nor scent; they all used such distinctive armor polish. No one would ever know... except Wyll. He would know. For Astarion could not pin this problem on Petras when pressed. Not if Wyll fixed his gaze upon the vampire and softly asked for the truth.

“...fifty-seven, fifty-six, fifty-five,” he growled out, the noble vanishing around a corner, having no idea how close to death he had been this evening. Astarion broke some small twigs off the bare limbs of the tree, continuing to count down, now for no audience but himself.

“...forty-one, forty, thirty-nine.” The age he had been upon his death. Mmm. He’d best keep counting; the reminder was as if petrol had been tossed upon the rage burning within him. Increasing his desire to leap and bite and tear, to scream—no, to *roar* into the night, to make those still in the streets flee and those in their beds cower in terror. To let this city know, no, this entire *world* know that Astarion may have lost everything in life or unlife that ever *mattered*, but he *was still here*.

“Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three...” Ugh. Why did he care so much? So what if he was propositioned yet again? For so many decades he would have been *thrilled* at such an occurrence. A target flinging himself right into Astarion’s greedy hands, all but begging to be taken back home for supper? Who did not expect him to even do as much as hold his blasted *hand* before arriving at the Szarr Palace? It would have been a dream come true, why, he would have been so giddy, practically skipped down the streets while leading the fool.

“...fifteen, fourteen, thirteen,” he said, a tinge of amusement now in his tone. Of course, he took Astarion to be a prostitute on the look for a mark; he was *not* wearing proper noble clothing, had been aimlessly wandering the same street corner for the better part of an hour as he tried to avoid thoughts that kept inserting themselves into his brain, and there was no doubt that the way he carried himself when his mind was elsewhere defaulted to his most alluring walk.

“...eight, seven, six...” The noble fool had been *polite* about it, so elegant and *respectful*, ugh. No doubt he would have been one that would have finished in minutes if lead to the guest room, Astarion’s version of a happy ending to an evening’s hunt.

With a laugh he leapt from the tree, landed on his feet, and did a little spin as he finished counting down, “One!”

Why... he did not feel that upset at all anymore, not really, not beyond his typically brewing rage and aggravation. He had been left alone and avoided causing more issues for himself. Nothing left to feel bad about at all! The idealistic fool’s incredibly idiotic suggestion of counting down had actually *worked!*

As that thought echoed around his brain and sunk in deep, his smile transformed into a deep frown. He growled out into the night, surely causing a few heartbeats to at least quicken, if not sending their owners fleeing or cowering in terror. After a few seconds of growling, he put his face in his hands and screamed into them, muffling the sound dramatically, then pinched the bridge of his nose while sighing deeply.

“One-hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight...”

Astarion focused on counting more than anything else as he began to walk, heading vaguely towards the western part of the Lower City.



The counting had long since been completed, his rage soothed. Astarion prevented a feedback loop by refusing to consider how successful the method was proving to be, already determining the younger Ravengard must *never* learn of such. Once more he was walking mostly automatically, barely processing his surroundings as he tried, desperately, to push thoughts of families, nobles, and gossip whispered in the halls of parliament from his mind. He was having rather *less* success with that. Not even hunting was an appealing distraction, the thought of feeding made him feel ill, he had no doubt he would throw up if he did manage to find suitable prey.

A sudden jolt of fear stopped him in his tracks! He was confused, but only for a moment. The running waters of the River Chionthar were directly ahead of him, a rickety railing all that prevented him from tumbling right in during his random walk. As the fear ebbed away, he glanced around, this little nook he found himself in was rather familiar. He stepped back out, towards the street, then turned to the look at the building.

Oh. Well. Look at that.

He was right in front of the Society of Brilliance's lodge. Exactly where he was to meet Dalyria.

"Ugh."

It was *hours* until she expected him to show up here! *Hours!* Gods, if he showed up now, she'd think he was *eager* and *wanted* to see her. Astarion shuddered at the prospect and darted away, heading down a random alley.

He could go home and rest, but that would be a complete waste of time and effort. Such a long trek, only to return to where he already had been! Also, if he did journey back to his flat, he likely would end up not leaving again. He could tell. The foul mood he was in. The state of being where hours were simply gone before he was even aware minutes had passed.

He couldn't let Dalyria down again.

Well. No. That wasn't correct. He *could*. He could do so rather easily, in fact! Would be no trouble at all... but he found he didn't *want to*. He could just see her eyes glistening and her stupid lower lip trembling if Astarion failed to show up this evening. He banished that vision from his mind. Fine. No going home. He'd prevent himself from sabotaging himself in this. Double self-sabotage? Hrm. He chuckled to himself, workshopping some stupid joke about the matter; something to tell Jaheira or Wyll... Maybe even Dal herself!

Oh! Jaheira 's...

Now there was an idea. The High Harper's house was a mere fifteen-minute walk, if that, from the Society's headquarters. He began heading that way before he could second guess himself, once again starting to feel rather floaty as he walked, arriving in what felt like no time at all.

Astarion had snuck into Jaheira's so many times, he pondered how would be best to do so this evening. There was the cave entrance, the sewer access, that one odd tree. Only... all of those were so much trouble. It was not remotely *close* to midnight and he was already *so tired*. Instead, he selected a course of action she would never see coming.

He trotted up the stairs to knock on her front door.

One of Jaheira's older children answered. The one that wasn't green.

She blinked in surprise, then rolled her eyes as she turned around and shouted, “*Mom! Your vampire is here!*”

Astarion decided he preferred the green one.

He did not respond, merely glared in her vague direction. Then softly muttering at her retreating back, “One-hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight...”

Jaheira’s vampire...?

He found that notion did not rankle him nearly to the degree he would expect. This discovery was tossed upon the pile with all the other unwanted discoveries of the evening, as the High Harper herself was at the doorway. Her stern expression shifted to one of confusion as she beckoned Astarion towards herself, motioning for him to enter.

“Hello,” he said, not moving.

“Are you well, little bat? I do not think you have had a gentle evening...”

Astarion chuckled, looking past her for a moment, his eyes unfocused, before turning his gaze to her and saying with a wry smile, “Have you ever assumed something? An aspect of the world that you have taken as fact, without realizing you had done so? Then... upon finding out the truth, it is as if a bedrock has been shattered?”

She gave up on him moving and reached out, tugging him through the door way, muttering, “I will need more than that, little bat.”

Astarion let her pull him inside, stumbling forwards, barely registering the door shutting behind him. “It’s nothing. Well, no, it is... something. I uh... wish to process it more. Before I tell you. Nothing recent, do not worry. It’s fine...”

“It does not seem fine, whatever ‘it’ might be.” She released his arm, stepping back, looking him up and down.

He caught her gaze, chuckling softly as he shook his head. “*Mm*. I do not have time right now. Not tonight. Not now. I have to go meet Dalyria. *Tonight*. That oh so brilliant society is hosting her.”

Jaheira only nodded at him.

Astarion sighed, chewing on his lip for a moment before softly asking, “Come with me, please? I don’t want to go alone...”

“Little bat?”

“...please?”

“Another use of the magic word. When?”

“Midnight. I’ll... I’ll be in your basement. Until it’s time to depart.” He started to walk away, stopping when Jaheira marched in front of him.

“Not the basement. My office. Come.”

He did not protest, merely followed her to said office, standing there, staring blankly as she shut the door. After a moment he moved to sit on the floor, crammed in a corner. Jaheira raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing, returning to her desk to work. She kept glancing up from her paperwork, not bothering to hide the concern on her face, never seeing any change when she checked on him. After a while of that, she let herself be fully absorbed by the task once more, muttering to herself as she tried to wade through the horrific red tape that was Baldur's Gate bureaucracy.

Astarion sat only a few feet from her but somehow a million miles away. He was facing in her direction with so much whirling around in his mind, he wasn't actively registering anything she was doing. He likely wouldn't even notice if Jaheira started dancing nude around her office.

He didn't want to think about what he had learned, not now, not *ever* really. Had no desire to make any connections, solve any long-standing mysteries. But it was impossible to keep the thoughts at bay any longer. He listened to the noises Jaheira made and relented, allowing the brewing storm to break, the various possibilities and insights raining down upon him, battering his consciousness.

Nothing to be done for it but what he had always done.

Try to survive.

The shuffling of paperwork. Her breathing. Her heartbeat. The onslaught of information.

A whole noble family dying at once and he never heard a whisper of it? How was that possible...?

Well, it had to be possible as that was exactly what had bloody happened!

Cazador did keep his entire gaggle of spawn confined to the manor during that first whole Bhaalspawn *thing*, and for some time after that still. So much had occurred, by the time Astarion's normal activities began again his ... the loss of a single noble family would no longer have been the talk of the city; overshadowed by everything that came after.

Additionally, for much of his mind-addled half-life of servitude he rather tried *not* to pay overly much attention to what nobles were saying, in any case. Upon reflection, it is *very* possible he heard many whispers and they just washed out of his brain, as so much else did.

Though... *really*? He never forgot his *name*. He forgot *everything* else. He forgot how to *say his name* but he never forgot that collection of letters was his surname.

Wait, how *did* he forget how his family name was *pronounced*? That didn't make sense.

Oh.

He suddenly understood. There were multiple ways. The *proper* way had an elvish lilt of the tongue that he just couldn't be bothered with most times... in life. Gods, was this sort of meaningless trivia the only remnants of his lost life that would ever return to him?

“Ha ha ha...”

“Little bat?”

He looked over at her for a moment, shaking his head before waving her off and turning away once more.

Idiot.

He was well on his way to working himself up into a state. A fit of temper. He must not do so. He was so dependent on Jaheira already, he was *not* going to go to pieces in her damn office.

Not *again* anyway...

At least if he did so, she probably would assume he was upset over the same harsh turns of fate that he typically brooded over. Honestly, he *was* upset over those, as he always was, but they were not the foremost of his upsets at this very moment. He'd schedule them to be his primary focus at oh, eleven 'o' clock in the morning, two days from now. That time slot should be available.

Of all the ways for him to find out. The words tumbling freely from Wyll's lips, the poor man having no *idea* that what he was saying had any connection to Astarion. Occurring mere *hours* after the vampire had steadfastly refused to learn anything about... about *this* from Gale.

Foolish wizard. Overly literal twit! He could have told Astarion that they were *dead!* He wouldn't have become upset with Gale for telling him this bit of knowledge. No one could reject him having died so long ago! There were no awkward conversations to be had with the dead!

Normally.

With the proper dead, anyway.

One could have plenty of *beyond* awkward conversations with the undead. With a sigh, he could not help but remember flipping over Gale's rubbish table. He imagined how he must have looked, from the wizard's eyes, during his multiple advancements, no, *lunges*, fangs fully bared.

As much as it pained him, Astarion was forced to admit he had no one to blame but himself for how he discovered the fate of... of... his family.

Completing the thought, using the proper word, made him feel as if a pit opened up within his chest. He drew his legs up, wrapping his arms around them, and rested his head on his knees. Gods. How many times had he assumed this pose over the past two centuries? While pondering *that* was honestly less disconcerting than thinking of family, he churned the concept around in his mind nonetheless.

Astarion realized he had been carrying an odd mixture of fear and hope with him these past months, walking through the city as a free man. On edge that he would be recognized, not as he was recognized at the Ravengard estate today, no. A far different type of recognition; that his name would be shouted, by some fair haired pointy eared stranger, who would dash to him, proclaiming they thought he was dead, all this time!

Such thoughts brought to mind Shadowheart and her own reunion with forgotten parents. Relations that remembered *her*, all too well.

It was for the best he never did visit her new home again, despite the honest invitation. He would only have been intruding, disrupting her attempts to move on, to leave all of this nonsense behind. No, it was better this way; let *one* of them have some semblance of a normal life. She finally had a *proper* family once again, after forty years of pain and misery.

Forty years.

More time than he had drawn breath as a living man, but not even a quarter of the time spent enslaved.

If he had been freed after *only* forty years, would anyone have been pleased at his return? Been there to care for him? Would his mysterious parents have embraced him, as Shadowheart's embraced her? With such joyous expressions, happily proclaiming that she was forgiven for any and all things she ever possibly did...

At the time Astarion hadn't cared overly much, other than vague feelings best summed up with 'that's nice, good for her, that was the correct decision'. Now... he felt jealousy growing within him. Had it been there all this time? Hidden from himself? Perhaps the *real* reason he had avoided returning to Shadowheart's growing menagerie? Honestly, didn't the dog have *enough* friends already?

How moronic. He was *such* a fool. If anyone existed to be found, they would have only added infuriating complications for Astarion as he *tried* to rebuild his life. Long ago he stopped trying to reconstruct any notion of his *true* family; had categorized the whole matter as irrelevant. By *far* the more sensible course of action.

Not... not whatever *this* was, that he was experiencing currently.

The only memory of family that remained, he wasn't sure was genuine. He could vaguely recall being a *very* small elf, small enough to be fully held in someone's arms. A child. Yes, that was the proper term; he *had* to have been a child, once. In this possible memory, he was a child sick with fever, held by a woman. She had no face he could recall, but was firmly linked with the nebulous concept of *mother*. She was stroking his hair as she called him her little star, and promised him everything would be better soon.

Reality or some drivel he conjured up as illusionary comfort? Perhaps a tale he had heard at some point, origin long forgotten, now falsely claimed as his own?

It did not matter. He could never know. He would never know.

He hailed from high elf stock. That was all he knew with certainty, before today. One of the very few things Cazador could not take from him. His race of origin. Now, he could find out so much more... no more excuses remained; they could not harm him.

Why *was* he so upset? For he *was* upset. He could not lie to himself any longer. Why did he feel like he lost something else? Nothing had changed. Nothing at all. No one was newly dead. They had *all* been dead for *so long*. Maybe they didn't even *like* each other. Maybe they were vile.

But maybe they *were* lovely.

Maybe he *was* lovely, once.

A version of him lost to the world, lost to all memory, including his. No one left who could remember. Gone for over a hundred years. Gods, he assumed his grave was left to the weeds and grime because he was disliked. That he had been so unpleasant in his life his relations had been *glad* he was beaten to death, only regretful they had not gotten to do it themselves.

But no.

They were dead. More dead than he was.

Properly dead.

Better at it than he was.

A noble. He really had been a patriar of Baldur's Gate once. Or at least a son of a noble house that contained such oh so *important* persons. He was correct in at least *that* assumption about his past, not that it brought him any joy. Patriars were not Astarion the vampire spawn's favorite people, to put it mildly. What about Astarion Ancunin, the forgotten one? Who drew breath. In life was he... had he...

No. No... No, now was not the time to give voice to one of his deepest fears.

He *was*, mind you, a noble. *Was*. The past tense was of critical importance. Elves lost claim to *anything* and *everything* upon death. Even, or better to say, *especially* if they were still lurching about as some form of undead. A policy request from Evereska, he dimly recalled, centuries ago, accepted by the city with no counter-argument, for why would they care? Hells, by now it was possibly equally applicable to all Baldurians. Something to look into, he supposed.

In any case, an elf fortunate enough to regain a proper beating-heart life would be required to submit *so* much proof of their restoration. The results of various tests of vitality, strength of soul, and lack of taint upon their oh so special fae-touched essence. Purity must be confirmed. *only* then could they have any property or title restored. Astarion had a most wonderful and capable imagination, but he could not fathom the word purity ever applying to him again, in this or any other permutation of existence. This revelation failed to offer the promise of any riches, lands, or titles. Really, roughly zero possible benefits to come from discovering his noble origins.

What else could he ever possible expect? There was no joy to this discovery. Only more loss. The gods of fate grinding his nose into the dirt, lest he forgets his place in this world.

N-490 was the form to file to begin the process of reinstating one's elfhood, or at least it had been, once upon a time. He hated how *this* sort of tiny facet was all he could ever dredge from his true life. His living life. Soulless legal prattle; dry, boring, and irrelevant to him now, for centuries now. A mickle of meaningless minutia.

How could he, in his darkest hours, doubt he once was a magistrate? So many pointless rules and regulations rattled around in his empty head. Case law precedent and other useless trifles. The only thing he ever used them for was to rattle off specific regulations fast enough to get the Fist or Watch to piss off, rather than booking him for solicitation and tossing him into a somewhat less fetid cell than the ones at home.

It worked more often than not. For a while anyway.

In due course the decades drug on and *on*, his knowledge growing more and *more* out of date. The world moving on, without him, away from him, whilst he was made to keep trudging through the streets, a phantom relic of bygone times. Nothing but a dead body, that he could not even rightfully claim as his own, and a head full of unchanging scraps.

No, that was not true.

The scraps *had* changed, been ripped and torn over and over again; he grew worse and worse and *worse*. Until he was unsure anything worth saving remained, when his impossible salvation finally arrived.

He was sure now.

There hadn't been.

Nothing suitable for long-term survival, at least. Only for a last flailing gasp, a glimpse of what could have been, if only it had all happened so much *sooner*.

Astarion had fooled himself for a while, let himself believe her beautiful lies; lies she did not realize she was telling, as she thought them truth. Believed with her whole stolen heart.

He had tried. He really had. Wherever she was, he hoped she knew that. Believed that.

At least he had outlived Cazador. At least he had that.

If only now he stopped thinking about the bastard so much every day. He thought of Cazador more than he did her. *Karlach*. How could he not? Two hundred years of misery, versus a scant few months, if that, of joy...

For not the first, second, or even hundredth time, if he was honest, he deeply wished she let him join her, as she burnt up on the docks that day.

What a pointless farce. A pretend life.

He should have gone home like he wanted, why had he let Jaheira talk him into staying? He should have abandoned Dalryria, *again*, and hopefully that would have been the end of that, their unlives separate forever more.

What an idiot he was for coming *here*. How could he distract himself from this horrid feeling inside his chest, from this swirling in his head, with Jaheira *right there*? He highly doubted she would approve if he started carving the skin off the bottoms of his feet, breaking his fingers, or any of his other distraction techniques he had employed when alone in his flat. Maybe he could chew holes in his cheeks without her noticing? Bite off the tip of his tongue? That particular trick gave such a large return of pain for so little effort, very efficient!

Imagine what she would do if I threw it at her ... or some of my fingers...

Not even thinking of her reaction managed to lift his spirits. No point in trying any of it, too much risk. If the meddling Harper learned of his predilections, she'd make *such* a production out of the matter; as she had done with his little sunbeam alarm clock. That idea was clever and Astarion stood by it!

Nothing had changed at all from this time yesterday. *Nothing*. There was no reason to feel as if he freshly lost yet *more*. No reason to feel so terrible.

Fool. Pathetic wretch.

Astarion tried to blank his mind again. He had to *actually stop this*. He could *not* get angry here. He could not burst into tears, nor harm himself. None of that. He needed to be *normal*. Stop being as much of a burden, he was already *so much work* for people. He had to stand on his own. If he did not... if he did not, then soon he would *truly* be on his own. Surely, he was reaching the limit of all this charity. There was no reason for these... these *heroes* to spend so much of their precious limited mortal lives trying to help *him*.

Only one person would put up with this much of his particular brand of troubles... and it seemed he was too much for her even... in the end.

Wyll's expression of rage in the meeting room flashed through his mind.

Maybe he was too much for any of them. For those sweet souls who had yet to realize how wretched he truly was, once all those beautiful lies crumbled to dust and laid the truth of him bare.

He focused on the noises Jaheira made while she progressed through piles of paperwork. Her breathing. Her heartbeat. Slow. Steady. Calm.

He matched his breathing to hers; once his thoughts stopped racing and his focus improved, he turned his attention to the other heartbeats in the house, one almost as slow and steady as hers, but the rest much faster, more animated. All moving around in the upper level of the house. Didn't these children *ever* sleep? Jaheira's free range feral wards. What a queer family she had assembled here. Obvious even in the state he was in immediately after... after he lost...

After he lost the tadpole.

Despite the state he was in; while staying here, he quickly learned this brood was strange, even by the standards of children. One would almost think Jaheira was creating literal spawn of her own. Oh, the not-green older one *seemed* normal at first, but she was *not*.

'*Mom! Your vampire is here!*' echoed in his head. Not the worst thing he'd ever been called. By a long shot. Did she mean it as an insult? If so, probably to Jaheira more than him...

The High Harper's strange collection of creatures with no true relation. Lost misfits one and all. He'd honestly fit right in with the rest of her brats. He had joked several times that she'd practically taken him on as a ward, but was he really joking? Astarion the free range quasi-feral spawn... did she consider him part of it?

Of course she didn't.

Because he wasn't.

He could never be such.

She was the High Harper of Baldur's Gate and he was a masterless vampire spawn. It simply made sense for her to keep tabs on him, very pragmatic and practical. Nothing more. She helped so many people, with many cutting words to say about them, complaining to Astarion time and time again. No doubt she had equally blistering, albeit hilarious, words to say about Astarion when around her *true* friends, such as the bald lummo.

Once again, he was unable to separate any scrap of kindness from affection... how could he possibly think she would consider him part of her family? Mad fool. The only family that would willingly claim him, he wanted nothing to do with. Pathetic wretch.

There was no place for him. No place anywhere. Not anymore. Maybe there never had been...

Another mysterious sense of loss bloomed, deep in his chest. With a heavy sigh he tightened his grip on his legs, squeezed his eyes shut as he pressed against his knees, and blocked out all other sounds again, focusing only on Jaheira.

Beat, beat, beat, went her heart. Flip, flip, flip went the papers. In-out, in-out, in-out went both their breaths.



“Astarion?” There was a very gentle shaking of his shoulder.

He jerked awake, confused for a moment, but the scent of Jaheira soothed him before he could panic. Ah, she was shaking his shoulder. Why? Oh. He fell asleep? Well. Success in blanking his mind there at least.

“Mmm?” He gave up on saying anything else, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, twisting away as he wiped the traces of tears away, at least pretending she couldn’t have seen.

“You said the meeting was at midnight, yes?”

“Meeting...? Oh. Dal’s thing. Yes. ... yes. Ugh. Sorry... time to go?”

“No, we have over an hour.”

“... then why in the sweet hells did you wake me up?”

“Because, little bat, I think if I do not inflict this bureaucratic quagmire onto someone else and make them suffer, as I have, I am going to kill myself right here in my office.”

“Hrm. At least you have a relatable motivation...” He waved her away. “Go suffer in solitude for a scant span of time, I’ll grace you with my presence soon enough.”

Jaheira stepped back, watching him uncurl and stretch, yawning and then dragging his hand down his face, but making no move to rise to his feet. She headed back to her desk, not really believing he would join her before they had to leave, but at least he wouldn’t be making whimpering noises in his sleep any longer. Before long, she was absorbed in the reams of paperwork again.

“Why are you—”

Jaheira startled and jumped at his voice, coming from directly behind her. “Gah! When did you leave the corner! Stop being sneaky!”

Astarion blinked and laughed, “Jaheira, I did not *mean* to sneak up on you. Losing hearing in your old age?”

“Stomp in my house like the children! Be respectful of our customs.”

He snickered again before asking his original question, pointing at the parchment she was holding, “Why are you drawing from the budget concerning Lower City road repairs for the reconstruction of residential buildings? You should pull from the housing fund, *yeeees*, it is customarily only used for the Upper City, *buuuut* there is nothing in the wording of the line item that says it *muuuuuust* be used in that fashion.”

She blinked at him. Then shuffled the documents to show him another. “And this?”

“Oh, dock repair? Take it from the Upper City culinary coffers, justify it via the fishing industry.”

Jaheira stood up and guided him to her chair, “Little bat, you have been holding out on me.”

Now it was Astarion’s turn to blink in confusion. Jaheira smiled at him and shoved the stack of paperwork closer. When he still looked at her blankly, she picked up one sheet and put it into his

hand, patting his shoulder with a grin after he automatically took it. “Enjoy!”

“Oh! Ah... uh... Jaheira, I must confess my knowledge is oh... a *tad* out of date. Why everything I told you is possibly so much useless nonsense, my dear.”

“I do not care. You will help me start. Give me a *good* start. Then I can check them. Update them, if need be. Trust me, little bat, the people on the thrones may be different, but the bureaucrats endure. They are not fond of change.”

She held a pen out to him. He shook his head, saying, “I have my own...” as he leaned forwards, pulling one out of his pocket, and started to read over the documents. Almost immediately he was jotting down notes, making corrections, and sorting them into several piles, all accompanied by very thoughtful noises indeed. Jaheira watched him for a time, nodding in approval, before she turned away, to attend to her poor neglected plants.

Astarion churned through the documents, until coming across one that gave him pause, at first only due to how many pages were in the proposal. He almost set it aside, then sighed and began to read; it was a plan to revitalize certain undamaged parts of the Lower City during the reconstruction efforts. It all made perfect sense at first glance, if construction operations were already initiated then why not be as efficient as possible and ameliorate conditions for the downtrodden, at least slightly. The planned improvements included structural repairs, additional bridges to provide better access, and more green spaces for the lowest income areas of the Lower City. The latter to be placed in areas currently occupied by buildings that failed to pass inspection and would be too costly to repair, damaged not by the mind flayers, but the weight of years.

He almost placed the plans in the no-attention-needed pile; this was not something Jaheira was spearheading, so why should he bother to waste his time on it? Then he noticed the inspections that these buildings failed were conducted *next month*. How sloppy! Astarion would be so much better at committing fraud, it was such a shame how no one took pride in their work anymore. His focus thus drawn, he flipped through the proposal again, this time with a much more careful eye.

While the author had tried to obfuscate it, Astarion soon realized almost all the buildings slated to be demolished to make way for the largest of the planned parks were residences, and they *all* were in a *very* impoverished district of the Lower City. One he was most familiar with, why he had taken Gale there only... gods, was it really only the night before? No wonder he was *so tired*.

No mention was made of the many people Astarion *knew* were living in the buildings, all that was said is the *official* property owners would be consulted and *compensated* before any work began in earnest. Which meant a host of noble families, many of which probably had written off the holdings decades and decades ago, when the district’s fall from grace accelerated rapidly, beginning with the bedlam brought about by the beforehand batch of bouncing Bhaal babes. No doubt a good portion of the current heads of the families did not know they actually *were* the legal owners and would be pleasantly surprised at any coin pressed into their hands before giving their approval.

This would never stand up if *properly* challenged in court. The current residents had been there so long without any actions from the theoretical *real* owners, the little proposition was not actually *legal*. Not that any of the impacted undesirables would have the foggiest idea how to go about fighting this legally, nor time really, they would most likely learn of this plan when the wrecking balls began to swing.

Scanning the list of structures slated for demolition again, one gave him pause: the greenskin’s tavern. He stared at the address for a long moment, then sat up straight. A thought tickling the back of his mind.

Could it be...?

A massive headache bloomed into existence!

Astarion grit his teeth, rubbing his temples. This happened sometimes when he tried to think down certain paths, skirting too close to the voids in his memory. It typically was enough to discourage much self-exploration, but on this night, he was steadfast, refusing to be dissuaded.

For decades upon decades, he had felt strangely drawn to that tavern. The poor dilapidated once upon time fine elegant establishment. Decorated, at one point, in classic high elven style. Or at least what *Astarion* thought seemed very high elvish. Closing during the last Bhaalspawn crisis. Never to reopen. Abandoned.

Gale's odd behavior in front of the building made *so* much more sense in light of this growing suspicion.

He had lied to the wizard; Astarion distinctly remembered how he felt when he could no longer deny the wine bar had closed forever. Rather like he had felt this very evening, while trying not to go to pieces in Jaheira's office.

Except he had very much gone to pieces that night, over a century ago. Breaking into the building and utterly losing his mind inside, having a fit of temper for the ages, destroying anything and everything he could get his hands on, before burrowing into the walls. It was only Cazador's cursed compulsions that pulled him out that evening, and sent him automatically plodding home, arriving scant seconds before daybreak. Drenched in wine with numerous glass shards embedded in his flesh. He had been such a sight that Cazador had only laughed at him rather than banishing him to the kennel.

It had been *his*. Once. *Somehow*. He could call up no further details, but as the headache dissipated, he knew this to be the truth, all doubt vanquished.

Astarion head dropped down onto the desk with an audible thud, he was still for a moment, then began laughing into the piles of paperwork.

"Ah, it has driven you insane? I am disappointed, little bat, I thought you were stronger." Jaheira glanced over, busy watering and weeding her neglected plants.

"I... think I need to visit a certain wizard tomorrow, accept his bloody gift." He snickered. "Ah, he will *also* think me quite mad... not fully incorrectly, I must admit..."

She finished with the pot she was working on, then walked over, poking his slumped over form. "What have I told you about confusing me? So late at night even!"

"Ah, I give, I give..." He sat up, batting her poking finger away. "Not even I can ignore so many signs. I'll tell you everything. Soon enough. First though, this should *probably* be stopped."

She took the packet after he wagged it at her. "The revitalization plans? Why?"

"No strong reason really, unless, oh, you just so happen to care about a large number of individuals suddenly losing whatever meager scraps they have, including homes. I mean, they're all just paupers, so who would, *honestly*. Plenty of greenskins among them, including our somewhat-civilized Baldurian goblins..." he kept up his prattle as her eyes widened and she flipped through the papers, "It would be an easy way to rid the city of *so* many greenies, truly. Pitch them out with the rubble. Building a Better Baldur's Gate, for only *true* Baldurians, I suppose..."

“So, that is their game. Thank you, little bat. I had a bad feeling when I heard whispers about this plan. Even more when they did not want to give me a copy.”

“Not surprised they’d want to keep others from perusing their scheme, it’s rubbish work really.” He took the document from her and flipped through it, circling the most objectionable errors.

“I have seen many impossible things in my life, but the nobles that are backing this plan working towards something of true benefit for the Lower City? Mmm. Pull the other one, not all its bells have fallen off. What you are saying? Far more sense making.”

Astarion looked through the document again, searching for the primary sponsors. He soon found them: Lord Winterpeak and Lord Pendry. Hissing in displeasure, he tossed it back onto the desk. He wiped his hands off on his pants as he muttered, “No wonder Gortash didn’t invite them to his little murder party, if *this* is the best they can do...”

“Which one is the hissing for?”

“Both. I’ll tell you *why* for each along with oh so very much else. Such as why I was in such a *somewhat* less than stellar state when I arrived here this evening. All to be revealed. *After.*”

“After...?”

“After my little meeting with Dalyria, you haven’t *forgotten*, have you? Tut-tut, shall I fetch one of your beating-heart spawn to tend to you?”

Jaheira looked at him skeptically. “You will not scamper away after?”

“Do not fret, how could I ever unlive with myself if I abandoned you to this plague of parchment. You do seem rather hopeless with paperwork, my dear. Would think you’d be better at your age...”

“Thank you for assisting this hopeless old woman, defeated by scraps of paper. Now, let us go to whatever this thing is that you are being such a good little bat about and keeping your word. I am so proud, Astarion.”

“I hate you.”

“I know, little bat, I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I have no idea how much stuff I can put in a chapter.

Some fun lil tidbits in there if you’ve read my pre-game fic looking at his last bit of time alive lol, I typically write all in one vision of the universe so that’s so the same Astarion.

Ty to commentators putting Shadowheart more into my head again, lol, I moved up some of his Shadowheart Realizations and honestly, they work better here so... toot! Great victory

NEXT TIME, they will have made the long and arduous journey one whole neighborhood over to SPAWN MEET UP TIME!

Chapter 16: Little Sisters

Chapter Summary

This time we have THREE vampire spawn!
Violet is here. You will love her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Really, Jaheira, if the journey is too far for you, we do not have to continue.” He wagged a finger at her. “After all, we don’t want you to break a hip! Your children would be most cross with me... maybe?”

She pushed his finger aside. “Alas, we have already made most of the arduous trek here, so we must keep going, as I do think my frail legs would snap before they could carry me back to my home.”

“I see, I see... perhaps I can still hurl myself into the river...” Astarion tapped his finger against his lips as he thought.

“Whatever you wish, little bat. While you enjoy a swim, I will go talk to those other spawn you do not want to see. I will make sure to ask them *lots* of questions about you.”

Astarion stared down at Jaheira in abject horror.

She laughed, patted him on the cheek, then motioned for him to lead the way. The pair were standing across the street from the Society of Brilliance lodge, exactly where they had been for several minutes. He sighed and hunched over for a moment, before straightening up, smoothing out his shirt, adjusting his collar, and making sure his sleeves were both pulled down, cuff-links in place.

“Your hair is fine and there is nothing in your teeth, if that was also concerning you.”

Astarion glared at Jaheira once more then casually strolled across the street, as if he had not a care in this realm, or any other. Just as he reached for the door, it swung aside, revealing a grinning Dalyria. “Astarion! You’re on time!”

He drew his hand back, looking down at her, trying to push the thoughts of the last time he saw her smiling face out of his mind. Had she also forgotten the color of her eyes?

“... Astarion?”

“I can be late if you’d rather. Or maybe simply leave...” He turned as if he was going to do so, but Jaheira was blocking his path. Astarion grumbled as she practically herded him inside.

“Uh...” Dalyria stepped aside for them to enter, looking rather baffled, but she said nothing as she shut the door.

Astarion looked around the entryway, noting it looked exactly as he remembered it, with no extra equipment or books. Though he was more on the lookout for *people*. He somehow managed to look at Dalyria out of the corner of his eye and down his nose at the same time. “Soooooo, are you alone oooooor...?”

A shrieking giggle from above made Astarion flinch. He sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, then looked up, finding exactly who he expected.

On the ceiling was Violet staring back at him while crouched upside down. Gone was her own finely coiffed hairstyle, instead it was loose and wild. Astarion wrinkled his nose as he spotted several tangles, realizing the whole mess was verging on matting.

“Well, that’s just as terrifying as I thought it would be...” he muttered, standing his ground when she scurried directly above his head, sitting up and letting her arms fall down so her wiggly fingers were on either side of his head.

Violet snap-snapped with her teeth and then snap-snapped with her fingers, giggling and giggling and giggling! She spoke in a broken sing-song cadence, almost sounding like a well-known nursery rhyme, but never managing to quite hit the rhythm.

“Brother, brother, wayward brother, up here in the sun!

But the sun he cannot be in!

Why does he stay? Brother, oh, brother why?

What entices you so now that the flame of love has burned so brightly?

What entices you like a dragonfly, buzzing in the frog ’s belly to stay so?

Stay where you can look and see but never touch, never have!”

“Ah, at least, dear Violet, you are the consistent inconsistency in my life,” he said spreading his arms wide and stepping back away from her dangling hands.

Violet giggled, singing out, “*Whose suede kitten are you now?*” before scrambling to the other side of the ceiling, and starting carving a ceiling beam with her claws.

Astarion waved away Jaheira’s curious look. “She just makes noises sometimes, don’t bother trying to ascribe any meaning to *her* drivel. *Soooo...*” He turned to Dalyria. “I suppose the sooner we get this started the sooner it is over.”

She awkwardly clasped and unclasped her hands. “We can’t start yet, the equipment we need is upstairs. There was a symposium here today and the after party is still going.”

He flung his hands in the air. “Of course! Of bloody course... mmm, what, they didn’t invite you?” He looked up the stairs, narrowing his eyes, unable to detect any heart beats on the upper story, or hear any movement at all. Some form of silence spell at play, no doubt.

“No! Violet parties no more!!” She shouted out from her new perch on top of a bookcase, with a laugh she knocked a large crystal off the top.

Dalyria gasped and dove to catch it, barely succeeding.

“Fair really...” He hadn’t moved an inch, and remained exactly where he was as he watched Dalyria catch another crystal structure Violet kicked off the top of another bookcase. “I am *not* looking forwards to the one I’ve been invited to... maybe I’ll bite someone in attendance to ensure I am never invited to one again...”

“Yes! Bite! Brilliant brother! Sister, sister, see! Bite and chomp and bite and tear and bite!” She tossed the last of the decorations down at Dalyria, then cackled and leapt to the ceiling once more, drawn to a crystalline chandelier.

Astarion watched her crawl, mentally weighing the odds of her dropping down on him in rage if he told *her* not to call him brother, while Dalyria found open spots on the shelves to place the delicate crystals.

Jaheira interrupted him before he could come to a solid conclusion, “Not going to introduce me? I am hurt!”

“Ugh!” He motioned at Jaheira. “This is the old woman who won’t leave me alone. Her name is Jaaa... Jaheira, I think she said it was?” He raised his eyebrows while peering down at Jaheira, as if to confirm.

Dalyria looked utterly confused as Jaheira burst into laughter. “Nice to meet you?”

“*This!* Is Dalyria. Dal. The best of us. And doesn’t she just know it.”

“*Astarion.*” Dalyria frowned, taking her eyes off this strange elderly half elf for a moment to glare at him.

“Shhh, don’t you *Astarion* me! I am doing *proper* introductions!” He grinned and then pointed to Violet, who was now chewing on the chandelier. “Violet. Don’t get close. She’s rather um... *bitey.*”

“Hah! More so than you, little bat?”

“*Much* more than me! Trust me, my dear, you have no idea...”

“...*little bat?* Astarion, what is going on, who *is* this woman?”

“The old woman who won’t leave me alone. Pay attention, Dal.” He rolled his eyes, putting a hand on his hip, looking most put out indeed. Jaheira simply waved at Dalyria, saying nothing more.

“*Twinkle, twinkle little bat! How we’ve wondered what you’re at!*” Violet sang out proudly.

Astarion did not give any reaction to Violet’s latest utterance, wagging a finger now at Dalyria. “It better be just the two of you here. I would question your choice, but well, *anything* would be an upgrade over your *previous* traveling companion...”

“There’s not many options, bro—Astarion.”

He tilted his head, not reacting at all when Violet scurried directly above and started poking the top of his head, only asking Dalyria “What do you mean?”

“Yousen isn’t interested in traveling, he’s... not really staying with the rest of us.” She smiled, a rare true smile. “Mas... um. He kept all the workers. Turned them all to spawn. Not only the foreman like... like we all thought. He found his husbands. Yousen did. They’re together again.” Violet started poking Dalyria’s head as she spoke, her latest victim also ignoring the activity completely.

Astarion's mouth hung open for a second. "He was married? He was married *twice*? Why I... I never knew." He grinned. "Good for him! Hells, good for them all! Glad at least *one* of us has a chance at happiness..."

"Leon is gone. One day when we were accessing the condition of the others, conducting a census, he simply walked into the crowd and never returned," Dalyria continued to update Astarion on the status of the other wretched house spawn for some reason as Violet tried poking *both* of their heads at once, still not receiving any attention for her efforts.

"I hope he died." When Dalyria stared at him, Astarion helpfully elaborated, "Ripped to shreds! Beaten against the rocks by the sea of spawn!" He grinned, holding one arm high, pointer finger raised for emphasis.

Silence was the only reply. Dalyria looked at him with shock, Jaheira hid a smile behind her raised hand, and Violet snapped at his finger; she would have succeeded in biting if he had not jerked it back in haste.

"Well. *Ahem*. Carry on then with your little report. How is... oh, you know..." He waved a hand about, feigning having to work to remember her name, careful to keep it out of Violet's biting radius. "Aurelia? Better?"

"Worse."

"Oh." He waited, only for nothing else to come. "...details? You do oh so love to provide them..." he said, making a get on with it motion.

"She's shutting down, only moves if I instruct her, push her, will barely respond to me. Exactly as she was after we lost Callum."

Jaheira did not say anything, but Astarion addressed her as if she had asked, "The *original* second spawn. I was but third oldest, you see! Until he took an ill-advised swim, a bit over a decade back..."

"The carriage he was in plunged into the river," Dalyria helpfully added.

Not to be left out, Violet also contributed, "*Splish splash! Whoops, wrong sort of bath!?*"

Raising his voice a bit, to be heard over Violet's cackles, Astarion said, "Well... try fishing out *another* long-haired broad shoulder human man with an aversion to shirts from said sea of spawn for Aurelia? There have to be several suitable, you have *thousands* to choose from..."

Dalyria glared at him, shaking her head.

"Oh, don't look at me like that! It worked *last time!*" He crossed his arms with a *hmph!*

"I should have brought a notebook. Such complicated workplace dynamics, put the Harpers to shame..."

"Uh... we were not... uh... co-workers," said Dalyria, frowning at Jaheira.

"Far better than *other* possible terms that come to mind..." Astarion muttered.

"*Cazador's champion cultivations! Castaways claiming caverns! Corpses contemplating cadaveric cities!*"

Dalyria and Astarion shouted, “*Shut up!*” in unison, sending Violet into a cascade of giggles once more.

“Ah, good show! One point to the ceiling Violet.” Jaheira clapped politely.

Violet scurried over, peering down at Jaheira, sniffing the air a couple of times, then finally chirping out, “Thank you!” as she poked Jaheira’s head before scurrying back to her chandelier.

Meanwhile, Astarion had been counting on his fingers, muttering the names of the other spawn. Once finished he said, “Hrm. Well. My apologies, Dear Doctor Dalyria, it appears you *did* make the best selection after all.”

A muffled happy noise came from Violet, as she plucked a candle from the chandelier and plopped it into her mouth. Only to spit it out again almost instantly. “Yuck!”

“What did you think...” Astarion pinched the bridge of his nose, wordlessly grumbling to himself for a moment, then clapped his hands together, turning his back to Violet as he faced Dalyria. “Speaking of *the others*. I *do* have a message for you, Dal, regarding your pet idiot.”

“... what about Petras?” She wrenched her eyes from Violet to Astarion.

“He’s in real danger of ending up staked. *Hunted*. By the little fist—The Flaming Fist. An official degree, so the little horned birds tell me...”

“*Pale Petras, pudding and pie, killed those girls and made Dal cry!*”

“Great! You already know what he’s been up to! I was worried for a moment I would have to *explain*.”

“But... how did you know it was him!?”

Astarion grinned down at Dalyria, waiting to speak till *just* before she was about to give up. “I guessed! Hoped really. Thus, I proffered his name as if I had the utmost certainty when asked who could be responsible for the corpses found with *obvious vampire bites upon their necks*.” He frowned and scoffed, “What unthinking behavior! Of course it was him! Come on, how hard would it be to *burn them?*”

As Dalyria grimaced Violet finally left her chandelier, the decoration looking far worse for spawnwear, scrambling above the other pair of spawn once more, standing up and doing a little dance. “*When the guards came out to play, Pale Petras ran away!*”

“How many girls, Violet?”

“*Three... two... one... none! Brother Petras went a-hunting!*” She jumped and clapped, Astarion noting with disgust that she clattered back up on the ceiling instead of down to the floor.

“Hrm...” He pondered while rubbing his chin. “Only two bodies have been found, one of them a man... naughty-naughty spawn! What, not enough in the Underdark to eat?”

“How would you know? You’ve not ever come to see!” Dalyria glared up at him.

“I traipsed through areas *far* harder to find prey in! I managed!” He turned away from her with a huff then smiled up at Violet as he asked, “What others, Violet? How many *non-girls?*”

“Sister, stop! Don’t tell him anymore!” Dalyria shouted, waving her arms next to Astarion.

Violet went silent, crouching down (up?) on the ceiling again, her messy matted hair slipping from its clip, framing her wide-eyed face.

“*Really?* Ugh!” He flung his hands up, yanking them down quickly when Violet started to move. “Oh, *whatever*. I don’t *really* care. More dead fools for the pile. What does it matter how many... at least *these* corpses will not rise again to cause more problems for all concerned...”

“If you came down, back with us, brother, to see, then—”

“I’m *not* your brother, Dal. And I’m *not* going back with you.” He sneered down at her. “I have delivered the message and asked the questions. I have done all that was asked of me.” He grinned, wiggling his ears in triumph, closing his eyes as he inclined his head back, placing one hand on his chest.

“Asked? Wait, *who* asked you to—”

“*Stop!*” Violet screamed out.

Dalyria startled and looked up, while Astarion barely moved. “*Mm?* Whatever are you on about, Violet-dear?” His ears dramatically twitched once more.

“*Unfair!!!*” Violet shrieked, while writhing about on the ceiling.

“Astarion, stop it!” hissed Dalyria, rapidly looking between the other two spawn.

“*Mmm?*” He tilted his head to the side, eyes wide and innocent. “I’m not doing anything...?” He was still for a moment, then his ears started slowly wiggling again, inciting a new round of shrieks and yelps from Violet.

“*Astarion!*” Dalyria stomped her foot and bared her teeth at him.

“I think you made your point, little bat,” Jaheira finally spoke up. She had been leaning against the wall with her arms crossed for almost this entire exchange, walking over she shook her head and chuckled, “I declare you two tied.”

“Oh, very well.” His ear wiggles ceased.

Dalyria looked between the pair of them, her mouth hanging open in disbelief.

“Why couldn’t you make him stop!!!” Violet hissed at Dalyria, shaking a fist at her.

“No one can *make* me do anything anymore!” He grinned, spreading his arms wide. “You should all listen to *me*, in truth! After all... I *am* the current vampire lord of the city...”

“What.” said Dalyria. Violet fell silent, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Technically.” He shrugged. “I *was* the one who killed the bastard. *Sooooooooo*... the title is mine!” He inspected his fingernails then looked at Dalyria out of the corner of his eye. “Honestly, it’s rather obvious, aren’t you supposed to be the smart one?”

“... that’s not how it works.”

“Says *who!*?” Astarion spun around to shout at her, waving an arm around widely. “How would *you* know! How would *any of us* know! All he ever taught us, all he ever *let* us learn, was... was...”

He trailed off when Jaheira put a hand on his shoulder. Oh. He was much closer to Dalyria now, several steps closer, and leaning down. Ah. He had been yelling right in her face again. No wonder she was backed up against the bookcase now.

Astarion licked his lips nervously as he straightened up again, coughing before he said, “If some *ooooh...* vampiric council or whatever disagrees? Let them send me a nasty letter! Which I will discard! Or maybe frame and use as target practice... I have not yet decided.” He finished with a flippant wave of his hand.

“You cannot be serious,” said Dalyria.

“The point is... *you* have to listen to *me!*”

She dragged her hand down her face while muttering, “I cannot believe I actually missed you...”

“... you missed me?” he asked, very quietly.

Violet sang in a saccharine sweet voice, hanging and undulating from side to side with the rhythm.

“Eggshell spawn is now eggshell lord? Lies!

Forever always only Cazador 's favorite pleasure toy!

Fiddle diddle, diddle fiddle!

Little lost love toy!”

She pointed at Astarion and oh, how she laughed!

Counting would not soothe the rage that flared. Numbers did not go that high. Astarion’s pointless breaths came in ragged hissed gasps. The edges of his vision blackened. The long absent bees returned, buzzing away in his ears, muffling all other sounds. His dead heart ached, not with loss at this moment, but with an agony only the undead could ever know; the torment of forced stillness when all the miserable blackened organ desired was to rapidly beat.

He was very vaguely aware of Dalyria screaming something. He did not bother to pay attention; why should he care what she was saying? It made no difference.

All thoughts poured from his mind, unneeded trappings, droplets flowing down into the gutters, where they belonged. Almost all.

I am going to murder Violet. Then I am going to set the building on fire.

A giant paw smacked Violet off the ceiling and Astarion out of his own head. He took a step backwards, eyes wide as he watched her sail downward.

She clattered down onto the table with enough force it shifted position, knocking the chairs askew. Almost instantly she sat up, hissing, her left arm obviously dislocated at the shoulder.

Only for a giant *pair* of paws to descend upon her, pushing her down flat on her back again. Oh, they belonged to a giant owlbear. It shoved its beak right into her face, and roared, coating Violet’s ashen

face with spittle.

“I’ll be good. Very good!” she squeaked out.

The owl bear growled, its closed beak touching her nose.

“I’m sorry, Astarion, I’m sorry! Forgive this fool who was cruel!”

Astarion burst out laughing, only roughly *half* hysterically.

The owlbear’s paws returned to the ground with a heavy thud, and Jaheira promptly stood up, brushing her hands off against one another as she nodded to Astarion. “Good?”

“*Glorious!*” It was just as well he didn’t have to find a way to fit homicide *or* arson into his schedule tonight; he was still *so tired*, after all.

“*Who are you!?*” Dalyria shouted at Jaheira, her red eyes oh so very wide. She always did get so worked up over *nothing*.

“The old woman who won’t leave Astarion alone. Very odd title, I know.”

Dalyria blew air out of her nose and pressed her lips together tightly, stifling her scream.

“Who I am is not important. Later it can be important. What is important *now* is that this *stops*. This whirlpool. Endless chaos and bickering. I have been given the smallest glimpse of your shared history. I do not claim to fully understand. I do not need to understand to know that this?” She made a sweeping motion, encompassing all three spawn. “Is not the way. Not if you want to move beyond. Be more.”

“I like her!” Violet sat up again, her arm hanging limply.

“She dislocated your arm!” Dalyria pointed out as she rushed over to the table.

“So have you!”

“She’s got you there, Dal.”

“You are here tonight for reasons other than to snipe at each other, yes?”

“Maybe...” Astarion tilted his head back and forth as he played up pondering the decision. “Maybe *not*... if that was all, then the task is accomplished. Thus, time to leave!” He grinned, taking one exaggerated step towards the door.

“If you wish, little bat. Honestly? Who could blame you.”

Dalyria hurriedly finished jamming Violet’s bones back into their proper positions, shouting as she ran towards the others. “Wait! No, Bro—Astarion!”

He took another exaggerated step, dramatically turning away from her.

“Make him stay!” She pleaded to Jaheira. “He... he listens to you! Whoever you are!”

“He listens to me, as I will not *make* him do anything. Guilt into? Perhaps. Not make.”

Dalyria turned away, only to bump into Astarion, who pushed her away and glared down. “Are you implying she’s my new *master*,” he growled.

“No! No! No, Astarion, not at all!”

“Coming here was a mistake. Yet another I’ve made in this oh so *very* long night...”

“Please... please stay! I... I’m sorry, Astarion. This is important I... this might help you! Maybe... maybe you can even... even remember? If we... know more about you?” She looked up at him, red eyes so wide and pleading.

He reared back, rage flaring back to unlife! How dare she dangle *this* out to him, as some potential reward! Remembering was *obviously* impossible! Who did she think she was?!

Just as he was about to tell her exactly where to stick her plans for the evening, for one moment, blue eyes were pleading at him, from a less pale face, one with no bite marks upon its neck. Astarion flinched, pushing away visions of smashing her offered vase into that face again and again and again. Gods, was that only the night before? It felt as if he lost his mind at the university simultaneously forever ago and mere minutes prior.

“Astarion? Brother?”

All the women were looking at him, undead and living alike. He awkwardly stepped back, then flashed the whole room a grin.

“Really, you invited me here so early, what did you expect to happen? With *Ms. Blooming Violet* here! So rude of you, Dal. I am *very* busy man nowadays; I will have you know. Reflecting my station! Lord things taking up most of my nights.” He buffed his fingernails on his shirt, casting a sideways glance at her.

“What have you been doing, bro—Astarion?” Dalyria very graciously took the bait.

“Oh well, honestly, not toooo much of recent, rather slow day, honestly... first advising the city’s newest Grand Duke on so many important matters.”

She waited for the punchline. When he just raised his eyebrows at her, she said, “You’re joking...”

Violet started knocking everything she could reach off the table.

“You doubt me, Dalyria-dear? Is it so hard to believe my true talents have *finally* been properly recognized once more? Why, you’ve met him yourself!”

Dalyria blinked, combing over her memory. “I have...? I heard there was another Ravengard but... brother, you *know* I’ve been in the Underdark! Stop playing games with me!”

Astarion grinned down at her, relishing her confusion for a bit too long as her expression shifted to a glare, before finally saying, “Dal! How uncouth of you! First you try to bite him and now you pretend to not know him?” He clicked his tongue at her a few times while shaking his head in admonishment.

“*What?!*”

“Oh, did I forget to give proper introductions? Ah well, maybe I was about to tell you who he was and then you *tried to bite him in my flat*.”

Dalyria stared at him; she looked at Jaheira, weakly saying, “Is that true? That can’t be true...”

Jaheira nodded, opening her mouth to reply, but was pushed aside by Astarion, who loomed over Dalyria again, bragging with glee, “Oh, before you try to bite *her*, to answer your question from before, *she* is the High Harper of Baulder’s Gate!”

“... what? No! Astarion stop... stop trying to ... do whatever it is you are doing! Stop lying! She’s obviously a powerful druid but... You keep saying we don’t have to *do* things like this anymore!”

Jaheira flashed her Harper pin at Dalyria, inciting a disbelieving gasp.

“Annnnd I assisted her with *many* important documents today!” He twirled around, bowing. “Isn’t that right, my dear little *High Harper*?”

“Yes, he was very most helpful. Lots of those supposed to be running this city do not care what happens to the lower portion, so it has fallen to those who do not even officially have a role here to make sure it happens. Astarion has saved me many hours of headaches. Caused only half as many by his own actions, fair trade.”

“Oh... oh... is... is that... ah...?” Dalyria put a shaking hand to her brow, stepping back as he loomed over her *again*.

Astarion tapped a fang, thinking, and then held a finger aloft, Dalyria flinching from the sudden motion as he shouted out, “Ah! Annnnd I know an archmage! An archmage that I helped recover from his great... folly! He has expressed his deep gratitude to me for my various assistances! Saying I single handedly corrected his course in life!” He grinned, leaping up on the table to pose triumphantly, barely processing Violet scrambling away to avoid his feet. “See how shortsighted *Cazador* was... I could have been *so much* more than his... his... his prized courtesan!”

As quick as he was on the table he was back on the floor, stomping towards Dalyria. “I *really* was a magistrate once you know! *You should all know!*!”

While pointlessly panting, his foolish lungs hungry for additional air that did nothing but power his speech, he searched his mind for more evidence to strength his argument, prove his case, beyond all doubt!

“A *cleric* favored by her *goddess* has invited me into her home to—”

His only *slightly* manic tirade was interrupted by Jaheira gently shaking him. “Little bat, I do not think your words are having any more impact. Nor have they for the last few boasts.” She motioned at the other spawn. Violet was crammed back on top of a bookcase, huddling behind some ghastly ceramic bauble, while Dalyria was standing exactly as she was last Astarion bothered to pay attention; her hand was even still upon her brow as she stared at absolutely nothing at all. Astarion blinked. He had not noticed Violet’s movement... or Dalyria’s lack thereof.

“Oh.” He peered at her. “Dal? Hello? Toril to Dalyria?” He reached out towards her, slowly...

Roughly five seconds later Astarion was looking down at that same hand, a pair of fresh puncture wounds in his palm.

Two spawn cowered on top of the bookcase; Dalyria was trembling right next to Violet, who had put her arm around the shorter elf. The ceramic statue now shattered on the floor below. This latter

development was the only positive change in all of this mess, Astarion mused as he licked at his wound.

“Ah, yes, that’s right. What it’s like to be on the receiving end... I have gotten sloppy, used to spending my time with people who won’t *bite me!*”

Jaheira righted a chair that had been knocked askew, sitting at the rather abused table. “With that, one point for her! Now you are all tied, and I declare this game over. Come, sit! Let us play a new game, talking to each other with nobody on the ceiling or walls. And no biting!”

“*Hmph!* Rude. Two of us haven’t bitten *anyone* this whole entire time!” He watched Violet slink down the wall and muttered, “Though not for lack of trying...”

“No biting? Not bite fighting?” Violet crawled on the table again, tilting her head at Jaheira.

“I will make you a deal. If I bite someone, you can bite all you wish.”

Violet stopped and thought, putting a finger to her chin and singing out her own thinkythought noises. “Okay!” She finally decided, grinning broadly, only to gasp when Astarion grabbed her upper arms.

He gently, but firmly, moved her off the table top to a waiting chair. “Chair. *Pretend* to be civilized. It is the least you can do after taunting *me* with your endless gallivanting about on the ceiling.” She relaxed and seemed to acquiesce to his most reasonable demand.

“Ugh. Your hair is a mess!” Astarion reached out and *tried* to run his fingers through her hair, only to almost immediately be stopped by the mess of tangles.

Violet reared back, hissing at him.

He frowned at her, then leaned down, hissing back.

The two spawn glared at each other for a moment, noses practically touching.

He wiggled his ears once.

She burst out into laughter.

“Stop hissing at each other!” Dalyria called out as she hesitantly climbed down the bookcase.

Her fellow spawn exchanged a glance, then turned towards her and hissed in unison.

Jaheira laughed, motioning for Dalyria to sit next to her and patting her on the back when she slumped down in it. “Relax, I think they are fine to hiss at each other right now, leave them be.”

“Come, Violet dear, let us deal with this mess you have attached to your head...” he moved behind her chair, making disapproving noises as he examined her hair, a comb now in his hand.

“Booooooring! That’ll take so looong!”

“Well, then we can simply chop it all off and let it regrow.” The comb had been exchanged for a dagger.

“No!” Violet ducked away. “I hate how it feels! Itchy! Like tiny worms wiggling out my scalp! *Worms crawling out, but no worms crawling in! No piccolo on my snout!*”

Astarion twirled the comb around his in his fingers once more. “No is a complete sentence. One of the many things I have learned!” He got to work on her hair. “I pass this knowledge on to you... *sometimes* saying less, is more!”

For a few, all too short, minutes he worked on her hair in blissful peace; Violet humming something that sounded like half a dozen tunes crammed together as she kicked her legs, always slightly off rhythm. Alas, like all good things, this could not last, as soon she added words to the chaotic cadence.

“Aurelia, Astarion, Violet, Petras, Dalyria, Yousen, annnd Leon! Seven spawn went out to play.”

He did not respond, focusing on a particularly nasty knot.

“The sun rose, night ended, and one did not heed Master’s call!

Astarion, the most naughty of them all!

Roamed far, with such gall!

There and back again,

But they say you can never go home again...” She stopped singing to ask him, “Is it true?”

“Gods, I hope so.”

“I’m sorry your pretty fire woman exploded.”

“...me too.”

“Flames danced upon her, oil set aflame on water... and I liked how she swung that huge axe around.”

“Me too...” He closed his eyes for a moment to steady himself. “Please, Violet, I have had a...” he softly laughed, “decidedly *ungentle* evening. I tire of words at the moment...”

“Can I sing more?”

“As long as you do not expect me to comment or join, be my guest.”

While he worked, she sang a variety of random songs, a most eclectic jumble, one melody flowing into another, with no real rhyme or reason. Mostly popular songs from the past two centuries; musical theater tunes, tavern songs, and even some children’s nursery rhymes thrown in for flavor.

Just as well she prattled on herself, it helped him ignore the conversation Jaheira and Dalyria were having. They had been talking for some time, with Astarion purposely not listening, not *really*, except keeping his ears primed for any utterance of his name. Or little bat. Or Brother. None of those words drifted over, thus he let them babble on, focusing on taming the rat’s nest that was Violet’s hair, skillfully thinking of nothing much at all as he worked.

Sometime later, there was a noise rather like a bubble popping, a rather *large* bubble, but a bubble all the same. The spell cloaking those upstairs faded, Astarion was suddenly aware of *so* many heart beats. My, my, they *were* having quite the party up there indeed. He ran the comb through Violet’s hair a final time; he had finished untangling her locks a while ago, but quite enjoyed the lack of conversation the task allowed him, so he kept pretending to work.

“Excellent timing. You look less like something that died in the gutter now, as the next event of this night that *will not end* begins.”

“I died backstage.”

“I... I know, my dear. I know.”

The duergar with scales on his face was the first to descend the stairs, followed by a collection of various other under-dwellers. “Now, follow me, straight through here and out to the street, then our tour will begin.” He motioned for the group to keep moving, past the quartet downstairs, most of them did so, but a few milled near the open doorway.

“Sorry for the delay, Doctor Dalyria! I did not realize how long my post-symposium programming would run. I simply was carried away with my vacation slides, ah, but how could one not give deserved attention to each and every one of the Glimmersea’s luminescent chambers. It was invigorating! Isn’t that right, my friends?”

A chorus of unenthusiastic vague agreement did nothing to dampen his mood.

“And now! We will leave you to your own important work, as we go to see the city at night. Most of us, anyway. Enjoy your free run of the facilities upstairs.”

“It’s fine, Mister Havkelaag,” Dalyria said, getting to her feet, making sure her hair bun was still tight and smoothing out her clothing.

“Now let’s see, I know the loveliest little library bar...” mused Havkelaag as he walked towards the door. The crowd produced more unenthusiastic groans.

“I can point you in a *much* better direction,” Astarion said, stepping away from the table. “Which one of you is the *least* boring?”

Several members of the society spoke at once, “Limeleech.”

“Limeleech.”

“Anybody but Havkelaag.”

“Limeleech.”

The crowd was in agreement.

A chipper looking drow woman stepped from the mass of academics, waving her arms as she said, “It’s me! Hi! I’m Limeleech!”

Astarion smiled and started giving her a *much* better itinerary than whatever was previously planned.

A tall drow woman walked down the stairs, stopping behind Dalyria. “That’s the subject?” She was not wearing Society of Brilliance robes, but instead a more standard drow traveling cloak and leathers.

Dalyria startled and turned to face the woman. “Ah... yes. That’s him...”

“She talks of our little bat?” Jaheira asked, joining the other two, looking this new drow over.

“Yes, uh, she’s helping us tonight. This is—”

“I am Ica. A necromancy expert from Menzoberranzan. I am not a member of this society. Doctor Dalyria and I began working with them at the same time, roughly. I broached their aid while seeking to understand disruptions in our necrotic current. Such a large quantity of vampire spawn has an impact on more than the blood containing wildlife they encounter.”

“I see, I see... and you are interested in *this* vampire spawn because?”

“Ah, Ica, this is—”

“I require some air,” said Ica, walking away, passing Astarion as he returned, having completed his latest important advising duties.

Dalyria sighed. “She’s... not easy to get along with, but she’s an expert on necromancy, especially curses. Let’s go upstairs and start setting up. I’ll explain what all the equipment is, Astarion.”

“Violet will stay! I put roots down... no! Roots up!” Violet leapt onto the table, then to the wall, cackling as she scuttled up to the ceiling, perching next to her favorite of all the chandeliers.

“What? No, sister!” Dalyria grit her teeth when all Violet did in reply was hiss at her.

“Oh, come off it, Dal, let her stay down here, why do you care?”

“We... we should stay together.”

Astarion motioned up at her. “She’s a grown vampire spawn! Been one longer than *you* have. Even if she was also only in double digits at her turning...”

“That... that has nothing to do with anything!”

“Really, some nerve you have, telling her what to do, when *you*’ve let her hair get into such a *frightful* state down there...” When Dalyria started to object again, Astarion flicked her nose.

“Ugh. *Fine*.” She threw her hands up in the air and then started up the stairs, Astarion following after, only to pause when Jaheira started laughing.

“What are *you* on about?”

“Oh, nothing, little bat. Nothing at all. I thought of a funny thing Minsc did! You know the old mind, she wanders.”

“... uh *huh*.” He glared down at her, then squawking out his futile objections as she pushed him to keep walking up the stairs, following close behind.

All was still and quiet, not a single living soul remaining on the lower level of the lodge, until the door opened once more, a single duergar and drow entering.

“Master Havkelaag, thank you for indulging me.”

“Anything for the pursuit of knowledge! I hope you collected the data you needed; I’ll have you know it was a bear of a time keeping everyone up there for so long, they are all very eager to see the city!”

Ica approached one of the large crystals that Violet had flung to the floor, saved only by Dalyria's quick actions. She held her hand out and intoned, "*Congrego*." The crystal glowed a sickly pale green hue, the light flowing as if a liquid towards a rolled scroll she was waving through the glow. Soon, the glow faded, all of it absorbed into the parchment.

"Well now, that looks promising. Really, I have been thinking of placing some of these little beauties about myself! You never know who, or what, might wander through the door. All for the pursuit of knowledge, of course." said Havkelaag.

She unrolled the scroll and read the newly created markings. "Oh my. The *doctor* spawn was not wrong. Perhaps her brain has not fully rotted away after all. How interesting, a *true* broken spawn. What an amazing opportunity... simply remarkable..."

"Right then! Enjoy your new toy, try not to make a mess, we won't be back till just afore sun up, I reckon."

She nodded, slipping the scroll into her pocket before proceeding up the stairs, as Havkelaag rejoined his fellows on the street.

Unseen by anyone, Violet skittered down the wall, grabbed the large crystal, then returned with it to the rafters.

Chapter End Notes

Oh well I'm sure that's nothing to worry about.
Time to go upstairs!!!!

Chapter 17: Real Astarion Lab Rat Hours

Chapter Summary

Time to GET TO WORK! Well, this time Astarion isn't the one at work, so things will work out better. Right? Yes? Hrm...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Astarion stopped a few steps past the stairs in the enclosed porch at the rear of the Society of Brilliance lodge, Jaheira moving past him.

“This place was certainly... neater, the last time I was here...”

It was an *utter* mess; he wrinkled his nose as he surveyed the metal scraps, charred wood, and random contraptions all about. Nudging one of the piles with a foot, he found a charred book, intermingled with shattered crystals. Well, at least that was *one* object identified. Partially.

“*Please* tell me *this* is not the equipment you've been badgering me about, Dal.”

Dalyria quickly tiptoed through the piles of academic detritus, pausing at the entrance into the lodge proper. “No, Astarion. It's not. This is from the seminar, their final demonstration went slightly differently than planned.”

“What, did Violet touch it?” He followed, making big production of tip-toeing through the clutter.

“Not as far as anyone knows! *Shh!* None of this is important for what I, er, *we* want to do anyway.” She tugged the handle, her scowl vanishing, replaced with a nervous grin. “Ah, just... just a tiny bit more to wait.”

“What, they don't trust you with a key? Good thing I'm already dead, or all this anticipation might do me in.”

“It's never been locked before...”

Astarion waited. Then waited. And for some reason waited still more. He flung an arm out. “Well? Get on with it. Pick the bloody lock!”

“Astarion! No! We're guests here.”

He stared down at her, tilting his head to the side. “...so?”

“Little bat, come here, something more important than teasing her.” Jaheira waved him over to the opposite side of the porch, in front of the large windows.

“Ugh, *why?*” He kicked at a random metal rod. “There's so much stuff in the *waaaay*...”

“Then stay there. If you do not care we are trapped here, why should I care to make you?” She rapped her knuckles on what should have been thin air, creating a series of soft buzzing sounds.

Instantly Astarion was next to her, spreading his fingers out on the solid air; there was no glass in these windows, but yet they blocked passage all the same. Somewhat like when he tried to enter a *true* home with no invitation, but without the mildly unpleasant tingle. “Dalyria?! What is the meaning of this?”

The answer came not from his fellow spawn, but the drow woman ascending the staircase. “To ensure testing is not disrupted. Delicate instruments can be misled by a stray gust of wind or fluctuating ambient aether.” She stopped next to Dalyria. “It’s sound proof as well. My, excuse me, *our* subjects can become distracted.”

“How useful for you,” said Jaheira, in tandem with Astarion’s grunt of displeasure.

Dalyria smiled nervously. “We should get started. We’ve kept him waiting long enough.”

“Very well.” Ica unlocked the door and entered.

Dalyria held it open for Astarion, smiling still.

“If you want to leave, I will not guilt you,” Jaheira whispered.

“No, but *she* will,” he replied with a sigh, leaping across the mess on the floor and entering. Inside proper was much like the porch, with various mysterious arcane devices everywhere he looked. However, the internal chaos was at least more ordered, these devices appeared functional and were not toppled over. One was softly humming, a deep tone that put Astarion’s teeth on edge. The drow necromancer sat at a table, writing in a notebook as she looked over a glowing scroll, spread out next to her.

“What *is* all this?” He asked, stopping barely far enough into the room to allow anyone else to enter.

“The reason I do not visit the healers, much to Rion’s aggravation. All they do now is wave a crystal at you and tell you every part of you is broken or wrong. Or broken *and* wrong!” Jaheira crossed her arms as she leaned against the wall.

Dalyria said, “Um... the testing instruments are *similar* to *certain* modern healing devices, but collect different readings.”

“There’s so many; we’ll be here for *days*...” He slumped down, then narrowed his eyes at her. “Is this why you ensured I can’t jump out the windows?”

“*No!*” Dalyria pinched her nose then smiled up at Astarion again. “We’re only using three of them, with only one set of tests taking any time at all.”

“Be still my beating heart. Oh, wait... wait... bit late for that.”

Laying on one of the society’s couches was a roughly torso-sized rock, covered with arcane glyphs; Dalyria easily shifted it upright, showing it was a geode, the inside filled with crystals.

“This will give us your baseline, you won’t even know it’s doing anything to you.” At Astarion’s skeptical look she stammered out, “Because it won’t be! It measures ambient necromantic energy. What radiates from us as we move and use our abilities.”

“Have you been leaving residue in my basement, little bat?”

Astarion glared at her in response.

“...you’ve been in her basement?” She shrank back when he whipped his head around to glare at her instead. “Um. No residue. Think of it more like heat from the living. This device is fairly old, and doesn’t give me too much to work with, *but* using it in tandem with this gives much more in depth results!” She smiled brightly, moving a few steps to another device, motioning at it proudly.

“... a dismembered golem made into a poor screen that contracted a fungal infection?” Astarion commented, eyebrows raised at the odd collection of metal rods with horrid fuzzy growths. It was roughly as tall as he was, folded like a screen so it could stand on its own, though all the holes in it made it a rather poor one. It was generously adorned with glowing gemstones, because of *course* it was.

“What?” Dalyria looked up at Astarion, baffled, then looked at the instrument again, at its steel piping and brass gears, bound to each other via mycelium twine. “Oh. No. It’s golem architecture with myconid connectivity. It’s called a visualizer; using data encoded as slightly manipulated crystalline structures it gives us a much greater picture by collating the various sources. I’ve been able to see so many fine details of how the curse animates us! I’ll show you after we feed your results into—”

“I am *not* touching that.”

“Brother, you don’t have to touch it! Just carry some of the gems on you. For a short time.”

He wrinkled his nose and huffed, “*Fine.*”

“There’s one more device we *might* be using. It’s minor, but I don’t want you to freak out about it later.”

“I don’t *freak out.*”

Dalyria looked at Astarion for a long moment, then motioned at a black box sitting on a small table. “This is from Ica’s lab, it um... it does a lot of things. One use is to read how much life essence is in blood from various sources.”

He peered down at the rather unremarkable box, the only feature of interest on it a number of small hatches, currently shut. “Am I supposed to be impressed? *We* can do that.”

“This is more reliable! Repeatable.” At his blank look she tried once more, “It gives a numerical read out!”

“I’ll write down some numbers in a notebook next time I eat, *just* for you, Dal. Have you set up a post box down there yet?”

“No.”

“Well.” He waved a hand about. “You should get on that. I’ve rather enjoyed receiving post...” he pointedly did *not* turn to glare at Jaheira, who was doing a poor job of containing her laughter.

Ica approached, opening one of the hatches as she pulled a vial from her pocket.

“Are you doing final calibrations?” asked Dalyria.

“No. I am feeding the spiders.” She poured live crickets from the vial, then shut the door, fastening it securely.

Astarion backed away from the table. “I hate modern technology.”

Dalyria smiled up at him. “It’s been so wonderful to use equipment like this again. It’s come so far in the decades I... I... missed. They can store so much spell work now, such as teleportation! It has made moving around the underdark so much easier. I’ve been able to do so much, Astarion... so much.”

She clasped her hands together. “I’ve determined how much blood we need, really need, not simply how much we feel we need, accounting for so many variables. Source, health of the provider and recipient, how much power it loses when stored, and more. I’ve started to run preliminary tests on *why* active feeding from a living thinking creature has the impact it does, I’m hoping to isolate the...” Dalyria trailed off. “Oh. I’m talking too much. Sorry...” She crossed her arms and rubbed her elbows.

He bowed, “Thank you for the explanation, Doctor Dalyria, I am at your service.” She smiled slightly, the tips of her ears tinging pink.

“Too bad your star patient is already *quite* dead,” he said, motioning at himself with a flourish while grinning.

“Ugh! Astarion!” She laughed, stopping when Ica cleared her throat and tapped her fingernails on the black box. “We should get started.”

“I agree.” He wagged a finger at Dalyria. “Remember, *Doctor* Dalyria, this is for *tonight only!*”

She nodded at him, taking a notebook out of her pocket, flipping through it. “Of course, Astarion, believe me, I won’t bother you again.” She shook her head, then motioned for him to follow her. “First we’ll confirm that you’re um...”

“A broken spawn,” he helpfully supplied, fake smile plastered on.

“Ah. Um. Yes. I see you’ve been doing research too. Ahem, anyway, we’ll use the geode I showed you, we both know you *are* but this is for the baseline.”

“I already did that,” Ica said, leaning on the black box.

Dalyria froze in mid-step, her eyes going wide, taking a moment to start to respond, “Oh. Ah. Right. Never mind then. Um. Then we’ll... we’ll... then... this way, Astarion, then we... we can...” She turned and bumped into him.

“What did she do?” he coldly asked, looming over her.

“Um. Nothing bad.”

He bared his teeth and growled while Dalyria whimpered and slowly backed away.

“Cease.” The drow woman moved out from behind the table, putting a hand in her pocket. “Broken spawn are extraordinarily rare, I doubted she had properly identified your condition. My time is too valuable to waste. Thus, I confirmed.”

“Pray tell, when and how did you, exactly, *confirm* my oh so special status,” Astarion said, through gritted teeth.

“Tonight. Downstairs. While you were surrounded by attuned anchor crystals. Much more modern versions of her quaint instrument. I have simply saved us time.” She pulled her hand out, revealing two roughly thumb sized oblong pale-yellow crystals. “I prepared one for each of us.”

“Thank you,” Dalyria quickly said, taking one, then smiled brightly up at Astarion as she started to move towards the visualizer, that odd golem and myconid fusion device. “Since I have this already, we can—”

“Dal, I don’t like this. I don’t like *her*.” He turned but did not follow. Behind him, Ica returned to her black spider box, opening another hatch.

“Astarion, it’s *fine*. You were just complaining about how long this was taking. Now it will take *less* time.” She kept smiling up at him, waiting, while he glared down at her. Behind Astarion, in Dalyria’s clear sight line, the necromancer dropped her crystal through the hatch.

He sighed as he hunched over. “Fine. *Fine*.”

“Ah! Good. Um. This way now.” She ran to the proper bit of equipment, holding the crystal out to the myconid matrix; it extended several tendrils, wrapping around the gemstone to tug it into position.

Astarion threw his hands up and started to follow, only to bump into Jaheira’s outstretched arm. “Hold, little bat.”

“Uh...” he eloquently said, staying put as he watched Jaheira approach the drow necromancer.

“You do not strike me as one to be doing this for charity. What is it you are hoping to gain?”

Ica looked up, her face blank.

Neither woman spoke, the silence dragging on and on.

Dalyria ducked behind Astarion, he started to push her away, then realized she was trembling. He squeezed her upper arm, twice, pointedly jerking his eyes towards Jaheira with each squeeze. The agreed upon spawn signal of safety.

After Dalyria’s tremors lessened, she squeezed his forearm thrice. The agreed upon spawn signal of unsafety.

Ah, so that’s how it is then.

Dalyria did not fully trust this drow necromancer, yet was so *damned* insistent. Why was getting information about *him* so damn important? She had *thousands* of others down there!

As reasonable as Dalyria thought herself to be, she was still very paranoid. Honestly, quite a reasonable position to take, considering, well, everything. But still, did she have a good reason not to trust the drow? A draw regarding the drow then.

“How do we understand how something functions?” Ica broke the silence, then answered her own question, “A powerful method is examining a version of it that does not.”

“Broken even?” Jaheira looked at Astarion.

The broken spawn of the hour glared at Dalyria, who was unable to meet his eyes. He huffed, glaring at the back of her head instead.

She could have *told* him this.

...but honestly, he should have figured it out on his own; he *would* have, if he bothered to try to think on it for any length of time, rather than simply dreading this entire ordeal. Having to see her again.

Ica waved a hand at the spawn. “The exact mechanisms underlying the vampiric curse are lamentably poorly understood. Very frustrating, especially for necromancers. Such fascinating creations, the most living undead of them all, retaining their untouched minds and, in the initial application of the curse, unaltered souls. Aware, fully, of their eternal torment.”

“You sound too much like some rather rude books,” said Astarion.

“Do you know the ultimate origins of your curse? There *are* multiple. One reason efforts at deconstructing the curse have not been successful. Many lesser scholars do not realize.”

He shook his head. This curse, passed from vampire to spawn, through the centuries, he supposed it *had* to start somewhere. He had never once pondered any of it. All that mattered was Cazador passed it onto *him*. The notion of Cazador as a spawn, let alone a mortal, was impossible to consider, until he was forced to confront the bastard’s blasted journals.

“I... I think ours comes from the abyss. By way of the hells,” Dalyria said, not turning around.

“Correct. First conjured in the abyss, drawn from a particular type of demon; then modified in the grand arcane research labyrinth of Mephistopheles. Who unleashed it upon the mortal realms, where it has propagated, unendingly, leaving misery and pain in its wake. A devil’s delight.”

“*Lovely*.” The scars on his back itched at the very thought.

“That’s why he could offer the master the ritual...” Dalyria stepped forward.

“The Rite of Profane Ascension. Not offered to *your master*.” Dalyria shrank away. “An ancient experiment, first proposed over a millennium ago. The Lord of Cania must be very eager to see the anguish his new type of monster could inflict upon the material plane.”

“See, Dalyria, she agrees with me! We *should* set it all up again!” He smiled brightly, not letting his grin fade one iota in the face of her disapproval.

Jaheira clapped. “Good lesson. You have not answered my question. Why? You do not strike me as one who is after knowledge for knowledge’s sake.”

“I did not think you would believe me, without this information. If I can master the vampiric curse, I can present the boon to the ruling families. Securing my position, and that of my daughters, and their daughters, for millennia.”

“Goody gumdrops for *you*. What do *we* get out of it? What do *I* get out of it? If I’m so bloody important, convince me not to waltz my glorious *broken* self right out of here into the night.”

“*Astarion*,” hissed Dalyria.

Ica stepped out from behind the table, closing the distance to Astarion, stopping a bit too close for his liking.

“Do you lust for power? Or is that aspect of your kin broken in you as well?” She leaned even closer. “I can give it to you. I hypothesize, paradoxically, a broken curse puts you closer to a true vampire

than you realize.” She reached out to him.

“Don’t touch me.” Astarion narrowed his eyes and stepped back.

Ica smirked then dropped her hand down, her face blank once more.

“Your choice, little bat. I would advise you to be wary, but I know you already are.”

“Ah.” Yet another person respecting his agency and giving him *choices*. How infuriating.

“Astarion, *please*. I... I think if I get data about you, about a fractured version of our shared curse, based on what I read in the books you lent me, it can help me in efforts to *cure us!* Especially those that are freshly turned. If this condition is as rare as she says then...”

“I recall you promised to give me those books back.”

“I brought them with me. You can have them after.”

“Fine. *Again*. No more bloody surprises. This is exhausting.” He spread his arms wide, putting on a grin. “Well, *Doctor Dalyria*, what do you need me to do, this oh so prized broken spawn?”

“That!”

“What?”

“Keep your arms out like that, don’t move.”

He did as she asked, watching her buzz about him, strapping crystals to his wrists, ankles, forehead, and pinning them to his clothing in several other spots.

“Do you have to make those so *tight?*”

“Yes! They need to not slip! Here, one more.” She reached up, snapping a band around his neck.

“Dal, if you have a *true* bondage kink, there are *better* ways than this to reveal it. I won’t judge. Much. At least not where you can hear me.”

She gritted her teeth for a moment, then said, “That’s all of them. Now, I need you to move around and—”

“Clean up, test-spawn.”

“*Excuse me?* No, no, no, you don’t get to forget I have a *name* because she’s slapped a collar upon me!” He wagged his finger at her.

Ica did not respond, not even looking his way, merely clipped several scrolls to the screen-like apparatus, allowing them to unfurl.

“Oh, that would be perfect!” Dalyria started pushing him toward the door, drawing her hands back as if burnt when he whipped around and loudly hissed at her, before stomping outside.

“I will go stand with you,” Jaheira said, following him.

Dalyria chewed on her lower lip, startling slightly when Ica held a scroll out.

“Excellent work, Doctor. Your extensive experience in calming half feral spawn is showing.” Ica leaned closer and whispered into Dalyria’s ear, “You would be most remiss to allow this opportunity to slip through your clawed fingers. You need only to give the signal, and we will move to my laboratory. My little helpers now know him, and the anchor crystals can easily reach him from their positions downstairs.”

Dalyria swallowed, then nodded as she unrolled the scroll. After a moment to compose herself, she joined the others.

“Took you long enough,” Astarion said, arms crossed.

“You could have started without me. You’re set up.”

“Oh.” He looked around at the utter mess. “I don’t suppose I can simply light it all ablaze?”

“No! You know how to tidy, Astarion, please!”

He grumbled and set about cleaning up the mess of supposed scientific progress. Occasionally Dalyria gave him more detailed instructions, such as telling him to try to lift up objects far too heavy for him to lift or to try to scale the walls. All the while she kept glancing at the scroll.

Eventually, it flared bright green, causing her to say, “We’re done.”

“Really? But he missed a spot over there.” Jaheira laughed as she dodged the remains of a burnt book Astarion flung at her head, laughing more when he growled and aimed a very rude gesture in her direction.

Back inside, Ica was detaching scrolls from the visualizer. “Good, you spurred him to sufficient activity. It will not take me long to process the results.”

“Spurred him?!” Astarion squawked.

Dalyria smiled up at him. “Do you have any questions while we wait?” She quickly added, “*Besides* can I leave or why did I agree to this.”

Astarion closed his mouth, then pursed his lips as he considered *other* questions. “Violet was still sporting a plethora of pointy teeth, but you *appear* to have lost yours.” He tilted his head to the side. “Couldn’t help but notice. What with how you, oh, you know, *bit me*.”

“What Cazador did to us faded, our new powers are gone. Including the physical changes, if we are injured.” She sighed. “Petras *literally* had his teeth kicked out by a deep rothe. That’s how we learned.”

“*Ooooh!* So, tell me, do—”

“The runes on our backs regenerate.”

“Ah. Of course they do.” He frowned. “Of bloody *course* they do. *Whhhy* do I even *bother* to get my hopes up...”

Ica moved to a table laden with scrolls, books, and yet more strange contraptions. She rapidly unrolled several scrolls and inserted gemstones into slots, generating a number of floating glowing graphs and other projections. Dalyria scurried over, taking her notebook out of a pocket, and started

rapidly jotting down information. The two researchers conversed in hushed tones, both occasionally glancing at Astarion.

After a few minutes of *that* Astarion rolled his eyes and began to take the gems off.

“Stop. You were not told to remove those,” Ica said, not even looking over.

“Astarion, please, leave them on, if we need more tests it’ll be difficult to replicate their placements exactly.”

“This is all rather uncomfortably reminiscent of some of the bastard’s *family* nights. Except you are commanding me without your own strings being pulled.” He paused, his eyes drifting to Ica. “Or perhaps *not?*”

Dalyria slammed her notebook down on the table. She was quickly on her feet, growling at Astarion, “*Stop it!* You *know* I want to *help* you. Help all of us! This is the first step. Maybe we can even figure out *why* your curse broke!”

“That is, in my *expert* opinion, the most important unknown concerning the broken ones,” Ica said, rapidly swapping gemstones.

Astarion grinned down at Dalyria, pleased he reduced her to growling and yelling; she so loved to act like she was better than that, if he kept it up, could he even make her hiss? “Ooooooh, I know why. If only you bothered to *ask me* instead of treating me like tonight’s entertainment,” he smugly said.

“Then *tell* me, brother!”

“*Still* not your brother, Dal,” he clipped out. “It’s because he put me in that damn tomb for a year when I was new! Starving!” He scoffed at her, “Honestly, you should be embarrassed I’m having to spell it out for you,” he finished with a dismissive wave.

“He did *what?*!”

“Is it really possible you never heard?” he pondered, tapping his fingers together. “Though really, with our *busy* schedules, so packed full of torments, who had the want or time to tell you about the horrors that occurred *before* you joined our unmerry band...”

Dalyria raced back to the table, scribbling in her notebook again. Next to her Ica smiled down at her own writings.

“And he never did it again! Special Astarion only punishment. So *many* things just for me! How *wonderful!*” He spun in place, striking a pose for Dalyria, who refused to be impressed.

“How new?”

He frowned at her, crossing his arms. “You are *never* any fun.”

“Astarion. When?”

“First decade. I was very... *new*. Trust me, that is when it broke. Things... occurred. That I’m not telling you about in front of *her*.”

Dalyria flipped through her notes, looked over the readings, and started scribbling equations, muttering to herself in elvish. Astarion tried very hard not to look interested as he peered over her

shoulder.

“... could you please just... wait over there, Astarion.”

“Do not touch the gems. Or anything else,” Ica added.

Astarion performatively sighed and made a big show of stomping over to where Jaheira was waiting, plopping down next to her.

“How you holding up, little bat?”

He studied her out of the corner of his eye for a moment. “Little isn’t code for runty, is it?”

“No.”

“Hah! I do feel foolish now that I asked you to accompany me tonight. These proceedings are not dangerous... merely *boring*.”

Jaheira took a moment to consider, watching Dalyria consult with the drow woman. “Better bored with an ally than alone for the excitement.”

“I suppose...”

“You can just weed my garden to make it up to me. Keeping me up so late past my old woman bedtime.”

“I hate you.” He chuckled. “If something did happen at least someone would *know*. I would not simply... vanish. Everyone realizing, eventually. Oh, whatever happened to Astarion? He hasn’t bothered us in weeks...”

“Do you really think that is what would happen, little bat?”

“Ah. Um. Perhaps months?”

Jaheira waited for the punchline that would never come, then shook her head.

“Fine, fine, *you* would notice sooner. Possibly even care?”

That earned him another long look.

“Er... well perhaps care is a bit of an, oh... *strong* word,” he stammered out, looking away from her.

She put a firm hand on his shoulder. “I would care. Others too, would care.”

“Isn’t wisdom supposed to come with age?” He scoffed, “They are *her* friends, not mine. I am... an obligation. That is all. A burden shouldered in her honor.”

Before Jaheira could reply, Dalyria called, “Astarion? Can we collect a few more readings?”

Astarion groaned, glaring at Jaheira when she patted him on the back encouragingly. He made a big show of the effort it took to stand up and plodded over as slow as elven-vampirically possible, Jaheira following after him.

“Remarkable results...” The drow necromancer scrutinized his every movement as he approached.

“Yes, yes, I’m very impressive. I am aware.”

“Impressively shattered. I’m baffled how you move with such fluid motions. This is the most pitiable instance of the vampiric curse I have ever seen. So fragmentary. Messy.”

“Fuck you.” If it wasn’t for Dalyria’s frantic pleading hand motions he would be trying to beat this woman to death with whatever he could get his hands on. Instead, he contented himself by imagining doing so.

Ica gave no indication she even heard Astarion's response. “Your shards have shown me much already, as they struggled to accomplish their functions.”

Dalyria quickly explained, “You’re burning more necromantic power than any other spawn I’ve measured.” She hesitated a moment, “With no increase seen when you tried to move the heavier items. Sorry.”

“Annnnd? That means...?”

“Oh. Um. When we use our strength, we draw on our reserves. You’re using too much life essence merely for *existing*, you don’t have enough to spare. That’s why you’re weaker.”

“Ah.” He took a moment, then asked, “Not fixable, I take it?”

“Astarion, I... wouldn’t even know where to begin...”

“To be honest, I had no hope of any other outcome...” He smiled as he sighed.

Ica motioned at a glowing outline of a humanoid form, filled in with green; darker in the torso and head, fading out down the limbs. “Your necromantic essence is not properly flowing, explaining the weak claws and inability to scale walls.”

Astarion looked back and forth between the scroll and his hands. “I love learning things about myself. Really. I do. Favooooorite activity...”

The drow tapped the deep green core. “This is why broken spawn give off more ambient necromantic power, you need so much more for basic functions, storing it all in the center, your cursed heart, but you cannot hold it all... wasted power, leaking away... how pitiable.”

After glaring at the back of Ica’s head for a moment, he turned to Dalyria, “Didn’t you *just* say I don’t have *enough* power?”

“You don’t! Not to make you as strong as you should be! But it’s... it’s complicated.”

“*It’s my body! Try to explain!*” He stomped his foot, seriously considering upturning the entire table.

“You don’t use *all* the essence from blood to keep your body running. There’s a surplus... but it’s not enough to make you stronger. It’s like... it’s like your curse doesn’t know what to *do*. This is probably why you heal faster than the rest of us...”

“Can we make *my curse* read some remedial books, perhaps. *Mm?*”

“I... maybe?”

“Dal, that was a joke.”

“I know that! But, Astarion, we *might* be able to fix *something*.”

He said nothing, merely looked at his hand and the diagram once more.

“We should examine how the flow responds to injuries...” Ica looked up from her notebook. “I propose to detach a finger and observe the energy pattern as he heals.”

Astarion balled his hands up, holding them close to his chest, eyes wide.

“Uh... no, Ica. I said none of that...”

“Shame. Are you not a woman of science? Still in these fragmentary shards, we can see possibilities, allowing us to understand the curse. Harness it...” Ica stood up, grabbing the visualizer to set it up around Astarion, stopping when he leapt away.

“No! You wanted to cut off my fingers. Oh, excuse me, *a* finger. You’re not putting me in a *cage*! I’ve had *more* than enough of *that*, thank you *very much*,” Astarion shouted, his voice reaching higher and higher octaves.

“We’re not doing that, Astarion. It’s not a cage. It doesn’t even have a latch to shut!”

He pondered for a moment, then sighed and permitted Ica to arrange the device around him in an arc. She reached through the opening in the front, tapping the various gems strapped to Astarion. He gritted his teeth, trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling each tap sent pulsating through his body.

“The various threads of the curse... they are so separated. How ... *exhilarating* to be able to examine the spellwork in this fashion.”

“*Sooooooooo* happy for you.”

Behind Ica, Dalyria once again frantically waved her hand at him, motioning for him to stay put.

“Such a peculiar arrangement... I was correct. It will be possible to unlock facets normally restricted to the true vampire.”

Astarion blinked, then smiled. “*That’s* how you’d give me abilities I shouldn’t have.”

“Yes. Such as the ability to spread the curse...”

The smile vanished from his face as he shot a panicked look at Dalyria, who was looking rather panicked herself.

“Forgive me for misunderstanding, as it is late and my old ears are tired, but is that not the *opposite* of what you said you were seeking?” asked Jaheira, now directly next to Dalyria.

“Vampire spawn would be a great boon to our forces. Finally, a purpose for sons. Alas, a *vampire lord* is required to create vampire spawn. Such spawn would be loyal to their sire, not our nation. Even so, I did try. Your master was not very accommodating.” She stepped back, every gem on the visualizer glowing brightly.

“How strange, you must have caught him on an off day,” Astarion muttered as he started to push the visualizer open, sticking his tongue out in disgust when he touched the slimy thing, but keeping his eyes on Ica.

“I sent an envoy to Baldur’s Gate, seeking an accord. They only recently returned, as free spawn. Alas, my efforts to become the new master of their curse bore no fruit. Having exhausted the experimental usefulness of the returned drow, I sought the source, hoping for perhaps a broken one within the vast quantity.” She looked him up and down. “You are perfect. I could not dream of a better specimen...”

“*Jaheira!* Isn’t it time for your medicine? We should leave!” He shoved the contraption fully open, causing it to clatter to the ground.

“Doctor Dalyria, you will have the aid of Menzoberranzan.” Ica plucked a vial from her belt.

“What?!” Dalyria’s head whipped back to Ica as Astarion started to sprint away.

“I accept your offering.” She shattered the vial; her own blood mixed with the contents, creating a dull sickly green glowing orb of magic.

Dalyria screamed, “Wait, no! I don’t—”

The drow flicked her wrist at Astarion, fractions of a second before Dalyria tackled her to the floor.

The spell flew towards him far faster than even he could ever hope to dodge, though he did try. He saw Jaheira drawing her swords and then—

Agony shot through the whole of his being. Coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once. Astarion was *very* familiar with pain; this sensation was on another level entirely. It wasn’t burning, it wasn’t crushing, it wasn’t slicing. Simply pure pain. As the excruciating ache overwhelmed him, he was vaguely aware his legs had given out, sending him tumbling down.

There was an awful lot of screaming and shouting. None coming from Astarion, he could not even whimper, the torment owned him so completely.

The outside world faded away.

He found himself remembering his time in the tomb, when he felt as if he was being unmade; his soul splintering into fragments.

The memory shifted to the moment when his heart stopped, oh so very long ago.

Then that too faded.

One final thought coalesced within the mire of anguish.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Oh dear.

I guess he shouldn’t have gone, after all...

Chapter 18: Wakey Wakey, Blood eggs and bakey!

Chapter Summary

Last time on Astarion Adventures: HE GOT ZAPPED. AAA. Now what?

Chapter Notes

A bit of a long one! Think of it as a special season ender. You could rest your own tired lil eyes at the ~~~ as a good break point, but I wanted this all to come out at once. He's earned it

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Astarion opened his eyes and recognized the ceiling instantly. How could he not? He certainly spent enough hours staring up at it, motionless, in the first days of his truly free and disappointingly lonely new life.

He was in Jaheira's basement.

The pain was gone, replaced with a feeling of disconnection, as if Cazador had recently released him from an *extensive* puppeting session. A strangeness to his form and fogginess to his thoughts that he had not experienced in months, but would never forget, not if he lived another thousand years.

Regaining command over his own body was somewhat of a procedure after hours upon hours of it moving without Astarion having any say in the matter. While there was no way in all the hells *that* just happened to him, the aftermath was following the same pattern. At first, all he could do was stare, only capable of the most tortuously slow blinks; each time fearing his eyelids would refuse to reopen. Very quickly he could move his eyes, for all the good that did him.

It took a few terrifying moments to start breathing again, then some dreadful seconds until he could flex his fingers. A few frightening minutes later he was able to open and close his mouth, then run his stiff face through a full gamut of expressions.

He sighed in relief, once he recovered to this degree everything always proceeded smoothly; he would not find himself stuck, waiting, for hours, for his control to return. There was some comfort in this horrid well-worn routine. He would be moving again soon enough, even if he had only the vaguest idea of what had happened to put him on his back in the first place.

After one, on average, tedious hour, he slowly sat up, albeit supported more by shaking arms than the lower portion of his body. He scanned the room, his head moving jerkily at first.

Troubling. Typically, once he regained control movement was fluid, except after the *most* intensive of puppeting sessions. Astarion shuddered at the unbidden flash of memory before pushing it firmly out of his mind. He looked around the room again, satisfied at the smoothness of his motion now, allowing him to *actually* pay attention his surroundings.

Yes, he was in the wooden cabin built right into Jaheira's basement walls. Again. On the same creaky bed. In the same corner of the room. But so much else was different.

Much of the furniture was gone, and what remained was covered with more blasted crystals and oddly shaped metal objects. Jaheira was not what Astarion would consider the tidiest of house keepers, but the chaos he saw throughout the room was beyond even her normal standards.

He immediately recognized some of those ghastly devices Dalyria had been so keen about, from the bloody Society's blasted lodge. None of those horrid things were on the bed with him, were they? It did not matter how weak his arms were, he would summon the strength to fling them away.

Oh. That's equally concerning, for a different reason...

Next to him was Clive, he plucked the stuffed bear up with a shaking hand. Someone had fetched him from his flat. From inside Karlach's trunk even, where Astarion had stored the bear some days prior, hoping for the toy to regain her scent; as he had been *most* displeased to discover his undead whiff starting to dominate. He gave the bear a sniff.

It worked. As fresh as her scent was just after ... after...

After taking in her calming scent for a few breaths, he opened his eyes, not even realizing he closed them, and gazed up at the wall.

First, he saw a note: *Wake up, vampire man!* It was penned in childish scrawl, accompanied by a stick figure drawing that was *probably* supposed to be him; even the most doting of parents would find it ghastly and hide it from sight. It almost perfectly matched the one hanging on his flat's wall. Next to it was a piece of tree bark, adorned with blue flowers.

Before he could even start to unravel what the *Gur* had to do with his situation, his attention was drawn by the various *holy symbols* emblazoned upon the wall. Selûne's eyes and seven stars, Silvanus's oak leaf and acorn, *Corellon's* blasted multi-pointed silver star, the silhouette of a bloody axe, and three six pointed stars in various warm hues. The latter two gods took him a moment, but soon he recognized them; Maglubiyet and Lliira, respectively. After all, he had tried to call to them as well, once upon a time.

A shimmer caught his eye, above the foot of the bed were several softly glowing arcane glyphs. None of these identifications lessened his bewilderment.

His mouth hung open and his eyes grew wider and wider as there was more and more and *more*.

None of this makes any sense ...

What did make sense was to get moving. After another deep sniff, he set Clive aside, then stood up and shuffled a couple of steps. Astarion walked a slow circle around the room, his shaky legs remembering what to do soon enough. This whole recovery process had given him plenty of time to ponder his situation.

Something bad had happened to him, far beyond a pain spell. The collection of *stuff* above his bed waiting to greet him gave him no doubt. The objects he observed during his small sojourn only strengthened his conclusion. He glared down at Jaheira's overly cluttered desk, as if it could give him any answers.

Several dead birds. Colorful plumage. Fairly fresh, not drained. Bottles of wine. Good vintages all, but obviously resealed. Some sort of curved metal calipers, with markings on them that Astarion could no longer *read* but recognized as illithid script.

Shaking his head in confusion, he moved on, finding *all* of the daggers previously upon his person, far more than any of them did. They were a good reminder, at least: in the future if he felt someone needed stabbing, he would not dither about.

Next to his weapons were all of the jewelry and fine cutlery he had *borrowed* from the Ravengard estate. Along with the collection of fine pens he pilfered during the meeting. He snickered, only for his mirth to cut off when his gaze moved on.

His lock picks. *All* his lock picks. His eyebrows shot up high. Then he processed what the neatly folded fabric they were sitting upon actually was: the clothes he had been wearing. He swallowed as he looked down at himself, realizing he was back in his old white ruffled shirt and new black pants.

...with some cat hairs upon them? He plucked one off, glaring at it, strongly suspecting it was in fact a *tressym* hair.

The ire at the stray hairs failed to defeat the dread swarming over him. A quick check confirmed he was even wearing different small clothes. Albeit no tressym hairs to be found there. He swallowed again, as the room dimmed around him.

Oh, he did *not* like this little discovery. He did not like it *at all*. He was even shoeless, gods, he was so mind muddled he hadn't realized before.

Desperately he tried to formulate a non-horrific explanation for his wardrobe change. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. Pointless panic would solve nothing at this moment.

He silently counted down a few dozen numbers and focused on an important detail: Jaheira had been there. She would *not* have let anything horrible happen to him. Well, anything *else* horrible. He was clad in *his* clothing, merely different articles of such, not dressed in some new strange humiliating ensemble. Most importantly, he did not feel any unexplained pains in various places. Both good signs.

Dragging his thoughts away from *that* hideous pathway, he finally pondered an important question he had been purposely ignoring, even as it flitted around the edge of his mind like a moth circling a flame.

How bloody long have I been down here?

When he first woke, he assumed it had not been much time at all, as the eternal ache in his stomach was still so very dull. By his standards, anyway. But then... all this *stuff* had been here to greet him. He put a hand on his abdomen and considered; hells, perhaps he was even *more* sated? *None* of this made sense!

What did that drow do to me?!

Astarion was *very* close to hating all drow on sight. Hells, he'd prefer the company of *gnomes* at this point. Hopefully Jaheira had slaughtered her. *Some* conflict must have taken place, as he was back in the druid's basement and *not* the necromancer's lab, doubtful she would have abandoned her *prized broken* spawn by choice.

He had half-expected to awaken in some *new* dungeon, chained to a *new* wall. An eternally kept *perfect* torture victim once more, only this time in the pursuit of *science*. The realm had *more* than enough vampires, in his *expert* opinion. Let his *literally* cursed pseudo-race go extinct.

Gods, an army of drow vampire spawn ... created from my bite. How nightmarish...

Astarion frowned deeply at the notion, then turned to a common technique used much in his slavery years; imagining said notion as a physical object he pitched off the side of the ramparts.

No more thinking of that.

After clearing his throat, he tested out his voice, whispering, “Bloody High Harper could have at least left me a note. She has *more* than enough rubbish papers at hand...” He nodded, slight smile on his lips. Speech was always the final piece to slot into place; his recovery was complete.

Enough faffing about. Time to get some answers.

A steady heartbeat above him had been comforting to focus on as he pulled himself back together. He was fairly sure it belonged to Jaheira, but was far too impatient for some explanation as to his circumstances to care overly much. Nothing to do now but to ascend in the only way he was permitted. Upstairs he would find answers or *completely* lose his mind, once and for all.

After securely tucking Clive back into bed and reclaiming his lock picks along with his most favorite daggers, he expertly wiggled past the sunlight streaming down into this very aggravatingly well-lit basement. He silently walked up the stairs and slunk into Jaheira’s office. He had been prepared to sprint through this as well, avoiding the sunlight that streamed in through the skylights, but there was no need, they were now completely opaque.

As he squinted up at the very non-functional skylights he froze; there was sobbing on the other side of the closed door. Very odd, it did not *sound* like the High Harper *and* the heartbeat was still so steady. How could anyone keep such a steady rhythm while going on like *that*? Not that he could *imagine* Jaheira sobbing as if she was some sort of beaten animal.

Pausing, he took a moment to really listen to the sobbing, realizing he recognized that particular wailing. Was all too familiar with it, really. Silently opening the office door, his suspicions were confirmed. Jaheira *and* *Dalyria* were in the bloody kitchen, both facing away from him.

“I killed him!” *Dalyria* was sitting at the table, surrounded by books and papers.

Jaheira stood at the head of the table, staring straight ahead, not looking at the weeping vampire. She calmly said, “There is more yet to try.”

“He survived everything only... only to... He was right to not want to help *any* of us!” she wailed out between sobs.

Jaheira sighed, patting *Dalyria*’s shoulder, then her back as she turned to sob into her. “Perhaps it is time we let Gale take him to Waterdeep. Or perhaps I tell *Wyll* he *should* declare war. A small war.”

As amusing as it was watching Jaheira go through the hell of *Dalyria* leaking all over her, his desire for answers won out over his *schadenfreude*. Though not over his desire for theatrics.

Astarion checked his hair, combing it with his fingers back into perfect order, then casually leaned against the door frame.

“Aw, come on, Dal, take some joy in murder. Didn’t you learn *anything*?”

There was a flurry of motion, then an Astarion seeking missile in the form of Dalyria collided into him, sending him down onto his hindquarters.

“Ah. That was about me. You thought you killed *me*. I... should have figured that out. Obvious really in hindsight.”

Dalyria barely seemed to notice, hugging him tightly as she sobbed onto his shoulder. Damnation, it was now *his* turn to be leaked on.

“I’m no more dead than usual. You can let go. *Please*?” Failing to pry her off, he looked at Jaheira, standing above the pair of vampires. “Don’t just stand there! Help, perhaps?”

Jaheira stomped her foot, barking out something Astarion did not understand. Dalyria released him, standing up and wiping her face as she tried to get her sobbing under control.

He got to his feet, patting Dalyria on the head as he said, “I *distinctly* remember a bit of yelling and *someone* telling me to stay out of her blasted basement. Why the change of heart, *mm*?”

Astarion turned to Jaheira, planning to complete his statement with a smug grin, only to instead receive one of the biggest shocks of his unlife: the High Harper’s face wet with tears.

He could do naught but wordlessly gape at her, Jaheira took the opportunity to embrace him tightly. “Welcome back, little bat.”

It took a few moments, but he managed to sputter out, “How long was I out?!”

She released him. “Two months.”

“*What*?!”

“If you want exact days, others have kept count.”

Astarion stared at her, waiting for the punchline he already knew would never arrive. He covered his mouth with one hand. Then the other. Then dropped both down. He opened his mouth. Closed it. He spiced things up by blinking a few times.

Dalyria dried her eyes. “64 days...”

His arms flailed wildly. “What the hells happened?! And while I’m shouting, why am I wearing different clothes?!” He motioned frantically at himself. Which was a very different motion than wild flailing.

Jaheira shot a look at Dalyria, who evidently was finding the floor *most* interesting, then shook her head and asked, “How much do you remember? You know where you were before, yes? With the Ica drow?”

“*Yeeees*.” He put a hand on his hip, dismissively waving away some of her concern. “It’s all perfectly clear up until that *witch* attacked me. Then well, I *dooooo* admit I was in rather too much oooh *utter agony* to notice a *great* deal...”

“Long story *very* short, the utter agony spell was supposed to send you to her lab in Menzoberranzan.”

Astarion whistled, his eyebrows high. “That is one *powerful* teleportation spell...”

“She... she stored it in those large crystals. Downstairs. The ones that scanned you.” Dalyria finally was finished staring at the floor, nervously worrying her hands together while she spoke, “It was all part of her plan... to take you.”

His eyebrows remained high as he processed her words.

“Violet saved you,” Dalyria finished, voice barely above a whisper.

“The rhyming one was amusing herself with the crystals, not even knowing what they were.”

“What, was she smashing them together?”

“Yes, little bat!”

“Hah! See, Dal, I *told* you she was perfectly predictable!” He smugly grinned.

She looked away from him. “There was stray spell-work arcing all over you. It... it wasn’t able to complete the incantation, but it was too powerful to just fizzle out.”

Astarion muttered, “Only the *best* for me...” Then leaned against the wall and asked Jaheira, “You kept her from a *second* attempt, I assume?”

“With help from the rhyming spawn, yes.”

“I was trying to help you, but I couldn’t even *touch* you!” She motioned at Jaheira, “She kept Ica from reaching you, so she summoned her anchor crystals and... Violet appeared too.”

“You were right, little bat, she *is* far more bitey than you are. I have seen wolves take down prey with less frenzy.”

“I’m *always* right.” He crossed his arms and performatively sniffed.

“She tore off her ear...” Dalyria said.

He giggled out, “Our little violent Violet!” clapping for the absent spawn.

“The drow cut her losses then, retreating with a much shorter-range portal spell, taking her black spider box with her. We could not follow.”

“The spell on you dissipated... but you wouldn’t wake up!” Dalyria sniffled a bit at the memory. “Then you... you started bleeding from every orifice.”

Astarion wrinkled his nose, frowning deeply. “*Lovely.*”

“I changed you, Broth-Astarion. No one else touched you.”

“Thank you. Well...” He awkwardly spun a wrist around, feeling rather foolish. “At least that’s *one* mystery solved...”

“Then, little bat, before we could do much else, the fire attracted other attention—”

He pushed off the wall. “Wait, wait. Excuse me. ...the *fire*?”

Dalyria started to say, "Violet—"

"No further questions, carry on." He leaned against the wall again.

"Wyll *very* soon was on the scene. Evidently, he is to be told of any vampire activity almost at once... interesting, no?"

"Why... did he even get reports of vampire activ—"

"Violet," Dalyria interrupted *him*.

"Oh. Right. Riiiiight..." Astarion motioned at his head. "Bit foggy still, my dear."

"He... when he saw you and... we could not revive you he..." Dalyria trailed off, staring up at Astarion.

He raised a single eyebrow at her, tilting his head to the side.

Jaheira interjected, "He took command. Quickly he was in pursuit of the drow."

"I hope he rode off on a white horse. Let that have been my mid-winter's present to him. Wait... two months. How has he not caught her by now? He's *most* capable, I'll have you know." He wagged a finger at Dalyria, who did not respond, chewing on her lip instead.

"They were fast on her tail, ah, but in the Underdark she proved to be a much more dangerous foe. Making it to the ruins of a drow settlement, under the rock, under the waves, not very far west of the mouth of the Chionthar."

"*Hrm.*" He tapped his lips, thinking for a moment. "Even the best can be laid low by rubbish help. He is so taken with his little fisters..."

"Gale and Shadowheart joined him, not fists."

Astarion blinked. "What?" He blinked again. "Both... they... and ... what?"

"Why the confusion, little bat?"

"Ah... no confusion, my dear," he lied. "I am only just *now* processing that I was... *indisposed* for two blasted months. I would like to sit down. Perhaps feed? Mm? I *know* you have blood here, little High Harper."

Jaheira chuckled, motioning at the table. "Sit, it is lunch time." Astarion was a bit unsteady on his feet, but he still hissed at Dalyria and batted her away when she offered to assist him.

It was so bloody stupid he became lightheaded upon learning all of this. His body was *dead*. Why must it insist upon pretending to be living in only the most annoying of ways?

His hissing did nothing to stop Dalyria from pulling a chair out for him. He sat down, making sure not to even look her way as she sat across from him, instead turning slightly to watch Jaheira as she set containers upon the counter.

For roughly ten seconds, anyway, until Dalyria spoke, "How... what did you experience?"

He snapped his fingers. “Nothing. Felt almost as if no time at all had passed... except I knew *some* time had passed... *somehow*.” He leaned forwards slightly. “Dal, I am not the beeeest student of the arcane arts, but wouldn’t a misfired teleportation spell be *much* more apt to splatter me all about? Than do... whatever it did?”

“It wasn’t *just* a teleport spell. I think, er, we think she... she activated a set of linked spells, stored in her crystals. She was trying to subdue you *and* move you, but when it couldn’t move you it, the other part of the spell overloaded and... started dismantling the vampiric curse?”

“We have to work on your confidence.” Honestly, she only killed *one* child by *mostly* accident, why was it hanging over her so heavily?

“I can’t say for sure, that was part of the problem waking you up! Drow have a different spell architectural standard. We couldn’t find anything remotely like the remnants clinging to you in all of Blackstaff’s necromantic archives...”

Astarion blinked. Then blinked again. Blackstaff? Dalyria was allowed in the archives of Blackstaff academy? And who was *we*?

A merciful distraction came his way from the counter, where Jaheira had finished heating up the blood, and then automatically sliced across her palm with a knife. She swore and then laughed as she bled into a cup.

“House special, only for you, little bat.”

Astarion grinned broadly as another puzzle piece slotted into place. “*Jaaaaheeeira!* My my... *you’ve* been feeding me! I *finally* got my Harper blood I’ve been after you about. The best even, High Harper blood!”

He frowned, wrinkling his nose at her. “Honestly, couldn’t you get anything *fresher*?”

Dalyria caught the dirty plate Jaheira flung at his head, setting it down on the table as she said, “You would feed if we poured blood in your mouth, that’s all you would do...”

“Seemed good to put more than beast blood into you. In case that would do something else. My basement, so my blood. Seemed right. This is your last helping! Make sure you enjoy.”

“I will savor every last drop,” he said with a smile.

“I was so scared you were aware... but that you just couldn’t move,” said Dalyria, with a slight snuffle.

Astarion winced. “Gods... to *imagine*. But, no, only a few minutes when I first awoke, feeling as if *he* had been puppeting me.” He mimicked playing with a marionette for a moment, then noticed his rubbish claws. “It still does not feel real. That I was... *indisposed* for *so* long, but here is yet more proof I cannot deny...”

Jaheira handed a coffee cup to Astarion, then commented, “They look good on you,” as she put a bottle of warmed beast blood in front of each spawn.

“They’re not new. I *do* grow claws... only they are embarrassingly brittle ones.” He held his free hand at her. “Waiting to break off at the slightest excuse...”

She sat down holding a cup of bloodless, but not boozeless, coffee. “We were starting to think we had lost you for good, little bat.”

“So I have gathered.” He offered her a toast; she clinked her coffee mug against his Jaheira mug. “I am glad to make ooooh, what, three, maaaaaybe four people pleased I have returned to my proper status as the *walking* dead, rather than the slumbering sort.”

Jaheira rolled her eyes and drank her coffee. Astarion tasted his own drink, licking his lips afterwards. “This what you were feeding me and I never roused to offer my thanks? What horrible manners. Surprised you did not just pitch me out into the sun. Be done with the whole business.”

“I... we thought about it...” Dalyria had not opened her blood bottle yet, not even touched it. “If we couldn’t wake you... if... you seemed beyond hope...”

Astarion said nothing, only drinking, his eyes a bit wide at that revelation.

“It was a bit tricky to know there *was* any hope, at first, little bat. A proper dead vampire is not all that different from a comatose one.” Jaheira grinned. “But then I realized an easy test, watching you heal when injured.”

Dalyria laughed, still not picking up the blood bottle. “She cut your hair. It looked so bad...”

He gasped out in false-horror. “Could you not think of something less barbaric to try?” He finished his cup and opened the bottle. “Why that mad doctor Ica’s finger idea surely must have been fresh in your minds.”

Jaheira finished her own drink and then stood, saying, “Next time. Now I will go let others know you are back to being, as you said, the more walking dead.”

The moment Jaheira went into her office, Astarion snatched Dalyria’s bottle of blood up, uncorked it, then plopped it back down. “Feed already!”

She jerked the bottle up, drinking quickly, small rivulets of blood dripping down her chin. He *tsk*’ed at her, finishing his bottle without spilling a single drop.

After she was done, he wiped the blood off her face with a stray napkin. “Your table manners are *atrocious*, Dal.” She did not respond, still deep in the post feeding haze. Astarion leaned back in his chair, putting his hands behind his head to wait.

It was so strange how she still, after all this time, reacted like a freshly turned spawn after feeding. He had thought it was something Cazador had done to her, some special Dalyria only compulsion; the bastard always found her behavior *most* amusing, taunting her endlessly. He frowned, actively pushing such memories away, then smiled as he enjoyed the pleasant fullness in his belly, with only the most minor of aches.

Gods, two months unconscious and I feel as if I could drift away again right now ...

Should he be concerned about that? He decided that no, he shouldn't. It was not *real* rest, of course he was tired. In any case, if he passed out for *another* two months, it would not be *his* problem.

Dalyria shuddered and came fully back to herself, only to look at him with such a worried expression.

“If you’re going to start crying again, do it outside. Wait... the sun is up. Do it in the basement. I can personally attest the location works *wonderfully* for that activity...”

“I won’t.” Dalyria retrieved her notebook, glancing up at Astarion when he snickered.

“Ah, don’t mind me. I was simply reflecting. You lost so many of those little books over the decades, but yet... you somehow always had another in your little hands. Seemingly the very moment you were out of the kennels... once again scribbling away...”

She looked back down at the notebook, jotted down something, then flipped back several pages.

“We all kept trying, in our own ways, didn’t we?” He sat up straight, drumming his claws on the table. “I always thought it was utter insanity, but perhaps it was needed insanity... keeping us saner than we would be otherwise.”

She looked up from the older entry, reaching out to take Astarion’s hand and examining his claws closely.

“Dal, for Gods’ sake. I am *trying* to talk here, I thought you liked that. Give it a rest. You can mock my pathetic claws later.” He jerked his hand back. “I’ll save you the clippings. You can be as weird with them as your little unbeating heart desires.”

“No!”

“That thing I said mere moments ago, about us keeping sane? I might just take it back.”

“Astarion, scratch the table.”

“I *am* taking it back.”

“No, Astarion! They’re different! Your claws!”

He blinked, peering at his own claws again, then tapping them against one another. “Perhaps... they do feel sturdier... a little.” He raised a hand, ready to swipe at the table. “If this hurts, I’m going to bite you.” He then hesitated, chewing on his lip.

Dalyria swiped at the table, leaving deep claw marks.

“What in the hells?”

“I wanted to establish a comparative sample.”

“Confident little thing, aren’t you... very well.” He brought his claws down, barely able to watch.

Astarion then was completely unable to look away. A second set of claw marks had joined Dalyria’s *and* his claws were still firmly attached to his fingers. He looked back and forth between his hand and the table several times, grinning wider and wider. With a cackle of glee he was on his feet, knocking the chair over, laughing and laughing, Dalyria joined him in the merriment, even as she was taking careful notes.

“That is too much laughing. What is happening in here?” Jaheira said, opening her office door to poke her head in.

He slashed the table again, with his other hand, making a lovely criss-cross pattern in the wood, giggling at the result.

“What are you doing?!” She shouted, running over and grabbing his wrists.

“They work! Jaheira! My claws work!”

“Good for you, now stop using them on my furniture.” She released him.

“Oh... oh what if...” He tried to pick up the table, but was barely able to even lift the two legs on his side more than an inch or two. “Maybe that is... too much.”

Dalyria stood, promptly replicating his actions, only she was able to easily lift the table off the ground, over her head. Her rewards were Astarion’s growls and Jaheira’s shouts.

“Stop! Stop! My table is not for experiments!”

“Of course, was too much to hope for. Ah well, if I was given a choice...” He raced over to the wall, raising his hands to swipe again. “I’d take the claws!”

“*Little bat!* No more! Stop!”

Astarion brought both hands down oh so slowly onto the wall, his claws merely tapping against the surface as he giggled at Jaheira.

“Why, my dear little High Harper, what a *lovely* wall you have...” He lightly ran his hands down it. “It would be such a shame if some... monster... damaged... it...”

He trailed off, looking at the wall, a thoughtful expression replacing his mad grin. Jaheira said something else, but it did not even pass through one ear, let alone the other.

His finger tips itched.

His palms itched.

His feet too.

He barely dared to hope as he took an unneeded breath and...

Astarion scurried up the wall, as if he had done it a thousand times before.

“When it is to get away from *me* you can do this. I see how it is!” Jaheira called out, watching him climb higher and higher, the vampire giggling all the way.

How wonderful! As wonderful as he imagined while watching every other spawn in the entire realm gallivant upon the walls. Astarion giggled again, scampering onto the ceiling and waving down at Jaheira. “Hello!”

She waved back. “Hello. Stop getting footprints on my good ceiling.” Next to her Dalyria jotted down some final notes, closed her notebook, stored it, then raced past Jaheira to climb the wall.

Jaheira flung her hands up. “You are supposed to be the reasonable one! That is it, I cannot have two of you on this ceiling. This calls for drastic measures.” Dalyria froze in a crouch next to Astarion, who only laughed.

The High Harper of Baldur’s Gate grabbed a broom and herded the two giggling vampire spawn into her office. “*This* is the room for being on the ceiling.” She flung the broom in after them, then slammed the door.

Astarion laughed, flopping onto his back to lay on the ceiling, making sure to keep his weight on one of the central beams, marveling at the view of the floor and walls from this angle. He wiggled his bare toes against the ceiling, then batted at some of the vines growing all about, giggling again. It felt as if gravity, mostly, was tugging at whatever surface he was clinging to. However, for his clothing and hair, judging by Dalyria's locks, the pull of gravity was still very much towards the floor.

Dalyria sat cross legged next to him, with her notebook out; she tended to write in elvish, which always infuriated him when he read over her shoulder. Especially when he could catch his own name in the script, such at the top of the page she was currently reading.

“Dal. That’s rude. I’m *right here*.”

“I was wondering if you’ll have to rest less now. Like the rest of us... at first, I thought your curse was fully unbroken, perhaps even reset... I’m sorry...”

“I’m not too broken up about the strength thing.” He grinned. “Ooooh, I will whinge about it *later*, but I do not care *overly* much.”

“No, Astarion if...” she trailed off, saying something in elvish before continuing, “If it was completely reset then... you wouldn’t be past the two-century mark anymore and—”

“You can stop explaining.”

“I’m... I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything...”

“Dal, stop that lip trembling, it is *very* unbecoming. I don’t care to see what gravity our tears follow. I’m not the scientist here.” He put his hands behind his head and crossed his legs, kicking one leg in the air, watching how his trouser leg fell.

She stared at him, obviously confused at his reaction, he huffed, “I’ll be sure to report to you about how often I sleep. Does that untremble the lip fully?”

“You should also try transc—”

“Do *not* start that with me again!” He sat up, glaring at her. “Why have you always been so bloody concerned with how I rest! Decades of this!”

“When I first... when we were introduced and—”

He leaned close to her, purring out, “What a *lovely* way to phrase it.”

She pushed him away, ignoring his cackling. “One of the first things you told me, when I tried to talk to you in elvish, was I should stop that. We weren’t elves anymore...”

“We’re *not*. Our N-490s would be rejected in an instant!” He amused himself by placing a dagger on the ceiling then catching it when it fell.

“Who cares about a form! It always made me sad that was how you saw yourself... rejecting everything about our people...”

“What, didn’t have enough to be sad about already? I thought that was the *one* thing Cazador kept in good supply.” Astarion stabbed the dagger into the ceiling beam. “Piss off, Dalyria. I was born in this city; I’ll have you know.” He shook a finger at her.

When she only glared at him, not bothering to react to his finger, he kept going, waving it at her more. “I’m not like *you*. I’m not from *elfland*. I didn’t come here to be some blasted hero, endearing myself so to the populace they put my picture up on a bloody building.” He tapped her nose. “Maintaining it decades after death even! You should be proud...”

She gaped at him, mouth open.

“Ah.” He nervously giggled. “You never *told* me that... did you.”

“Not... not all of it...”

He sighed heavily, flopping down upon his side, muttering as he worked the dagger back and forth. “There’s a memorial for you. At the medical campus. I found it. Shortly before the... *excitement*. At the lodge.”

“There is?! But I... are you sure it was in my honor? And not my condemnation?”

“Yes, Dal. I do know how to *read*. I read it... mostly.” He sat up, wrenching the dagger fully free. “Before I smashed it.”

“You smashed it?!”

“Into *bits*! Ripped the canvas, smeared it with paint, scratched the plaque; I was *very* through, I’ll have you know.”

“*What?! Why?!?*”

He shrugged. “Who knows. I’m a mad feral broken spawn, after all.”

“Bro—Astarion...” She reached out for him, he hissed at her hand, standing up on the ceiling.

Dalyria took a deep breath then stood while calming saying, “Thank you for telling me.” She smiled up at him.

“Stop it!” He stomped a foot and tugged at his hair with one hand. “Stop being *nice* to me! Stop it! You shouldn’t!”

She watched him for a moment, then asked, “Astarion? Why not?”

“*Because I was going to kill you!*”

He was suddenly in her face, their noses touching, his red eyes wide.

The pair remained as such for a time, his unneeded breath coming in ragged gasps, her entire body still, not a single undead muscle twitching.

With a growl he spun away, stepping onto a skylight, to the sound of cracking glass.

Dalyria gasped and jerked him back onto the beam. “Astarion, be care—”

“I had decided to kill you! In the ritual. *I was going to kill you!*”

“But you didn’t. I *knew* you wouldn’t! That you would never be able to go through with it—”

“*It wasn’t because of you!*”

Silence fell upon the spawn again, neither one moving, staring into each other's eyes.

Astarion fell as if his strings were cut, sitting down hard on the beam and slumping over.

Dalyria sat down next to him, close, but not touching. He spoke again, barely above a whisper, "So *many* people... all the fools, all the villains, all the... the... *so many*. Stolen children... a sea of starving spawn. All staring at me... their fates upon my shoulders..."

She hesitantly put a hand on his shoulder. He did not react.

"Astarion? Broth—"

"If it had *truly* been only the six of you and the bastard? I *would* have done it, Dal. I *would* have done it or died trying. She would have needed to *stake* me to stop me. I'm..." He chuckled softly. "I'm not whatever it is you *think* I am. I can't be. You've been taken in by an illusion... only the lingering shade of *yet* another part of me that *he* took."

Astarion plucked the leaves off the closest vine. "I didn't go there to save you. To have you join me in freedom. I went there to kill you. To damn your soul to the hells."

Dalyria squeezed his shoulder, then let go, sitting back on her heels, looking at him. She waited until he would finally meet her eyes again, then said, "I was planning to let Ica take you. When I invited you to the Lodge."

"...what?"

"She wanted a broken spawn for her laboratory. She said if... if I could deliver you, she'd give me... anything I wanted. All of Menzoberranzan would be in my debt..."

Astarion blinked again, the hint of a smile on his face.

She sniffled, wiping at her eyes. "I'm sorry, Astarion I was *so angry* at you! Because you abandoned us! Said you planned to *never* come see us... to come see me! And..."

His smile broadened into a grin.

"She made me believe the only hope of a cure was to use you and—"

Astarion started laughing, Dalyria stared at him in disbelief.

"Dalyria?"

"Ah? Yes, bro—Astarion?"

He held his hand out. "Perhaps, I *am* your brother, Dal. If you'll have me?"

She stared at his hand, ever so slowly reaching out towards him.

"We have new lives. Unlives? Oh, *whatever*." He smiled as their hands touched, putting his other hand on top of hers. "Perhaps it would be better to build them together. We can be more to each other than reminders of *him*." He wistfully laughed. "I confess, I feared all we could do was continue to hurt one another..."

"I never thought that..." she put her other hand on top of his, completing the stack.

“Nor did I. Not in truth, though I lied to myself. I’m quite good at it, you know!” He flashed her a small smile. “For while the private times we spent together were typically coupled with being paraded around as a matched set, *coupling* ourselves for the patriars’ perversions... The quiet hours after were the most pleasant we ever were allowed...”

“I... was glad I was with you the most. Instead of any of the others. You were... so different when we were away. It...” she sniffled. “Brother, I do not know how I would have survived *any* of it, without *you*.”

“*Mmm*... you would have. I was not nearly the aid to you I could have been... perhaps should have been? It is... difficult to know, really... for all kindness was a risk. *He* would hurt you more, make *me* hurt you more.” He raised their entwined hands to kiss hers. “Vincent, your immediate predecessor... Cazador sent him away, doomed to die horribly, because we were... *fond* of each other. I resolved to *not* make that same mistake again. Then you made that *very* difficult.” He glared at her for a moment, then smiled. “Stubborn little sister.”

She flung herself at him once more; this time he hugged her back tightly, rocking side to side, both spawn laughing even as they wept.

“You may call me brother. Even if I permit no one else.” He paused, releasing her and sitting back on his haunches. “Though... I suppose I *should* extend the offer to Violet as well.”

Dalyria nodded. “She did save you.”

“And she didn’t even try to sell me back into slavery first!” he grinned at Dalyria, then flicked her nose as she gaped at him.

Jaheira opened the door, sticking her head in. “Little bat, you have visitor coming. Then a few more. But a Grand Duke has a standing appointment to arrive shortly.”

At Astarion’s confusion Dalyria softly said, “He was visiting you thrice a tenday.”

“It *was* more. He would have sat next to your bed till he starved, I was close to using the broom on him.”

He blinked, processing that information, quite unsure how to feel about it. Why in the world would such a busy individual spend so much time by his bedside?

Thinking back over his day at the Ravengard estate made it slightly clearer... especially reflecting on how it ended; Astarion had ditched the poor fellow, as he was desperately calling out for him... Wyll must have guilted his fool self unendingly over the whole horrible ordeal. At least by waking up Astarion had alleviated some of that endless weight sweet Wylliam piled upon his horned brow.

Astarion grinned, putting an arm around his sister’s shoulders. “Oooh, little High Harper and favorite sister, I have an idea for some mischief to play upon my dear friend. He could use the enrichment, you surely must agree?”



“You are slightly early today, Wyll.” Jaheira motioned him inside.

“It was today you were going to attempt something with the Blood of Lathander, correct? Forgive me if I am mistaken... the days are starting to rather blend together, and it seems as if sleep does nothing to restore my weary bones.” His steps were uncharacteristically leaden.

“Wyll, how dare you come into my home and say such words! Your bones are fine, young and strong. Leave such talk to those of us who have earned it with more than heroism, but also years.” She shut the door, and escorted the slow-moving man towards the kitchen.

“Today I feel very fortunate to have any years left to me. I came straight from the memorial dedication. A most somber affair, hence the attire.” He was clad in his Grand Duke fineries. “I half expected to show up and find our sleeping beauty chastising me for allowing him to miss it... but I could find no more excuses for delay.” He nodded a greeting to Dalyria.

“We used the relic for a modified radiant overload procedure this morning. At dawn... it...” She had to avert her gaze from the frowning man. “The surge didn’t damage his body, which was the worst-case scenario, and the life essence contained in the relic’s blood showed a measurable reduction. But then... nothing else happened. For hours...”

“It was somewhat successful, you’re saying? There’s hope there... any hope, no matter how faint, is a light to follow in the darkness.”

Dalyria managed to meet his gaze. “Gale said similar; our hypothesis has not yet been falsified. He left with Shadowheart to examine the results in more detail.”

He nodded, then started to head down his well-trodden path to Astarion’s resting spot in the basement, halting when Jaheira put a hand on his shoulder.

“Ah, cub, hold a moment, there is more to tell you. I... ah, somethings with age become no easier. Let us simply say, there is no longer a point to you holding vigil at his bedside.”

Wyll swallowed once, reaching out to brace himself.

Jaheira motioned upward. “Because our vampire princess has finally had his fill of beauty sleep!” A giggle rang out.

Astarion was clinging to the ceiling, grinning brightly, as Wyll’s dour expression shifted to a disbelieving smile the upside-down elf waved and chirped out, “Hello!”

“Astarion!” He motioned at him. “How?!”

“No clue, Wyll darling, not a single one! But I *do* approve.”

Dalyria laughed behind a raised hand. “Oh, I have a few ideas, one possibility is—”

“Gods, no! You can babble about the amazing mystery that is my ah... unique version of the curse *later*. I’ve had *more* than enough of being a test subject! Honestly, didn’t you get your fill these past oh, what was it, *two bloody months*?”

Wyll hugged Jaheira and Dalyria, laughing all the while. He motioned to the ground. “Astarion, please, may we have the pleasure of your company?”

“Ah, first I have a question for Dalyria. Sister, dear?”

She was busy smoothing out her clothing, but looked up. “Yes, brother?”

“How do I... turn it off?” He motioned vaguely around himself.

Dalyria laughed, bending over slightly. “You just think about it!”

“That’s no help at aaaaaahhh!”

With but a thought he was plummeting from the ceiling to the floor!

Astarion was caught by strong arms, easily holding him in a princess carry, his arms automatically going around his savior’s neck.

Who just so happened to be Dalyria.

“Argh! Unhand me! Put me down! At once!” She lifted him up higher for a moment, then sat his wiggling form down, laughing as he huffed at her.

“You two go catch up in there.” Jaheira waved them through the dining room curtains. “We will start getting the celebration ready, others are on their way.”

Once they were on the other side of the curtains, Astarion turned to Wyll with a smile, “Apologies, my dear, I missed your mid-winter ball... alas.” He tilted his head away slightly, flicking his wrist.

Wyll’s only reply was to tightly hug Astarion.

He laughed, hugging the man back, laying his head on his shoulder and closing his eyes. He had never noticed before how muscled the younger Ravengard’s arms were, now pressed so strongly against his back...

When he broke the hug and stepped back, Astarion’s quip died upon his lips. Wyll was wiping tears away.

The... the Grand Duke of Baldur’s Gate was crying for *him*? It should be unbelievable but... this *was* Wyll, the man who cared too much about *everyone*, even people he had never met. Even creatures not properly considered *people*, such as vampire spawn. He truly was the worst monster hunter...

Oh gods, I have to say something. Something! Anything!

“... can I have my job back?”

“Yes, Astarion, yes! Of course!” He hugged the small vampire again, a much quicker embrace. Though the silence that followed after was longer, broken by Astarion’s nervous giggle.

“I... not to disrupt this joyous moment but, I need to tell you that Gale confirmed my suspicions as to your family of origin...”

“Oh.” Astarion drew himself up to his full height, which was still almost a full head shorter than Wyll. “Did he now? What *else* did he have to say?”

“Nothing of note, though I suspect he knows far more. It was only mentioned as Doctor Dalyria proposed a blood relation of yours could perhaps wake you and then...” He chuckled, shaking his head. “We both spoke at once, saying that route was not available.”

He sighed, slouching again, only saying, “I...” before spinning one wrist aimlessly and offering up another giggle.

“Astarion I’m... I’m so sorry I... to say it during the meeting I... it was beyond thoughtless of me to use that phrase. I simply... it was so long ago... but I should know better than most, that stories have real people at their cores... who may be much closer than you suspect.”

“Oh, do not trouble yourself, darling. It is water under the bridge, and we all know how little vampires wish to visit running water. There are *worse* ways to find out your *entire* family is dead. Or...” He trailed off, tapping his finger against his lips, then smiled and tilted his head to the side. “Well, there *must* be... I suppose? *Mm?*”

Wyll frowned, not taking the bait. Astarion laughed, patting his shoulder. “Do not worry yourself, my friend. If... I had to find out in such a manner... at least the words tumbled from your sweet lips.”

Those sweet lips smiled. “It is a pleasure to know you, Astarion Ancunín.”

The masterless semi-broken vampire spawn blinked. Then blinked again. A smile spreading over his own lips. What an odd feeling... hearing his *whole* name said aloud, in those smooth tones. Another giggle erupted from Astarion, a true one, unbidden, not called to fill awkward silence.

“Likewise, Wyll Ravengard,” he said, his voice oddly shaky, offering the Grand Duke a bow as he slightly stepped forwards, wondering at the strange floaty feeling in his gut.

When he rose, he was closer to the other man than he intended. Had he also stepped forward? The question faded from his mind as he stared into his large soft brown eyes... well. Eye. Singular. The other was still that ugly grey stone. *Why*, oh, why had he not replaced it yet?

That question *also* faded as Wyll’s face stayed oh so very close to his own, so close he could feel the living man’s breath passing over his lips, and Astarion realized he had been holding his own breath. He released his held air, watched the other man’s lips slightly part and...

“*Mr. Astarion! Mr. Astarion!*”

The curtains flew aside, a tressym bursting through.

By the time anyone could perceive the scene, Astarion was sitting on the dining table, the two men a respectable distance apart. He was the very picture of innocence, smiling as Tara flew past the slightly blushing Grand Duke to land on his lap.

“Hello, Ms. Tara. I knew those were your hairs, my small fuzzy darling.” He gave her the pets she demanded.

“I missed our hunting expeditions, Mr. Astarion.”

“My apologies, you simply *must* allow me to make it up to you. But, later, my dear. I think now is the time to talk to your pet wizard.” He looked up as Gale and Shadowheart entered.

“Mr. Dekarios has been *most* worried as well. The poor dear. You shouldn’t worry him so, he’s very delicate. Worrying gives him the most fearsome indigestion.”

“I will endeavor to do better in the future.” He gave her a final set of pets before she spread her wings to take flight.

Gale flicked his wrist, creating a small portal in the air. Tara called out to him before she entered, “Don’t worry, Mr. Dekarios, I will go monitor the equipment, exactly as promised. Do make sure you are not late for supper. *Again.*” Her pet wizard chuckled as he closed the portal.

Astarion waved with both hands. “Good...” He peered at the closed drapes off to the side. “Afternoon?”

“Yes, three bells past the sun’s peak. And a *very* good one it is! I knew we should have waited for the radiant overload to fully disperse before we declared the attempt a failure. Why, shortly before Jaheira summoned us, I was evaluating the data collected this morning and telling Shadowheart the results were *most* unusual, the relic was *consistently* showing a reduction in power, I suspect a permanent one, thus we should re-examine you for responsiveness again!”

Shadowheart smiled as she stepped in front of Gale. “Don’t believe him, he wasn’t *nearly* that optimistic. You sure made us work for this, Astarion.”

“Shadowheart, my dear...” He smiled, then frowned. “Your roots are showing. *You* can use a mirror, what excuse do you really have?”

“Shut up and get over here.” Astarion slid off the table, into Shadowheart’s open arms for yet another hug.

“I heard how busy you were since I saw you last. Before your little nap.” She smacked him on the shoulder. “Why didn’t I get another visit?”

Astarion blinked, tapping his claws against one another. “I uh... *suppose* I felt my presence would be a bit of an intrusion... one does not normally include creatures of the night in their life when they are trying to regain some... normalcy.”

“My father is a werewolf.”

“*Pft!*” He waved her off. “That little affliction barely counts as monstrous! Why, he still has a beating heart...!”

“We can discuss this near the curtains if you’re going to keep that up. Maybe you could use some more sun.”

“Hah! Point taken, my dear. Point taken. I was making your decisions for you...” He bowed. “My apologies. I will not forget nor ignore the standing... *invitation.*”

“You’ll *love* my dad’s jokes. You can trade puns!”

“How dare you! *Puns?* The lowest of all comedy... and I’ll stake my reputation on that.” He crossed his arms, frowning before breaking and shooting her a wink, both of them laughing.

Gale and Wyll had been quietly conversing off to the side, after they nodded at each other Gale offered, “Perhaps, Astarion, some evening soon, all of us could patronize that half-orc and goblin co-run establishment.”

Astarion turned, batting his eyes as he leaned forwards. “*Mmm?* Why would you call out *that* establishment in particular?” He narrowed his eyes as he said, “You haven’t... told anyone anything, *have you?*”

“Ah... um... well, what with your condition I thought it—”

A torrent of giggles interrupted his stammering start of an apology, then Astarion grew serious once more. “It was mine, yes? In the forgotten before. In some fashion?”

“It was your grandfather’s wine bar. Serving wine produced at the Ancunín winery, using grapes harvested from the Ancunín vineyards.”

“Oh... *hrm*... a simple yes would have sufficed. Don’t you ever learn, blasted wizard?”

Gale winced. “Oh, well... I...”

“Thank you, Gale.” Astarion threw his arms around him. “I know you have always meant well. Even when you... overstepped.” His target startled, then returned the embrace, patting Astarion on the back.

“Oh! I... am at a loss for words, Astarion...” he said as the other man stepped back.

Shadowheart said, “This truly is a miraculous day. I’m going to mark it on my calendar.”

“I would love to visit this bar of yours, Astarion,” said Wyll.

“Oh, I do not think it is *mine* any longer, in any capacity... however...” He grinned, putting his arm around Wyll’s shoulders, standing on his tiptoes to do so. “We can pretend.”

“Did I hear that correctly, you have claim to a vineyard? A winery?” Shadowheart said, eyebrows high.

“This is information I only *just* now learned myself, you little lush!” Astarion wagged his finger at her with a grin. “But... perhaps?”

Wyll and Gale exchanged a look for a moment, then Wyll softly said, “Let us table this conversation, for now.”

Astarion raised an eyebrow, opening his mouth to contest that suggestion, but then Dalyria poked her head through the curtain. “The refreshments have arrived... if you’re ready?”

Quickly the room was rearranged for the celebration, with more couches dragged in than Astarion even knew Jaheira had! The table was laden with a fine spread of meats, fruits, and cheeses, with accompanying liquors, carried in by the tall green member of Jaheira’s brood.

“Really. *Food* to celebrate a *vampire*? How insensitive!” Astarion huffed, crossing his arms.

“Here, little bat.” She handed him a bottle of wine. “Happy wake up day.”

Astarion peered at the label, it was a very well-regarded wine, opened, but resealed, and appeared quite full. “Dare I hope...” He tugged the cork out with his teeth, spat it out to the side, and then took a tentative sip.

The flavours exploded onto his tongue. Rich and sharp; dry, but with a tinge of sweetness, and of course, the delicious notes of *proper* blood. Without any hint of rot, ash, or vinegar.

“Oh... oh...” Now *his* words failed him and he sat down heavily, Wyll pushing a chair beneath him in the nick of time. In lieu of any verbal communication, he took a *very* long drink, another advantage of not needing to breathe.

“Good, yes? My Jord, he figured it out.” She jerked at thumb at Dalyria, who was had a full wine glass in front of her, as she sat off to the side, writing in her notebook. “She tested to confirm. A nice break in the task that you were.”

“Yes, as a comatose vampire spawn is *so* much effort to maintain.” Astarion rolled his eyes. “One change of clothing and pouring blood in my maw on occasion could not have been that much hardship.” He grinned, opening his mouth and raising the wine bottle high, pouring wine down his gullet, as if to demonstrate.

Shadowheart flung a cheese ball at him. “You may have been a vegetable but we were working hard.”

“Yes, Shadowheart was a most capable assistant, contributing her knowledge on the more directly divine aspects,” Gale caught the cheese ball Shadowheart sent sailing his way and popped it into his mouth.

Astarion paused in his performance to say, “Divine? Oh, that’s right. See, Jaheira, I was wise to keep the mace. Made it easy for you.”

“Of all the words I would use for the past two months, easy is not one.” Jaheira glared, hands on her hips.

Gale laughed. “My friend, there was so much more than that. Why, if I had not been already qualified to instruct in all schools of the weave prior, our efforts to rouse you would have well prepared me.” Wyll caught another cheese ball that Shadowheart lobbed in Gale’s direction.

“Going off surface recollection, before today’s successful procedure, we attempted a more traditional radiant overload via channeled divinity. Then someone recalled we had a relic that we were most delinquent in returning to its proper ownership, that by coincidence happened to contain stored radiant energy in divine hematological form!”

“*Someone?* I brought it up. Three times,” said Shadowheart.

Wyll threw the cheese ball at Gale, Shadowheart nodded in approval, then sighed when Gale easily caught and ate it.

“Ah yes! Thank you for the reminder, you were a most capable assistant indeed!” Shadowheart topped up her wine glass as Gale continued, “Prior attempts included a necromantic overload, necromantic siphoning, various conjuration affiliated experimental treatments, polymorph, direct weave alignment adjustment...” He trailed off when Dalyria put a hand on his shoulder. “Ah, yes, too much detail! Forgive me. I’ll save that for the various manuscripts we will co-author.”

Astarion had stopped actively drinking some time ago, and was instead staring, with a spot of blinking tossed in for variety. He only avoided making a gigantic mess because Jaheira tilted his wine bottle up before it could overflow his mouth. He hastily swallowed what had pooled, then sputtered a bit, wiping wine off his chin.

“I’m afraid I was not much use, other than moral and financial support,” said Wyll with a chuckle. “I felt as useless as shoes on a flumph, after the villain of our tale escaped...”

“Being able to watch him while we traveled was very helpful,” Dalyria said.

“Ah... how *very* busy you happy few were... my... my mistake...”

“Not just us few, there were so many people tromping through my *secret* basement!”

“Oh?” He eloquently stated, swallowing the sudden mysterious lump he felt in his throat. “Now, darlings, really, no need to exaggerate on my behalf...”

“No exaggeration, little bat! We had multiple parades of Gur. Do not worry, I made sure to erase what the little vampplings drew on your face. Halsin visited you *twice* and many scholars from your sister’s club as well.”

“It’s not my club; they elected Limeleech to be the new leader. I didn’t even run. Omelum visited the most. It helped us be hopeful you weren’t suffering...”

Gale selected a bottle of rum from the offerings, pouring himself a glass. “We visited the uh... establishment we spoke of earlier, searching for something possibly connected to your past, that lead to some visitors as well.”

Shadowheart rolled her eyes. “When Gale showed up and started rooting around without you, I thought the bartender was going to kill him. Luckily, I convinced them that we were trying to *help you*.”

“Do you recall Maiela, the elven woman from the council? She misses your presence at the meetings and came to pay her well wishes.”

“Violet was here too. No other spawn. I didn’t know if you would want that. Oh, I need to tell her you’re awake!” Dalyria set her wine glass down, hurrying out of the room.

“Rolan was a great assist in establishing the arcane runes downstairs *and* I had help at Blackstaff ready to call in. Oh, yes! While you were comatose, I was awarded a professorship at my alma mater. As you are back with us, I’ll set about negotiating a start date. Soon will come my greatest challenge yet: students.”

“Aylin and Isobel were planning to come soon. I tried to contact Lae’zel...” She frowned, taking a large drink of wine. “There’s been no reply yet...”

“And it was not only Gale’s flying cat using you as a bed. Boo kept many a vigil. He is only with Minsc today because for some reason he did not want his small friend near the Blood of Lathander.” Jaheira shrugged. “Minsc also performed many rashemaar rituals for you. You are welcome for me cleaning *those* marks off your face also.”

Astarion was glad he was sitting down, for he felt most wobbly even in the chair.

How could this be true? *Why* would so many people drop everything else they were doing to attend to *him*?!

The room dimmed. People kept talking, but he understood nothing being said, only vaguely aware the living were talking amongst themselves. He took another drink of wine, tasting nothing.

This made no sense. None of it. Besides Jaheira’s aid. She was the High Harper, after all, hopeless charity cases were her calling.

If he tried, he could make Wyll’s contributions somewhat logical. There was a reason Karlach had been so fond of him, after all. Perhaps he shared in her strange perceptions... or at least thought he could save *everyone*. The sweet fool.

However, one could be sweet *and* practical. The Grand Duke did seem *awfully* pleased when Astarion asked for his job back. The vampire spawn was critical, after all, for the plan the hero formally known as the Blade of Frontiers had concerning those thousands upon thousands of spawn in the Underdark.

Why then Shadowheart? And Gale? Especially the wizard, who had his own powers and life *back* now. Why would he spend the first two months of it on *him*? Was this some fantasy? An elaborate joke at his expense, only waiting for the punchline?

Impossible. The objects Astarion saw downstairs proved they were speaking truth. How infuriating, he solved their mystery only to be presented with an even *greater* one.

Jaheira put a hand on his shoulder, pulling him back to himself enough for her words be more than vague sounds. "I should have charged a fee to see you; I could have funded the Harpers for decades."

That was it.

Not her literal words, but Astarion had always been useful. He simply had not yet determined in what *way* he was useful for the others.

He jerked out of her grasp, leaping out of his chair. The group fell silent, all those living eyes staring at him.

"What a confusing day this has been... since the moment I awoke. One confounding complication confronting me, cascading continuously upon my cranium..." He grinned, holding a finger up. "But I now mostly understand... what you *want* from me..."

Glances were exchanged between the group, Wyll stepped forwards, unanimously selected.

"Astarion, no one wants anything from you," he said, holding his hands up.

"Don't patronize me! You want me for your little spawn savior mission... the oh so *noble* hero." He giggled disingenuously. "But what in the world do the *rest* of you want from me... that is the lingering mystery..."

Wyll stepped back, Shadowheart and Gale doing naught but stepping aside for him. Jaheira meanwhile moved to the impromptu bar, looking over the bottles.

"What could it be... oh!" He pointed at Gale. "You told me yourself! How... how *eager* you would be to behold such a *rare* permutation of the vampiric curse. For in-person examination and experimentation, was it?!" Astarion laughed, motioning at himself. "How tantalizing a defective aberration I must be!"

Before anyone could respond, he pointed at Shadowheart. "You... ah! Your love has departed, lonely, are you? Reading of erotica not enough to sate the fire that burns between your legs? There is nothing more desirable than a vampire, after all..."

Gale and Shadowheart shook their heads, looking worried. Behind them, Jaheira selected a bottle of vodka, pouring some into a shot glass; she then flung the glass over her shoulder and took a hit directly from the source.

Astarion startled at the sound of breaking glass, giving Wyll an opening to speak up, "Please, friend, easy, you are tilting at windmills..." He snatched his offered hand back, narrowly avoiding Astarion's snapping jaws.

"Maybe it is these accursed scars still on my back! That foul drow expressed an interest in them as well, reminding me how I am unable to escape *anything* he did to me!" He hissed at the group as a whole, his eyes wide, ears angled back, and fangs bared. After a moments reflection he raised one clawed hand, ready to swipe.

The faces that greeted him were not what he expected, not twisted with anger or fear. Instead Shadowheart was pressing the heels of her palms into her eyes, Gale's mouth was hanging open, and a single tear rolled down Wyll's cheek.

Jaheira took another swig of vodka, not even looking in his direction.

Astarion's snarl vanished, instead he chewed on his lower lip, hand staying raised, eyes flicking to the window, damnable sunlight still visible around the edges.

"I am a druid, in case you three have forgotten, plenty of potential stakes about," offered Jaheira.

Astarion's gaze snapped to her, aghast.

She winked at him.

He stumbled back a step, his hand falling limp against his side. He blinked, the rage that was flooding through him draining even faster than it built. "More... more the fool me... of course, none of those are your reasons. You... did it for *her*... who would not... try to do... whatever she would desire..."

"We're your *friends*, you idiot!" Shadowheart stomped to him. "We care *about you!* What will it take for you to trust us?! After all we've been through... what more *could* we even do!"

"Ah, little bat, have you not learned yet? You're part of my family now, you cannot get away that easily."

Now Astarion's mouth hung open in disbelief.

"We love you, Astarion. We all do." Shadowheart gently pushed his chin up, closing his mouth. "We didn't help you because we wanted something. Not for help with the other spawn or a test subject. Not even because Karlach would have wanted it. We helped you because we *wanted to help you!*"

"There was never any doubt, debate, or disagreement... Gale Dekarios would be a poor friend indeed if he failed to bring his all to bear in your hour of need." He stepped to Shadowheart's side.

Wyll appeared on her other flank. "In all this world, Astarion, there are precious few things we would not do for you."

Astarion looked between the three. "...r-really?" He finally said, voice barely audible.

"Oh, fine, you win! You're right. *I* do want something. You never made *me* a pillow! I feel left out..." Shadowheart pouted, her lower lip sticking out.

"She brings up a fantastic point, little bat! Where is mine? Are women not good enough for gifts?"

The world around Astarion once more grew strangely dim and muffled.

But not entirely.

The background faded, but the mortals did not.

His friends.

They all cared for him. They worked together simply to try to help him. For no gain. He felt so foolish and wise all at once.

He could not understand. But he believed. He knew. He wasn't just a burden, a problem, or a tool to be used. To be consumed and thrown away. He was a person. All these other *people* here thought so and so did so many others; those not here today who had contributed to the effort. Giving so much of themselves, expecting absolutely nothing in return.

There was only one explanation.

Karlach had not been telling him beautiful lies, only pure unfiltered truths.

Enough *must* have survived, if only barely.

Astarion *truly* had become *more* than what Cazador made him to be.

Realization washed over him, the shiver passing down his back and spreading out through his limbs. He fell to his knees and began to loudly sob, much like he did after the bastard was *finally* gone. Only this time, instead of wails, he was crying out with laughter.

Not that this important distinction was immediately obvious to anyone else.

“Give him space!” Jaheira shouted, tugging Wyll back via a horn.

Dalyria raced back, crying out, “*What did you do to him?!*”

“Easy, sister, easy...” Astarion sniffed with another chuckle, accepted her assistance to get back on his feet, then wiped his eyes as the tears continued to flow. “All they did was... care for me...”

“Brother? Are you sure you're okay?”

“I would not say I am *okay* but...” He stopped, considering with a small laugh. “Maybe... maybe I *am* okay? I feel... lighter... somehow...”

“Hrm, could that be related to your new found ability to spider-climb?” asked Gale.

“Jaheira, your house has a weird buzzing sound. Well, best to ignore it, I suppose.”

This time the cheese ball that Shadowheart lobbed found its mark, smacking her target right in his wizard forehead.

“I know I can be, ah... *difficult* to deal with, at *certain* times...” Astarion rolled his eyes at his own words. “I am prone to fits of temper, as you are all *very* well aware. Oh, the stories Dalyria could tell you.”

He blinked. “Gods... maybe she has...” He pressed his knuckles to his lips, eyebrows high as he considered, before dismissing the entire notion when Dalyria shook her head vigorously.

“Thank you, my... my friends. Thank you. I cannot promise I will be the *easiest* to deal with *every* day to come... but I promise I will continue to try. I will be *able* to try due to your combined efforts. Thank you for this gift, I am in your debt.” He bowed.

“Your words are repayment in tenfold, friend... no, hundredfold.” Wyll said, holding a mug aloft in a symbolic toast.

“Mm. It feels like I have said not nearly enough considering oh...” He waved his arms about. “The everything. But somehow, even after my *extended* rest I am tired and... one more concerning point, I

simply *must* address...”

After a moment to let anticipation build, Astarion flung his hands up. “Honestly, how was I supposed to believe you were truly my friends, who care for me, when there was not a single sunwalkers ring to be found on my lovely fingers upon my return? Nary even a potion of daywalking?” He put one hand on his hip, the other directing a rude gesture at the group.

A cheese ball bounced off his head, triggering laughter from all in the room, followed by a round of hugs once more. Both Wyll and Dalyria picking Astarion up, despite his squawks of protest.

Soon enough the party was back on, in even fuller swing than before as Jaheira’s feral pack of smaller children arrived, adding some chaos to the entire event. Astarion wandered through the gathering, joining in on conversations and flitting away again as he pleased, fitting behavior for the guest of honor.

After regaling Wyll with a tale that had made the young man turn almost as crimson as Karlach, Astarion retired to a wall, leaning against it while taking occasional drinks of wine, still somewhat astonished at the flavour, he read the label over and over again, the voids in his memory itching.

“Brother, are you truly tired or was that a joke?”

He looked up from the bottle, finding Dalyria and Gale in front of him. “Truly tired. I do not think my extended... hiatus was true rest.”

“Dr. Dalyria finished relating to me that you have gained the ability to spider-climb but, alas, still are incapable of demonstrating the standard strength that characterizes the non-broken vampire spawn. I would never have predicted such an outcome, how remarkable!”

Astarion decided he would *not* ruin his party by bashing Gale over the head with the wine bottle, after a moment’s reflection.

The wizard continued, unaware of the mercy bestowed upon him, “I share her most eagerness to know the impact on your required cycle of resting.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Professor Dekarios has been such a delight, brother! To be able to discuss research at this level again I... We... we’re going to keep working together. On sun-walking and... a cure.” She smiled brightly. “He’s invited me to keep working in his lab space!”

“Why, Doctor Dalyria, you should not discount your own observations and capabilities! Examining the curse as a more mundane disease rather than purely an arcane affliction is a wondrous notion, exactly the novel perspective an endeavor at the grand scale of your proposal necessitates.” He took a drink of rum. “I was not surprised one iota at your most excellent contributions, I would expect nothing less, based upon your previous publications.”

Astarion’s eyebrows shot up as he looked back and forth between the pair.

Dalyria laughed, shoving Gale playfully away. “Those are *ancient*! I cannot bear to read a single page. I hadn’t published for years and years even before I...” She paused to gather herself. “Before I became a vampire. I had my duties concerning university administration, then with the added responsibilities after I secured an appointment to Parliament...”

“Nonsense!” He wagged a finger at her. “Why, your monograph on the analgesic impact of elven herbs on non-fae physiology by itself is a seminal work, that will stand for ages!”

“Pardon, if I may...” Astarion did not wait for a reply; he pulled Gale’s collar down slightly, enough to clearly see the bite marks on his neck.

He released the wizard, his head snapping Dalyria’s direction, his eyes narrowing.

The other vampire spawn’s ear tips flushed pink and she averted her eyes, suddenly finding her wine glass very interesting.

Gale laughed. “It only made sense, so that our work could continue uninterrupted.”

“Sister, excuse us for a moment.” He yanked Gale through the dividing curtain, pulling him some distance away.

“Is something the matter?”

Astarion glared up at him. Then backed up to the wall and spider-climbed up a foot or so, to glare *down* at him instead.

“If you... make her cry...” He growled and he shook his finger in Gale’s very confused face. “I will... rip your dick off and beat you to death with it.”

“Oh!” Gale smiled, shaking his head. “Honestly, Astarion. I would never. I’ve been *trained* by the greatest of several generations in the proper manner to give constructive academic feedback. While she has been away from the realm of academia for decades now, I have complete faith in her ability to thrive within its hallowed halls once more.”

Astarion thudded off the wall onto his feet, pinching his nose. Gale watched, obviously confused. Right as he took a deep breath to prepare to tell this incredibly stupid smart man what he was *actually* talking about, there was a crash from the other room.

Then a spot of screaming.

From several people.

They raced back through the curtain and all instantly made perfect sense. To Astarion anyway, if not Gale.

Sunlight was streaming in, the protective curtain knocked askew, and broken glass from the shattered window was scattered all about on the floor and nearby furniture, with several shards sticking out of Violet’s still smoking skin.

The newly arrived spawn laughed and laughed, spinning about, causing her smoking hair to crumble into ash near the roots and break off in large clumps, falling about her like some terrible snowstorm. Gale levitated over the broken glass, restoring the curtain to its proper place.

Dalyria popped out from under the table. “We have a portal between the main spawn settlement and the lodge. She ran here in the sun!”

“Hello, Violet. Welcome to my party!” Astarion motioned about the room. “I’d say make yourself at home, but I see you already have.”

“*All the spawn’s friends and all the friend’s friends, put brother Astarion back together again!*” She sang out, then giggled with glee, dancing away from all the many hands trying to give her some aid.

Astarion clapped his hands together. “Wonderful! Thank you for preventing my return to slavery, sister. Help yourself to some wine.” He tossed her his half-full bottle. “Please. Your cheeks are splitting.”

With a cackle Violet caught the bottle and then leapt onto the table, putting a bare, mostly fleshless foot, into a bowl of dressing, then kicking a tray of vegetables over. She cackled while scrambled up and away, her practically skeletonized hands clacking on the wall. Dalyria yelled in frustration, following her up, joining the gaggle of people trying to help the very sunburned spawn.

“*Queen Violet has arrived! All hail the queen!*” She dodged Dalyria’s tackle, clambering onto the ceiling, her remaining hair falling out to mingle with the food below.

“Sister! No! Your hands, your hair! *Violet!*!”

Everyone set about joining one of two missions: trying to catch Violet or cleaning up the utter mess she had quickly made of the room in general and refreshments in particular.

Almost everyone. Astarion plucked up another bottle of *his* special wine, along with a flask of vodka suitable for mortal palates, then drifted over to a couch on the far side of the room.

He handed Jaheira her vodka as he sat down next to her, she nodded thanks, and they opened their bottles in unison. The pair drank in silence for a time, watching as Violet avoided capture, managing to knock over more food no matter where the not-green older ward tried to place it.

Eventually though, that show became boring. Astarion turned to Jaheira. “Queen Violet?”

“She is now the one leading the Underdark spawn. Quickly she decided that made her Queen.”

“Oh, more the fool me, how obvious. Going well, I assume?” Jaheira nodded, causing him to snicker. “I’ve told Dal she is not *truly* mad. Trust me. I’ve seen spawn fall into madness...”

Jaheira nodded again, watching Violet break off a finger bone to give to one of her children. At Rion’s harsh glare Violet made sure to break off enough bones so that each child could have their own.

“*Queen Violet*. I must admit... it does have a nice ring to it.” He took a long drink of wine, then giggled. “I am *never* going down there.”

“Did you not ask Wyll for your job back?”

“...shit.”

“Speaking of work.” Jaheira sat up straighter, giving Astarion a fearsome glare. “You did abandon me to the plague of parchment after all! The others may be pure of heart, but I do want things from you. For you to get back to helping me.”

“I knew there had to be *some* more sensible motivations at play.”

“For all your out-of-date worries, most of your suggestions worked amazingly. Very satisfying, seeing so many displeased nobles turning such interesting colors as they failed to find any way to argue against me.”

“Really?” He grinned. “I’ll be... bureaucracy *does* turn slowly...”

Wyll finally managed hold Violet still enough that Dalyria could pour some glowing liquid down her throat. The injured spawn giggled as she glowed soft green, all of her sun damage healing in moments. She flung her arms around Dalyria, licking her cheek while the other spawn sighed.

The chaotic tension now drained, the guests returned to mingling and helping themselves to the surviving food options.

“M-mother? Can I sit here.”

“Of course you can, Tate. Here, plenty of room.” She pulled the smallest of her wards into her lap, Astarion looking down at the flighty lad. He once asked Jaheira what happened to frighten the boy so. She said it was not her story to tell, but that inside he had boundless bravery. The vampire hesitantly waved at the child.

“See, I told you he would not sleep *forever*.”

Tate waved back, then started to read a thin book.

“Little bat, first thing we must do. Avert the revitalization plan, the one proposed by the hiss prompting nobles. Unfortunately, they are too connected to give up after one setback. Nothing has occurred yet, but it is just a halt, not a stop.”

Astarion sighed. “It would be a shame for the tavern to be demolished when I have only now learned of its significance to me. Very well. You have my pen.” He grinned. “And if that fails, my daggers... or perhaps even fangs?”

“I think for this, the pen will be enough. Your other offers? We will talk about better uses for them. Later.”

He blinked, and started to ask for details, before spying the name on the front of the young boy’s reading. *Popular Arcana*. Astarion smirked and leaned down. “Long time reader?”

Tate nodded. Astarion pointed at Gale, who was still working to salvage as much food as possible. “Does he look at all familiar?”

The boy peered, then his eyes somehow became even wider. He looked up at Jaheira who laughed, setting him down on the floor. “You should go say hello, my brave little one.”

As she watched him walk away, Jaheira said, “Little bat, I am reminded. You said you would tell me of so many things *after* your meeting. The plan to wiggle away from your promise has failed.”

Astarion snapped his fingers. “Shame. But you cannot deny it did buy me some time.” He snickered, watching Gale kneel down to talk to the lad.

“Some of those items I fear were revealed while you were sleeping. Partially only.”

“I heard. Later? Please?”

“Yes, later. But soon later. Not long later.”

“Let me at least read Karlach’s bloody letter *first* then...” He waved a hand around aimlessly.

“Then... the rest.” He sighed again. “But I suppose I should make headway on the other while I can. *I*

suppose.”

Tate ran out of the room, powered by small child excitement, his feet slapping on the stairs. Astarion caught Gale’s eye and waved him over.

“Salutations! This day has been full of surprises, most pleasant. I was having the most wonderful conver—”

“That’s nice. Anyway, *wizard*, about those papers I flipped your table over, how soon could you... have...” he trailed off when Gale produced a bound stack of papers from his robe.

“I brought them with me!” He smiled brightly.

“Of course you did. Of *course* you did.” Astarion took the packet. “I’ll store them with the rest of my possessions currently in the basement.”

“*Your* possessions, are they all?” Wyll chuckled as he joined the conversation.

“Yes! I pilfered them right under your nose after all.” He pouted at Wyll. “Would you truly take such small trinkets away from a destitute former slave?”

“Of course not, Astarion.”

He took a victory drink, pausing when Wyll continued, “Not while that former slave is comatose. However...”

“Cruel ruler!”

“Consider it a long-term loan, Astarion. Of the jewelry. I will retrieve my cutlery.”

“Hah! Fair enough really. I assume my flat is still there?”

“Of course it is, little bat. Ready for you to return when you wish.”

“I wish this very evening! One the sun has set, of course. I will begin ferrying all *myyyyyy* goods over.” He wiggled the bottle of wine. “These too! You are more than welcome to help me do so, since you all *love* helping me so much. Who am I to deny!”

The bottle was taken from his hand. He blinked, turning to the culprit.

Shadowheart leaned over the back of the couch, wiggling the wine back at him with a smile.

“Vampire spit free?”

“Mostly. It has only the standard backwash, my dear.”

She started to take a drink, pausing when Astarion said, “Ah... there *is* blood in it!” She shrugged and took a very long drink indeed.

Astarion laughed, then frowned as she *kept* drinking, snatching it back. “Alright, that is enough, you lush! Ugh, I do not wish to have *mortal* spit in my wine. How disgusting...”

“*Hrm*. Not bad... better than many I sampled on our trip, really.”

“A lot that you *sampled* were decades old and half vinegar!” He wiped the mouth of the bottle clean with his shirt, saying in a softer tone, “Did I hear correct? There’s been no response from Lae’zel? Is

that... standard?"

"No. I'm concerned, but there's so many reasons her reply could be delayed. Not that I've contacted her often. She never messages me first anyway."

"Before getting too concerned for our revolutionary comrade, it is important to take into account the difference in temporal perception between our plane and the astral," Gale began to lecture.

Astarion deployed his ignore field.

Eventually his determination to not pay attention was obvious to all and Astarion was left alone on the sofa with his bottle of vampire friendly wine. He was rolling sips about in his mouth, intensely pondering the flavors, feeling a tickle in long forgotten things in the back of his mind. Nothing concrete surfaced, but he was not bothered; perhaps it would someday, perhaps it never would. No matter the eventuality, the cards he was dealt, he knew he would play them well.

And not just in games of solitaire! Astarion giggled at his own joke, taking another sip as his gaze wandered about the room. The pleasant feeling of inebriation spread, yet another thing that had been denied to him for oh so very long, that was now his again, the floaty soft gentle happiness descending upon him.

Beyond that though, he was simply... happy. Honestly happy. Sitting here, surrounded by these all these people.

They were not just *her* friends. He was in the company of *their* friends.

Oh, and his *sisters* were here too. That was nice. He supposed.

He giggled again. Ah, he would not lie to himself in his own head, not tonight. It *was* nice. Astarion had always had more fondness for his sisters than the supposed brothers. At least the current pseudo-brothers.

He took a sip of wine. Yousen was alright, he supposed. For a gnome. He doubted he would care one whit if Astarion called him brother or not. Leon and Petras would still better serve this world via spending an extended day frolicking in the sunny waters of the River Chionthar.

So many other spawn with him in Cazador's service, over the long *long* years... While he was not in the depths of mourning for poor lost Callum as Aurelia was, he could not deny the unfairness of it all. If dear sweet Wyllyam insisted upon aiding the teaming masses in the Underdark, at least Astarion would have an excuse to try to prevent his eldest sister from following the *true* eldest brother and expiring before she could enjoy her long delayed freedom. Though, gods, the stories *she* could tell...

Astarion sat up a bit straighter, looking around the room more actively for a moment, scanning for his sisters. Dalyria was in some discussion with Gale, it must have been intense, as they were both drawing on the back of napkins. Meanwhile, Violet was sitting on the wall, animatedly talking to Shadowheart.

He froze for a moment, then slumped down again, taking another drink of wine. They would not say anything *too* egregious about him, he trusted.

Probably.

... and no one would fully understand what Violet was going on about if she did anyway.

Probably.

Ah, it did not matter, they all knew enough already. Nothing could spill from their fanged mouths and cause these charmingly foolish heroes to turn on him...

To his amazement, Astarion found he truly did believe that, he giggled once more, grinning broadly. Shaking his head when Jaheira and Wyll interrupted their conversation to look at him questioningly.

He really should get up off this oh so comfortable couch. Talk to these *friends* of his more, they had been so cruelly deprived of his voice and wit for so long after all. He could tease his little sisters, perhaps, or ask Wyll for confirmation as to when their next council meeting was to occur and ask some questions about the dress code for such gatherings.

Yes... yes, that was a good plan. He would do exactly that.

Any moment now he would stand up and get started.

But maybe first, he would pull up his legs, lean slightly to the side, and close his eyes for a moment or so. Half a minute at most. Merely a small spot of rest, then he would be ready.

Astarion was asleep within seconds, the celebration continuing around him, but quieter, as one by one they noticed his latest nice, simple plan had derailed.

After the impromptu party leavings were mostly cleaned away and Jaheira's children were all either in bed or attending to other tasks, those remaining gathered around Gale. He was holding the portrait of the living Astarion, when he was freshly appointed as magistrate.

"Gale, I cannot believe you thought it would be a good idea to up and hand that to him today!" Shadowheart turned to the others. "This is why we were late. I had to talk him out of it."

"It is a very well-done piece..." Wyll softly said.

"I merely said I thought it would make for a lovely present to commentate his reanimation."

"I know. You said that roughly ten times with different wordings."

"We had the same eyes..." Dalyria carefully took the painting, her fingers brushing against the canvas very gently.

Violet swung closer, once more hanging upside down from the ceiling. "*When he finally peeps, brother will run out of tears to weep.*"

Grinning, Jaheira plucked the portrait away, promptly hanging it on her wall.

"Let us see how long till he notices."

"If..." Dalyria said, chewing on her lower lip.

"If in a year he has not, then I will tell him. I will invite you all again. We can make another party of it."

The resulting chorus of laughter did not cause the slumbering vampire to awaken, instead he smiled sightly, the laughter of his friends drifting into his dreams.

Chapter End Notes

ayyy~ Astarion finally accepted he has friends, and MORE! Aren't you proud of him? One more chapter to goooooo, yap, we're not done yet! There's a couple of more things still waiting in the wings~

More notes to come next chapter, I'm sure your lil eyeballs is tired.

I cannot believe how nice I was to gale. What has happened to my fic that started off with joke about Gale being so fucking oblivious. Scream.

Chapter 19: Her Letter

Chapter Summary

Time to read, vampire-boy.....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Astarion,

You didn't do anything wrong.

I love you very much.

I know you love me.

I never doubted it.

Don't you doubt it either!

I'm sorry our story was so short. My time in your life. Your long long loooooong life. With so much more of it to come. Even with the best of luck, our story would have always been so short for you, only a fraction of how long you're going to be around.

I'm sorry.

I am SO fucking sorry.

I wish I could stay there, with you.

For all of it, if I'm already wishing. Not just 50 more years, or 100. For all those immortal years you're always going on about.

I really can't imagine all the years you've already seen. Being around that long.

I'm sorry those years were so horrible.

I want you to live your life how you want. I don't want you to be with me in a life neither of us want. That might never get better. That might get so much worse. I don't want more horrible years for you.

You deserve the best. The finest things. Lap of luxury. The life you really want.

Live for yourself, not anybody else.

I asked Jaheira and Wyll to keep helping you.

AND YOU BETTER FUCKING LET THEM!

There's no shame in needing somebody to take care of you for a bit, to help you out. That's what people do for each other. You took care of me, Astarion. In so many ways that I cannot ever put into words. You never let me down. Even if I did want to pinch your pointy head off sometimes.

Let somebody else take care of you now that I can't.

There are so many people in this world that would love you, truly love YOU, if you gave them a chance.

I'm not as amazing and special as you think I am.

If I was, I wouldn't be writing you this letter.

Love,

Karlach Cliffgate

Not Demonsbane.

Never again Demonsbane.

PS: Only go down to the Underdark with the other spawn if YOU want to do that. Please, Fangs, please, do what YOU WANT.

PPS: If I can come back, I fucking will!

Astarion read her letter over and over again, sitting cross-legged on the wall above his bed while wearing his favorite sleep pants. He discovered tears obeyed the standard pull of gravity, running sideways down his face. Despite his sniffing, he was smiling down at the letter, gingerly holding it in his slightly trembling hands.

Dawn was breaking outside his covered windows, not his first sunrise since rejoining the waking, but his first one alone. Dalyria had departed for the Underdark mere hours ago, having insisted on staying with him for a few days. She wanted to be sure he truly was recovered, free of any complications from the incident itself or various attempts to rouse him. As much as Astarion had whined, moaned, hissed, and grumped about her wishes before making a huge production of reluctantly agreeing, he was secretly relieved at her continued presence.

It was time for everyone to get back to their lives and stop fussing about his peculiarities. He gave Dalyria strict instructions that if something *did* occur, such as he failed to wake, she was to simply pose him on his balcony to await the sunrise. Preferably dressed in finery.

Her visit had been so strange, in the most pleasant ways. No longer did they need to remain constantly alert, ready for when their rare stolen moment of peace would violently end, nor did the very sight of her fill him with crushing guilt. No, instead the spawn simply spent time together, talking about oh so many things while they both worked on various projects or walked about the city. Her visit only saw one emotionally charged 'fit of temper', a new record!

Even more impressive, it was *not* Astarion who had the fit. He had been on his *best* behavior, even when Dalyria kept writing about him in her bloody notebook or let a wizard into his flat. Not that she gathered much of note, merely confirming that he rested on a mortal's schedule, rather than that of a proper unbroken vampire spawn.

The emotional excitement occurred when the pair visited the medical campus and discovered Dalyria's memorial was repaired, with only the faintest of scratches remaining from Astarion's little perfectly rational outburst. Even then, Dal had kept it together, only losing it when he was fool enough to comment how her niece was most likely the one responsible for it being repaired so quickly. Well, no, at first his sister had not responded at all, only stared, so he helpfully explained that a *true* relative of hers was in the city, visiting the memorial and leaving flowers.

It was quite the struggle to corral her up the side of the building as she sobbed, managing to barely avoid the patrolling guards. Dalyria leaning on him *once again* was a fitting enough punishment for his initial destruction. He was actually the one who suggested she stay for one more night, after all of that. A night that had been, mercifully, uneventful. If you did not count the wizard she invited to his flat for another bloody visit. Though really, that had been fine enough, as Astarion had convinced the pair to join him for a spot of hunting. Much of the city had been cleaned and repaired, with unsorted debris stored in rubble piles in the Upper City, drawing many blood-filled looters. Now there were two less of the potential thieves roaming about.

All in all, a rather pleasant family visit. Except for how Karlach's letter had weighed on his mind heavily the entire time. Astarion could almost hear her laughing at him for not reading it yet. As much as he wanted to rip it open the moment he was finally alone again, he resisted. A long bath helped pass the final hours, he was still rather warm and damp, his unstyled curls clinging to his forehead, framing his eyes. He did not retrieve the letter until the first traces of morning light crept into the sky; it felt fitting to read her letter in the daylight.

This final message he would have from his love, who burnt away to nothing at precisely the moment when the sun scorched his flesh once more.

Additionally, in case her words spurred him to his own fit of temper, he was far less apt to do something bloody stupid if he was confined to his flat due to sunlight.

Astarion wiped his eyes with the back of his hand as he re-read her words. No, no, no, there would be no fit of temper this morning.

This was not what he expected.

He wasn't sure what he expected, honestly.

Gods, even though this was penned before her death, it was as if she had been in his head, peering at his thoughts in all the months that came after, when those left behind struggled onwards without her.

Her statements so perfectly defeated his myriad worries. He chuckled, wiping his eyes again, that much of an open book to her, was he? How could he ever possibly find anyone else who would understand him *so well*? Karlach understood him better than he understood himself, really. Who else would love him, truly love *him*... complications and all? As she had, despite—no, *because* she understood him so well.

Foolish Karlach, once again believing too much in him. Believing in the best version possible. She was exactly as amazing and special as he thought. No. She was more so. Objectively. Take that! He wins all their arguments now, after all, and so shall he ever, for all of his immortal years...

He read over the letter again, chewing on his lower lip, then sighed.

Fine, Karlach. Fine.

She had won this one after all. He'd pretend to have hope to find love again one day. He had time, after all, no one could deny that...

Astarion's eyes drifted over the postscripts for roughly the fourth time, smiling while yet more tears ran sideways down his face. Then he blinked, sitting up straighter.

If I can come back, I fucking will!

He could recall Karlach shouting those words at him, when she was holding him aloft and spinning around. This was not something he conjured from his imagination, no, it was a true memory... but how? She would *not* have told him such, her true plan was an infuriatingly well-kept secret.

Astarion stared at the letter, pursing his lips as he thought, holding it at a distance to stare. Thinking and staring. Then he held it up close, his nose almost touching the paper. Staring and thinking.

“Oh.”

The past two months, his little ‘vampire coma’ as some had taken to calling it, he knew the truth of it, had already known, but simply forgotten.

Astarion had been *dead*. Properly dead. In the afterlife dead. Karlach had been there, they had been *together*, this every scrap of him knew with certainty.

Laughter fit for a mad man filled his flat as he thudded off the wall onto his mattress. He had been *dead!* Properly dead! And they *brought him back!* Ugh! Some *friends* they turned out to be.

His laughter faded as he considered, tapping a fang. He must have *wanted* to come back? Astarion was not what any would call an expert on resurrection magics, but he knew that willingness of the soul was an essential part of the process.

With shaking hands, he folded her letter and returned it to the envelope, then carefully stored it in her trunk once more. That critical task done, he collapsed onto his bed and wept softly.

They had been together.

Then he came back.

She was going to try to come back!

That was her plan, Karlach decided to find hope in the realms beyond this life, rather than gamble they would survive long enough to escape Avernus with a solution for her infernal heart. Certainly, enough adventurers had returned before? Yes? Astarion must ask Jaheira, and soon. If anyone could accomplish such a task Karlach could, he had no doubt.

No other fresh memories of her emerged, despite his best efforts.

“I miss you terribly still. Every day, if I am being honest, even walking with Dalyria this past evening, I was pondering how the pair of you would get along. But your absence feels different now... I suppose this is why I have felt so... much lighter? Meeting you once more, being with you, telling you everything you have already missed, I am sure, as all of our friends worked their lovely fingers to the bone trying to save me. Ah, if only they knew...” He laughed, then snatched Clive up, rolling the bear over in his hands, selecting the left foot as the perfect spot to chew on this morning, careful not to puncture the fabric as he considered this little revelation.

Yet another one of his worries was soothed, one dating back to almost as far as he could truly *remember*; when vague dream-like wisps of events gave way to real concrete memories. After he recovered, as much as he ever would, from his horrible year in the tomb, when he first realized he had forgotten practically everything from his true life. Worse yet, careful questioning of his fellow spawn revealed that none, even his elders, had forgotten to same degree.

He tried to keep his lack of living memory a secret, but so very soon Aurelia realized all he had lost. Astarion *begged* her to not tell Cazador, pleading as he wept while clinging to her legs, trying to stop her, even as she walked down the hall. He shuddered, recalling all too well how *master* had summoned him almost instantly, so eager was he to lay his eyes, followed by his hands, on his delightfully weak and empty spawn. Astarion rolled over several times, wrapping a blanket around himself tightly as he grumbled.

Inside his blanket cocoon he whispered, “As far back as I can recall, I often have pondered: am I Astarion Ancunín, a man who lived and died, but lacked the good sense to *leave*? Or am I some *new* undead *thing*, calling myself by his name? Naught but Cazador’s creation, lurching through my nights clad in the magistrate’s stolen corpse?” He wiggled the bear a bit, then hugged it tightly.

“Now though, such worries are meaningless tripe. Whoever or *whatever* I am, I was enough to be allowed admittance to what lies beyond. I did not simply... wink out.” He rolled the opposite way, undoing his blanket wrap. “I suppose this is as much of an answer as I shall ever receive... unless Gale’s bloody report stirs memories.”

He snickered and whispered, “Between you and me? I am doubtful it shall.” Astarion kissed the bear between its fuzzy ears then placed it on his headboard; Clive had been demoted from the primary hug receptacle, in an effort to preserve Karlach’s scent for as long as possible.

Astarion expertly rearranged his luxurious and elegant vampire nest before diving back in, selecting a pillow to hug as he settled down. He tried to recall more from his time *away*, but his mind kept wandering to his suite of vampire powers instead. If he had gained these wall climbing powers *before* he had successfully slept in his bed, would he have tried to rest on the ceiling? What would happen if he fell asleep on the walls or ceiling?

Try as he might to settle down, his thoughts kept racing, spinning around his various abilities. His enhanced senses came to mind, his sense of smell at the forefront. While his hearing and vision were vampirically enhanced, and became even more impressive when had fed on *proper* blood, they were nothing compared to the superiority of his nose.

Mortals could barely detect *anything*; it was as if they were walking about with plugs up both nostrils. He sniffed the air, smiling as all the various odors of *home* filled his nostrils. One of the traits he would deeply miss, if he was somehow cured.

Ah, was that why his thoughts kept returning to his various vampire abilities? All that talk of cures this past evening? Dalyria and Gale discussing what their next steps would be in pursuit of a cure, now that they had less important things than Astarion to worry about. That was *more or less* how they phrased it, he had not really been listening.

Between the endless boring technical prattle and both of their unending apologies over how unlikely it was for him to be cured; it was enough to make a man long for the days of the coma. This was not new information, they did not need to keep trying to comfort him over such a trifle of a non-issue.

The only thing he remembered about living was dying. For Astarion a cure would not be a gleeful return to a lost and longed for existence, but starting over, *once again*, in a form that was unfamiliar to

him, body changed to that of a living elf. Becoming a vampire was not a *pleasant* experience, he keenly recalled, he highly doubted the return trip would be any nicer.

He started biting the pillow, ripping through the pillow case instantly and then the pillow itself, sending feathers flying all about. He needed to *stop* this pointless pondering!

Astarion once again refused to listen to himself and kept sorting out aspects of his condition into their various piles, all the time ripping to pillow to shreds.

Healing oh so *very* quickly was of course an excellent benefit. His new wall-climbing ability was every bit as satisfying as he had imagined; using his window to enter and exit his flat was an exhilarating change, he might never use the door again! He had claws that *worked*, finally, after all this time. Perhaps he would paint them before his next meeting at Wyll's, make sure everyone present noticed his new additions, in case any of the remaining members considered playing with the curtains.

Being a vampire spawn was rather *less* horrible currently than it had been for the past two centuries. Being an abused slave tended to put a damper over everything. Surprise! He chuckled for a moment before violently coughing, hacking up a feather. With a hiss he flung the offending pillow clear across the room, more feathers escaping from the gnawed gashes as it traveled. Astarion rolled his eyes, grumbling as he yanked up a replacement pillow.

Dalyria and Gale told him he would never gain "proper" vampire strength. It had been most unpleasant to hear; the two of them *both* babbling jargon at him was every bit as horrible as he imagined. He had been the weakest for almost two centuries, he found it hard to muster up much despair about remaining as such, and honestly, it was good to *know* and not have the ghost of hope haunting his thoughts.

The only negatives to his condition that mattered were being unable to go into the sun, the small matter of the *unending aching hunger* in his stomach, and most importantly, the lack of a bloody reflection! If only those could be taken care of, why... he would actively hiss and flee from any notion of a cure. He giggled at the prospect, chewing on the fresh pillow, oh, the sea of confused faces he'd leave in his wake. It was bad enough trying to convince Dalyria he really did *not* yearn for solid food, how the very notion turned his stomach. He was eager to sample other flavours, but in liquid form only, please.

Astarion was still a *broken* spawn, but less so than before, hopefully that made him less desirable to all those mad necromancers scurrying about the realm. Less useful. The last thing he needed was another group of people hunting him. He had finally gotten the Gur off his blasted back, he did not relish a return to fleeing through the city streets, barely ahead of vampire hunters.

If only he was one of those *lucky* broken spawn Wyll had spoken of, the ones with *extra* abilities beyond those of mere spawn. That would be an excellent trade of for his weakness, but he was Astarion, so naturally he did not get any such compensation.

Though, when he let Dal run more bloody tests on him, his sister had said he still had some excess necrotic energy. The wasted power sloughing off as it decayed, his curse never utilizing it. Maybe, somehow, he could learn something else?

This appeared to be the proper morning for pondering useless theoretical queries, might as well keep on theme. Which true vampire power would he select? Turning people was *right* out. Charming people? Though it would make council meetings proceed smoothly, alas, Wyll would *never* approve, so what would even be the point. Turning into mist was also unappealing, too disconcerting. The

ability to summon wolves or bats would also be more trouble than it was worth, those ghouls taught him that lesson very well. Summoning? Simple. *Un*summoning? Rather less so.

Oh, he was so tired, the obvious answer had completely slipped his mind: bat form. Astarion snuggled into his nest, hugging a pillow close, drifting off with a smile as he imagined flying through the night sky, without a single care in the world.



Another successful day of rest, without a *single* bad dream rousing him from slumber. Resting in general was going far better, but it still was a rare day where he did not wake up at least once, terrified without clear cause, the nightmare (daymare?) already dissipating into vague fragments. Naturally, today's victory meant the terrors were merely biding their time and a truly horrendous day of rest awaited him.

That was *future* Astarion's problem. Current Astarion was going to enjoy his good fortune, set about getting breakfast and ponder what to do with himself this fine evening. Perhaps Gale was due another concert, then he could give Tara her long awaited tour of the aquarium.

That is, if he bothered to get up and did not simply lay here all night long. His bed felt even more soft than when he fell asleep, the very pinnacle of comfort. As if his mattress had transformed into a giant pillow.

... *wait*.

Opening his eyes further, he realized he *was* laying on a giant pillow.

Oh gods, what now?!

To think, he once complained of boredom! He would never make *that* mistake again.

He froze the instant he started to sit up. His body felt strange, but not due to sluggishness from compulsion or injury. Slowly he looked down at himself...

A high-pitched squeak erupted from his mouth, rather than the intended swear.

Astarion was *not* on a giant pillow. He was on a normal pillow. It was *his* size that had changed.

He was now a small white bat.

*Is this a dream? It does not **feel** like a dream...*

Flipping over, he crawled about on the pillow, making slow but steady progress to the edge of the soft terrain. He had no problem with moving, now that he better knew the form he was working with, bat-shaped instead of elf-shaped. A burst of high-pitched chirps filled the room, Astarion's version of bat laughter.

He finally made it off his pillow, then found he could make far quicker progress on the harder surface, navigating around pillow obstacles. For a moment he considered he *perhaps* had a few too many pillows, then quickly discarded the foolish notion.

Once at the edge of his bed, he peered down to the floor, which looked oh so very far away indeed. He took a deep batty breath, then pitched himself off the side, spreading his new wings.

Astarion successfully swooped up before hitting the floor!

He bat cackled as he darted all about his bedroom, finding he was most adept at flight indeed, able to zip about as he pleased, easily fly in tight circles, and do loop-de-loops! Trying out some echolocation worked as well; his vision was fairly unchanged, thus superior to that of a real bat, but the sound pulse did give him a better shape of the room. It was all coming to him instinctively! How excellent!

Soon he tired and landed on the glowing clock Wyll had given him, hanging upside down, feet clinging to one of its metal supports. He wrapped his wings tightly around himself. No wonder this was how bats slept, it was rather comfortable.

A surprising, but enjoyable start to his evening. However, it was past time to change back and get his evening on the move.

There was only one problem.

Astarion had no idea how to change back.

He had transformed while asleep, oh Gods, Dalryia was right, he should have been trancing instead!

Releasing from the lamp he flew around the room in a sheer panic for a few minutes. Forcing himself to calm down, he landed on his chair, trying to concentrate on his normal form. Next, he flew to the ground and tried to stand up on his legs, as best he could, attempting to remind his body of its proper configuration. Nothing gave him even an inkling that he was on the right track.

Hissing in frustration, he flew in circles again, before landing on Clive's head, his little fluffy bat body draped miserably over the bear.

He couldn't access the sending stone, as it was safely tucked into his blood cache when he was asleep. A little trick he had felt *so* clever about, preventing anyone from bothering him when he did not wish to be bothered. A possible way to call for help and so much tasty blood so close, yet he lacked the thumbs required to access it. Growling, he chewed on Clive's ear in frustration.

What was he to do?! Who would know how to possibly help, while he was like this, nothing more than a little bat. He paused in mid-chew, blinking his little batty eyes.

A rather obvious answer, now that I bother to think on it.

Astarion took flight again, thankful he was in the habit of keeping his window open for Tara's visits.



Jaheira had many talents, sleeping was not one of them. Six hours in a row was all she could manage typically; for so long people had told her to wait until she was older, then she'd wish she could get by on such little sleep. How much older did she have to get?

Tonight though, *this* was going to be a good night for sleep. So many random neglected duties had built up due to the vampire in a coma in her basement, today she had finally finished with the bulk of the backlog.

Thus, she had flung her younger children at the older and gone to bed early, leaving clear instructions *not* to be disturbed for anything, up to and including another realm threatening crisis.

She slept so heavily that high-pitched chirps and squeaks failed to rouse her. Nor did something tugging on her hair. The same something climbing on her forehead did not even produce a hitch in her breathing.

It took a chomp to her nose, the bite hard enough to draw blood, to wake her. Jaheira gasped as she sat up, hand going to her face, finding nothing but her own blood, which she wiped away with the first pillow she grabbed. She swore and released a few softly glowing magical lights, looking around for the culprit.

Panicked chirps from above drew her attention; she understood everything and nothing all at once. A small white bat was flying circles above her bed, darting around her floating orbs.

Jaheira barked out a laugh as she held out her hand. The bat landed, somewhat clumsily, but she easily caught him with her other hand. "You really are a little bat now!"

Astarion the bat chirped at her, peering closer she could see him furrow his little bat eyebrows.

"You are stuck, yes?" Another chirp was the only answer.

"Hah! This happens to druids on occasion. Very young children druids."

He hissed then tried to bite her finger, squealing when she thwarted him by dropping him onto the bed. Astarion scrambled in the wrinkled sheets, crying out and thrashing as he slipped between two rumples very quickly, his tiny bat claws flailing to secure any real purchase.

"Calm down and no biting, I will free you."

He became very still and compliant, allowing Jaheira to easily fish him out, nothing more than a limp sad bat sack in her hand. "Stop that! No sulking. This is still impressive. If funny you are stuck. How long has it been?"

Jaheira learned that bats could shrug. "Ah, just woke up like that, didn't you? I am not sure how much I can help you, little bat. If you didn't try to do this, it might be more of a side effect from your not so little nap, and we will need to get you more help. Again."

Astarion made a number of squeaking noises. "Cannot understand you. A spawn bat... you really are an interesting vampire." She flung his tiny bat body back up into the air, watching him fly around the room once before landing on the pillow she used to clean her face, trying to lap up the blood. Discovering it was already dry, he flopped over dramatically, with a plaintive cry.

"Small as you are you are still a big baby." She held out a finger, wiggling it in front of his face. Astarion opened his mouth, then hesitated and backed up, looking up at her with an inquisitive chirp.

"Feed already! You cannot take much now."

He chomped down, with the cutest lunge possible, breaking the skin and licking up her blood, chirping happily as he drank, his relatively enormous ears twitching.

“Your ears are almost the same relative size in this form, you kn—OW!” She laughed after he chomped again then flew away, hanging upside-down from her bedside lamp, glaring at her.

“Impressive flight too. Druids often have a trouble the first time we gain wings. Differences between how the shapes are granted, I suppose.”

Astarion took flight once more, doing figure eights around the lights, then a few loop-de-loops, before returning to his perch. Jaheira clapped for him as he wrapped his wings tightly around his little bat body.

“The only advice I can give you right now, is druid shape change is not exactly as if concentrating on a spell, but it is not exactly different either. You are not trying to change into something new, but back to yourself. Do not think of it as flexing a muscle, more so relaxing one that is tense.”

He flew across the room, plopping down on a chair, obviously giving her advice some serious thought.

“Good luck, actual little bat. Do not worry too much if you have no success, this is a problem I have seen before, more or less. I will take you to get aid tomorrow if needed. Wake me if you do recover your voice, tell me the whole story.” She dismissed the floating lights and laid down again.

Jaheira was asleep roughly ten seconds later, Astarion glared at her, filled with jealousy, having half a mind to go bite her again as punishment, but he refrained. She *had* fed him after all! He felt much stronger after his High Harper breakfast, but no less stuck.

A quick burst of flight took him to an armrest. He chewed on the wood as he thought his situation over. Even if she had no immediate solution for him, at least he *had* made it over. The flight over had a bit of an adventure; the distance at first had seemed oh so very great, distracting him so with catastrophic visions of having to shelter in some strange attic that he completely failed to notice an owl until he was almost in the creature’s talons. Luckily, he managed to lose the feathered predator through some very impressive aerial *acrobatics*, if he did say so himself.

Tiring of the armrest he flew up to hang from the edge of the curtain rod, tiny bat growling at his predicament, very aware the high-pitched growl was not remotely intimidating. While this bad form was fun, flying was a real treat, he would enjoy it *far* more once he was no longer fearful it had been a one-way trip. Astarion had seen Cazador turn into a bat and back *so* many times, always with such ease, it could not be *that* difficult.

At least he’d be easy to feed if he was stuck was the case, he mused with a tiny bat sigh. He was *awfully* small. He had not realized how small until Jaheira held him in one hand. Cazador had been *much* larger in his bat form. Much uglier too. If he had to be trapped as a bat, at least he was an *adorable* white fluffy bat. Reflection or no reflection, he knew this to be the truth.

Too bad he lacked a tiny bat novel to read. He would simply have to entertain himself, as he was not leaving this room until either Jaheira awoke or he was wingless once more.

How would his various friends react to this new form? Wyll would be the most amusing, he quickly decided. Shadowheart would not be impressed and Gale would say too many words at him about bats. Dalyria would faint. Violet would either try to eat him or sing every song about bats that had ever been penned, and then come up with her own original tunes. Probably both.

Karlach... she would have squealed so loudly people around them would be in danger of suffering hearing damage; he had no doubt. Her horn would have made an excellent perch, as well.

“Fangs, you’re gonna be so fucking adorable as a bat.”

He almost fell off his perch, blinking for a moment before tiny bat laughing. Another glimpse of what he had forgotten during his little nap! Gods, if only he could remember it all, what *had* the pair of them gotten up to? Astarion was a real proper broken spawn now, with this *true* vampire ability. Had he *chosen* this? It was a ridiculous notion, but it was somehow the explanation with the most support. Chosen it... with Karlach. Gods, he *had* been with her... the whole time...

Right. It was time to think about something else; he was *not* going to cry as a *bat* in Jaheira’s house, he had standards!

If he *was* trapped like this for a time, there *were* some positives. No one made small fluffy bats attend boring political advisor meetings. Or help hordes of vampire spawn in the Underdark. Let alone talk to small child vampires.

... well, they would probably still make him do that last one.

But in any case! It would not be all bad. Astarion would have to make sure Tara did not try to eat him, but otherwise, no real worries.

He reassured himself further; this was a safe place, Jaheira would make sure he received help if needed. Though, Gods, how embarrassing to require help *again*. Well, at least he wasn’t in another coma. Helping was what friends *were* for, yes?

Astarion yawned, relaxing finally, the tension draining from his tiny form. He was almost asleep when he felt very strange, overcome with a feeling as if he was about to sneeze, but over his entire form. Partially on instinct, but also daring to hope what he thought was happening was happening, he few down close to the floor.

A soft thud accompanied very elven feet, not tiny clawed bat feet, touching down on Jaheira’s floor. Astarion laughed as he examined his body briefly, feeling all over, everything *seemed* back to normal. “I’m back!”

With a groan, Jaheira sat up in bed, squinting at him. He grinned and posed for her, doing a little twirl. “Behold! I even managed to shift my clothes!” He grandly motioned at his pajama pants.

She politely clapped, then flopped down again. “Congratulations. Now, to borrow an expression from you: Shoo.”

“That’s it? What happened to wanting to hear the whole story?” He pouted, hands on his hips.

“I confess, I did not think you would succeed before I woke up. I lied to you. Tell me later. I will be more excited when I have had more than six hours of sleep spread over three days. I am happy you are not stuck, Astarion. Going to try it again?” She mumbled, more into her pillows than at him.

He put a hand to his chin as he considered. “Not at present, I have this... feeling that I simply cannot, so soon...”

“Ah, trust that feeling. Shifting form when you are not prepared can lead to... mess.”

“So!” He grinned. “How cute was I?”

“Shoo!” She flung a green pillow, embroidered with a vine pattern on the edges, and the words ‘*I hate you*’ in the middle, at him.



Astarion caught the pillow, carefully set it on the foot of her bed, then bowed, before slipping out, as quietly as he could. Which, as he was a vampire, was exceptionally quiet.

Using the same stealth, he purloined a shirt from Jord's wardrobe. Shoes were a bit more of a problem; he ended up stealing what he assumed were a pair of Jaheira's sandals. As he tried them on, he peered at a new picture on the wall, there was *something* familiar about it, but before he could connect any dots, his attention was taken up by adjusting the straps of his new shoes. The shirt was too large for him and the footwear too small, but they would serve him fine enough.

He slipped out of the house, leaving no one else any wiser to his presence. As he walked down the street, he looked up at the sky and smiled at the twinkling stars. Flight opened up so many tantalizing possibilities, not tonight, he simply *knew* he could not transform again just yet, but soon. There had to be some rules governing his new little trick, vampires were saddled with so *many* bloody rules, after all.

Chuckling to himself, he wandered aimlessly. What a strange life... unlife. No. Life. Astarion did not need a beating heart to have a *life*. He had something better than that... hope and friends. True friends. Even in his darkest hours to come, it would be hard to convince himself that he was completely alone in this realm, with no one who cared for him remaining. Though he had no doubt he would *try* at some point.

Karlach won yet again, he shook his head with a smile. Still winning all the arguments, even though she was no longer here. The familiar tightness in his chest started to build, but did not threaten to overwhelm him any longer. Astarion did not *agree* with her decision, but he now *understood*. It was not a condemnation of him, not a decision made because he was lacking some critical *living* quality, nor had he failed to find the proper words to say or actions to perform. Not *everything* revolved around Astarion, he was forced to admit.

Hopefully she would return as planned, whatever was occurring in the realms beyond would work out as she wished. If it was not to be, however, he would *soldier* on. Remember her, in all his immortality. A noble purpose for his gift.

Astarion stumbled at the thought, oh how he *hated* that term. Cazador called vampirism a gift so very often, it was still a tainted association. Perhaps he should think of himself as vampirically blessed, rather than cursed? As really, *was* he cursed?

... fine, yes, he was very much *technically* cursed.

However, he did not *feel* particularly cursed, not to nearly the same degree as Dalylria and the rest of his kin. Perhaps it *was* better to have forgotten it all. Leaving his affiliation not a burden to endure, but rather a critical part of himself. This nascent himself, a true him, constructed upon the foundation they built together.

This was only a curse if he treated it as such, and in these past months of lurking in the shadows, missing Karlach, he had been very much acting as if he was stricken with the worst curse ever conjured in all of the realms.

Time for a new perspective. He was not cursed. Nor was he blessed, besides with *phenomenal* beauty. He was simply... Astarion.

Who wants to walk in the sun anyway?

He had to laugh at that, for of course he *wanted* to walk in the sun once more, oh so very desperately, the desire second only to her return.

Who needs to walk in the sun anyway?

There. That was the truth, he wanted, but he did not *need*, there was more than enough possibilities in the comforting darkness of the shadows. He would not be lacking for activities. Besides, with all his clever friends, perhaps one day he would walk in it again. Or fly through the bright sunlit skies! He giggled at the notion, the echo pulling back to his surroundings. Ah, his random wandering had taken him into one of the stone tunnels within the Lower City's maze of alleyways.

Where was he exactly? That could help him decide what to do with himself this evening. He could bother Wyll, perhaps drag him out of bed to visit 'his' bar. Gale most likely was no longer lying awake in fear of the cymbals, he was past due for a return engagement. Shadowheart's gift was not yet fully finished, so he should work on that at some point before turning in for the day, but that was a later task not anything to help him at prese—Oh!

A knife was in his face.

He had been so inside his own head, a common Baldurian mugger had managed to sneak up on him. How delightful!

A human man, roughly a head taller than the eternally hungry vampire, jerked the rusty blade towards the tunnel wall, thrusting it a bit closer to Astarion's throat when he did not instantly move.

"My apologies." He smiled, keeping his lips pressed tightly together, and allowed himself to be herded, his back pressed up against the wall, hiding the pair from sight of any passerby on the main street.

The would-be mugger, but in truth breakfast surprise, kept the knife at Astarion's throat as he unsuccessfully searched him for a money pouch.

"Oi, hand over yer coin already less you... fancy... a..." he trailed off, realizing his target was now roughly a head taller than him, the knife at sternum level.

Astarion accelerated his scurrying up the wall, quickly reaching the curve in the tunnel wall, looming over the man and grinning oh so brightly!

The rusty knife clattered on the ground, his prey turned to run, but he was too slow, *far* too slow.

A giggle echoed through the tunnel as Astarion dropped down and lunged at his target, closing the distance in single heartbeat.

The mugger did not even have a chance to scream before he bit down, his fangs sinking in deep.

Nothing else could compare to the sheer delectable delight that was feeding from a *living* thinking creature. The gnawing pain in his gut vanished instantly, replaced by exquisite pleasure that radiated throughout his whole form, soothing every ache and pain that troubled him. Now *this* was living, the delicious ambrosia flowing down his throat, splashing down into his stomach, but also his very soul, filling his entire being with comforting warmth. If only this could last forever. The *true* dream of all his kin.

Alas, it could not. The man would rudely run out of blood all too soon, already his pulse was oh so very weak, soon it would flutter its last. Astarion would take it all, every last drop, not in a loss of control, but a blissful and purposeful release.

Wyll's displeased face flashed in his mind for a single moment, causing him to jerk his head up with a gasp, the man dropping to the ground.

"Shit."

Astarion knelt down, checking his vitals; he was still alive, but barely. He would need *prompt* medical attention if he was to survive. The vampire sat back on his haunches, grumbling as he wet his fingers, then wiped his mouth, licking the salvaged blood off his fingers.

Gods, what was he to *do?! Who* cared about one blasted filthy mugger, anyway?

Wyll cared. The bloody fool cared about everyone in this city.

"Oh, very well..." He wagged a finger at the dying man. "You have no idea how lucky you are, my little breakfast treat."

It was *such* a production moving the bodies without being spotted, and sometimes he would have to spend so long in the foul sewers when they failed to catch fire. Perhaps this was the *easier* path, after all.

Astarion took a moment to listen to his surroundings, ears twitching, then grinned, hopped back to his feet, and left the not *quite* corpse right there on the alley's cobblestones. He hummed a jaunty tune as he casually headed to an armored man on patrol.

"Good evening." He bowed slightly. "I do believe a man in that alleyway over yonder has run afoul of a... vampire?" He giggled. "Some manner of beastie, he is ah... *precariously* close to death."

The guard sprinted away, calling out for immediate assistance. Astarion gave into temptation and leaned against a building, giggling as the area was soon swarming with Flaming Fist.

“Sir, can you tell us anything more? Did you see the attack?” One of new arrivals asked Astarion.

“Oh, yes! I was *right* there.”

The woman nodded at him, obviously waiting for more details.

A plethora of options danced across Astarion’s mind, including giving them a description of Petras as the culprit.

“Weeeeeell, first the devastatingly beautiful vampire climbed the tunnel wall, much like this!” He scurried up the building wall, cackling at the look on her face as he went higher and higher.

Shouts of “*Vampire! Vampire! Vampire!*” erupted from below, along with other words Astarion could not be bothered to understand

Excellent, all according to plan! Now, let us see ... do I lose these fools as quickly as possible or purposely lead them all the way to the Ravengard estate, gleefully reporting to Wyll how well his little fisters performed?

He was leaning strongly towards the latter option, when he was struck with a third possibly; with a thinkythoughts noise he scurried around the corner of the building, avoiding a magical blast sent his way. His instincts had served him well already this evening, why not trust them again?

There was a burst of magic, a softly glowing green cloud of necromantic energy obscuring his form for a moment before dissipating. The vampire clinging to the side of the building was gone, replaced by a small white bat. A high-pitched chirp of delight rang out as he flapped his wings, climbing higher and higher.

The shouts took on an even more panicked quality. “*Real vampire! Real vampire!*”

Astarion tiny bat laughed, quickly leaving the guards behind, doing a few loops in celebration.

Well, Wyll will most certainly hear about that!

He flew through the peaceful night sky, doing a spot of people (and owl) watching as he pondered where to go *next* on this oh so spectacular evening.

No reason to visit the Ravengard manor tonight, let the sweet fool stew on that little bit of information for a night or two first.

As he did not leave any tiny bat cymbals at Gale’s, visiting the wizard was also off the table. Plus, he felt rather nervous at the thought of Tara setting eyes upon him in this form.

Shadowheart liked animals, he *would* visit her tonight, it would be useful to know how long it took to make the journey by air, as she was *so* far out of the city proper, even past Rivington.

Perhaps he’d pay the Gur a visit on his way out, get some enjoyment from taunting the little brats with this new special Astarion only ability. Oh, and let them know he wasn’t any more dead than normal. He could even thank them for the visits and well wishes. But mostly there would be taunting.

Astarion flew towards his destination, looking down at the city, smile on his little bat face.

Now *this* was a view.

Chapter End Notes

Can yooooooooooooou figure out how Astarion's batform works? :>
He's not fully sussed it out yet, but he'll get there, after only one more instance of oh fuck is he trapped for real this time? The gur will probably help him figure it out, which is what he deserves. Neener neener.

► The answer!!

Yes, I wrote like 160k words so spawn Astarion can turn into a bat we did it team good job.

Okay to be more serious for a moment loool, OMG I DID IT I DID IT I DID IT
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA. (yes that was serious)

Ty for coming on this journey with me everybody, I hope you enjoyed my little story of how Astarion stopped moping about and started becoming the guy you meet at the epilogue party if you don't romance him.

Big big thanks to my good friendlings WAMBO and [RAINBOWBARNACLE](#) and [BITTER](#) and [LUCAS](#). I would probs not have finished this without youse all.

AND OF COURSE THE BALDUR'S WRITERS 3 DISCORD:

<https://discord.gg/aZzKHupvV3>

I'm a mod there, come join! You can talk about fanfic, the game, writing process, or whatever~

Astarion is a very important character to me, for Reasons and I wanted to make a fic where it was really about HIM and how he dealt with Things. So. That is what I did!

THERE WILL BE ANOTHER LONGFIC. A SEQUEAL TO THIS ONE. EVENTUALLY. I want to do some one shots first and like. Plot it out. There's a /a lot/ of stuff set up here that we have not dealt with!! Stupid Pendry and Winterprick! All those fucking spawn down there in the underdark Petras..... ugggggggh. Can anybody save poor Aurelia? :(

ALSO, WHAT ABOUT HOOKING SHADOWHEART UP WITH NOCTURNE?

What exactly is up with Dalylria and Gale for that matter? And Astarion and Wyll?!

Oh, and I guess there's Karalch's cunning afterlife plan too... :3c

I also will /eventually/ upload a BONUS chapter to this fic, but not for SOMETIME so I've marked it finished for now, it will be entitled 'While was sleeping' and will go over what everybody was getting up to to try to save him while... he was sleeping! :>

But yah, if you liked this peep my other fics. I might start posting some Astarion AU stuff too soon. Idk. I have OPTIONS now gasp!! But yah 1 shots both set post canon and during canon and some pre canon maybe and side canon and okay yah im babbling.

Okay well that is it, ty for reading, I hope you liked the end here with happy Astarion! If you have read the whole thing, what was your fav part? Anything really surprise you with how things went? What would you like to see next?

<3 <3 <3 <3

Chapter 20: While he was Sleeping

Chapter Summary

What was going on during Astarion's two months asleep? Here's a peak!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Once again, Dalyria was too slow.

Waiting too long to follow her heart, failing to correct course after her mind led her astray. Nothing had changed from before, except her heart no longer beat.

She screamed at Ica, “Wait, no! I don’t—” as she leapt on her.

The necromancer released the spell, a fraction of a second before Dalyria collided with her, sending both crashing down. Astarion fell to the floor, like a puppet with his strings cut.

Dalyria hadn’t acted fast enough to save herself, seven decades ago; tonight, history was repeating.

A burst of green magic blasted her away. Dalyria hit the wall, sending splinters of wood all about, then slid down to the floor, leaving a dark red smear in her wake. Fighting to stay conscious, she lifted up her head.

Skeletal green glowing hands swarmed over Ica, forming a shield. Above her stood the elderly half-elf, two scimitars at the ready.

Ica snapped her fingers and the necromage hands shifted, pushing her from the floor directly into the other woman, carrying the pair of combatants onto the balcony. The noises coming through the shattered door left no doubt the fight continued outside.

Dalyria automatically set her ribs before crawling over to Astarion. His muscles were spasming, causing him to make horrific noises, as all the while magic arced over him, like little green lightning strikes.

“Brother, can you hear me?!” she shouted, reaching out to him.

The misfiring magic arced over her hand, cutting her down to the bone. She jerked back, as a wave of necromantic energy deposited Ica next to her, the skeletal hands clacking against the floorboards. The drow’s clothing was in disarray, one sleeve entirely gone, with bloody bite marks on her arm. In the back of her mind Dalyria noted they were much too small to come from any druid wild shapes she could recall.

“What did you do?!” Dalyria dove between Astarion and the drow woman, as close to him as she dared.

“Exactly what I said I would. Your interruption does not negate your agreement.” Ica began to reach out, only to be restrained by vines erupting from the floorboards, their tendrils wrapping around her limbs.

“He was not hers to give,” the druid leaned against the door frame; her clothing was in tatters and she was bleeding from several wounds, the edges of the cuts glowing a sickly green.

The drow wrenched one arm free, twisting her wrist and fingers as she shouted, “*Z’orr!*” Her anchor crystals materialized around her, spinning in a tight orbit, preventing either Jaheira or Dalyria from reaching her.

Not however, Violet, who was hanging onto one of the crystals, wide eyed and laughing.

“Sister! She’s trying to take Astarion!”

Violet let go and slammed into Ica, ripping her free of the vines, but not the Violet. The vampire spawn bit and bit and *bit*.

A spell burst sent Violet into the wall, making a second dent right next to Dalyria’s impact only minutes prior. Ica was standing on the other side of the room, smug expression finally off her face, as she stared, hand to the side of her head, the pressure not enough to stop the copious dripping blood.

Violet scrambled to her feet, next to the half-elf, spitting out Ica’s ear. “I broke the biting rules! Don’t hurt me!”

“No, you did not. I said you could bite all you wish if I did so first. I suggest even more biting now.” The druid staggered towards Ica, swords at the ready again, not bothering to hold her top up, the sliced fabric falling down, revealing half her chest.

Violet grinned at Ica, dropping to all fours, and oh how she laughed as she lunged.

The drow necromancer dashed to her black box of spiders, snatching it off the table as she said, “Doctor Dalyria, you have made an enemy of Menzoberranzan. *Z’hind!*” A portal opened up beneath her, closing as soon as she dropped through. Violet sailed through the space she had just been, clattering into equipment.

Dalyria turned back to Astarion; the wild spell tendrils arcing over him moved slower and slower, until they fully dissipated. The moment she judged it safe, she grabbed his arm and shook, “Brother? *Brother! Astarion!?*”

“Little bat? Wake up time now, you can say you told me so. You love that,” the half-elf knelt down, putting her hand on his forehead as Violet skittered over, her hair once again a tangled mess, this time with added crystals and fungal mesh.

“Brother *does* love that! Are you his best friend now, druid lady?”

“Jaheira.”

“Are you his best friend now, Jaheira lady?”

She swore in a language Dalyria could not immediately place, but it had tinges of lands far to the south.

“Brother! Wake up and tell me not to call you brother!”

This time he responded, in a way. Blood began to drip from his nose and ears, followed a moment later by his tear ducts. Dalyria gasped. “No!”

“Mmm. A vampire letting blood leave is not a good sign. Stop shaking him, I will call for aid.”

“Oh, we should move him, Jaheira lady!”

“Why, sister? Do you know more from investigating downstairs?”

“No. But I do know I didn’t put out all the fires downstairs!”

Jaheira yanked on Astarion’s necklace, breaking the stone off, shouting, “Wyll! We have a problem!”



Dalyria had no idea what to do with her hands. What to do with any of herself. She resorted to focusing on keeping Violet from wandering off or bothering the soldiers combating the flames engulfing the Society’s lodge.

Violet giggled, dancing in place. “*Fire, fire, blooms bright, blooms all, Violet will bring warmth and light to all the night!*”

Jaheira knelt on the ground in front of Astarion, covering him with a blanket. She stood up, clutching the blanket around her shoulders tightly shut as the horned man approached.

“You have done well on your promise of faster response time. Impressing even my old bones.”

“I admit to already being on my way when you called. Responding to a report of vampire activity.”

“*Sister!*”

Violet giggled and danced again, leaping away from Dalyria to twirl around their brother and the two mortals. “Violet goes walkies! Violet goes bities! Sippies! *Snackies!* Violet catches and releasesies!”

“I’m sorry, saer, I...” Dalyria trembled, all too aware she had lost control and tried to bite this man *herself* when she had last met him. The *only* time she had met him.

He raised a hand, smiling at her as he knelt down next to her brother. “Keep your apologies. I will also admit I was most glad for the report, I... lost track of him, early this eve.”

“Our little bat turned up at my home, in a very unusual manner. Knocking on the front door. Something deeply troubling him. Shed some light, Wyll?”

“I... fear it is not my place to share. I am in the dark almost as much as you, with but one flickering candle of suspicion. Can I see him?”

Jaheira lifted up the blanket, Astarion looked as if he had been in the kennels for tendays, his face and clothing streaked with blood. He had stopped bleeding, but Dalyria was worried it was only because he had run out of blood entirely. She had never seen a spawn bleed so...

Wyll stared for a long moment, then closed his eyes and turned away. “Is he... alive?”

“It is... hard to tell. I am consoling myself by remembering other spawn I have slain fell to ash. Our little bat is a solid corpse.”

Dalyria realized the mortals were looking at her, waiting for her contribution. “I... I don’t know! I don’t *know!*” She stepped back. “I don’t know what she cast on him! I...”

Wyll smiled at her, holding a hand out. “Easy there, we lay no fault at your feet.” Jaheira glared over his shoulder, before she turned to cover Astarion again; she was clearly not in agreement with his words.

“Are... are you really Grand Duke Ravengard, saer? Forgive me for... I... we have...”

He laughed, shaking his head, and the anxiety in her belly lessened, much to Dalyria’s amazement. “I am. But you need not call me such. Wyll is my name; a good one, I have always thought.”

“Oh... oh... I...”

“Brother has served many Grand Dukes! Cazador always sent him with bells on! On his tonker!”

“*Violet!*” Dalyria spun, trying to once again get ahead of her sister, only able to watch her cackle madly and skitter up the side of a building. Once she was securely out of reach, she tugged her trousers down and mooned Dalyria.

Wyll tenderly picked up Astarion’s blanket covered form. “I have you, friend, let us get you off this cold ground. We all know you hate being cold...”

“Back to my basement again, little bat...” Jaheira motioned at Dalyria, “Come, you too. Plenty of room for another vampire.”

“What? No, I... I can’t.”

“You, Dalyria, are invited into my home. There. Now you can.”

Dalyria shook her head, backing up until she bumped into the wall. She started to turn to climb it, only to come face to face with Violet. Spinning back around, Jaheira was *right there*.

“That was not an optional invitation.”

“I... I have to go back to the Underdark. To help the other spawn...”

“*Dalyria must help all of brother’s friends put him back together again!*”

“Sister, no!”

“Sister, yes!” Violet pushed her away from the wall. “*Queen Violet will lead the spawn!*”

“*What?!* You... Violet, you can’t!”

“Can! Queen Violet will report, and command the strongest spawn to patrol for drow raiders and test for other broken spawn and keep counting us! Counting, counting, counting! Names! Names and counting!”

“Astarion always said you... you were not truly insane...”

With a shriek and a cackle, *Queen Violet* jumped off the building.

“Here. Take this, to stay in contact,” Jaheira held out Astarion’s sending stone by its chain.

Violet took the stone, promptly swallowed it, then raced off on all fours down the street, leaping over a very surprised Flaming First on her way.

“Marshal Ravengard.” The gnome saluted and gave her report after Wyll nodded, “The fire has been contained, the building is damaged, but it will not be a loss. No injuries and we found no one inside. All crystal fragments have been collected, as you commanded.”

“Thank you, Manip Fluffington. Provide the displaced with lodgings, and have the Blazes assemble at the Ravengard estate. I will arrive as soon as I am able.”

A firm hand was on Dalyria’s shoulder. “Come. We get to know one another,” Jaheira said, as Wyll started walking away, carrying Astarion.

“Um. I...”

“Because of you this happened. You are explaining it to me. All of it.”

Dalyria swallowed, then nodded, unable to meet Jaheira’s gaze.

The small group passed by the gathered Society of Brilliance members as they departed.

Havkelaag stared at the burnt-out structure, slack jawed, eyes wide, hands shaking.

Limeleech clapped and turned to the other members. “We get to redecorate!”



“I’m finished,” Dalyria called out, from a small alcove in Jaheira’s basement. A bed in the corner, looking out of place. A cleaned and redressed Astarion was upon it. He was now wearing his frilly shirt; the one she had seen him mend *so* many times. It was long out of fashion when Dalyria first arrived in Baldur’s Gate, roughly a century ago. The pants were new, Jaheira selected them during their brief visit to his flat.

Jaheira entered the alcove, sitting in the desk chair. “Ah, little bat, you were supposed to be one of the safe ones. Those there to put me in the ground when the time came...” She watched Dalyria for a moment then banged her fist on the desk. “You said you finished! Tell me what you found.”

“Ah! Sorry, sorry. ...sorry.” She motioned at his bloody clothing, neatly folded up on the desk, sets of lockpicks and daggers next to the pile, she had been careful to remove each and every one. “He stopped bleeding... I... that’s the only good news I have.”

“Then give the bad. I am a big girl. I can take it.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“And stop saying sorry!”

“Sorry! Um... Right. He was bleeding from... everywhere. I examined him while cleaning him. He... if I...” Jaheira blew air out of her nose, causing Dalyria to speak quicker, “It’s almost like he’s a normal corpse, not a vampire spawn.”

“Explain.”

“He’s not breathing, we... we normally breathe when we—”

“I know. I have seen him sleep a great deal.”

“You have?! Oh. Uh. Sorry. I mean. Right. He’s not. His corneal reflexes are also not firing. I couldn’t find any reflex that would respond. I tried a detect thoughts spell on him and... nothing.”

“I am waiting to hear the almost.”

“Sor—I then scanned him and found a minute level of necromantic energy. Far less than he should have. But still more than a non-cursed corpse produces.”

“So he is still in there.”

“Um. Maybe. It could... it could be residual. His... his soul might be... he... I don’t know.”

“Hrm.” Jaheira stood up, leaning over Astarion. “They say the first sign of infection, before a spawn rises, is healed wounds.”

Dalyria stepped back. “His bleeding stopped, but I didn’t see any true wound—*What are you doing?!*”

Jaheira sliced at him with one of his own daggers. “Testing. We will see if he heals.”

She had cut his hair, shearing off a strip from the middle of his head.

“Oh! I thought... I thought you... oh...” She leaned against the wall and laughed.

“What, you do not think he would agree with me this is a grievous injury?”

“You... you’ve spent a lot of time with him.”

“Yes.”

“Why do you call him little bat...?”

Jaheira motioned at Astarion. “What, does he not look like a little bat to you?”

“You’re really the High Harper of Baldur’s Gate?”

“That is what they call me, despite my every effort to escape.”

“And you’ve been helping him...”

“Of course.”

“And... the Grand Duke, an arch mage, and a ... a *cleric* are chasing after the woman who did this to him...”

“Yes. You saw them yourself before they departed. He was not lying.”

“I... didn’t think he was.”

“Hah! Good job, little bat. Good job...”

Dalyria blinked, then followed Jaheira’s gaze. Astarion’s hair was back to its previous length. “Oh! He’s... he’s not gone! His curse hasn’t been completely dismantled...” She felt his regrown hair with a shaking hand.

“Good. I will go try to contact our allies on the road; they will want to know. You stay with him for a time. Then we will make sure you are fed.” She walked away, not waiting for a reply.

Just as well, for Dalyria could do naught but stand there for a time. Finally, she sank in the chair next to her sleeping brother. “No wonder you refused to join us...”



“Good evening, brother.” Astarion did not respond, of course. “We heard back from the others today. They’re still following Ica. The drow necromancer. The one who did this to you.”

Dalyria sat on the edge of his bed. “They caught up with her, but she was able to fight them to a standstill. Using the Underdark to her advantage. She fled again; they are following. I can’t... I can’t even imagine, brother. Your friends are... so powerful. They defeated our Master without even using a daylight spell. I was so confused... so much so that when, when I met them, after they saw you, before they departed. Upstairs. I asked why they had not.”

Dalyria leaned back, eyes slightly unfocused. “The wizard with the nice beard, he... he said of course he didn’t use that spell. Because it... it would have hurt *us* too.” She laughed. “Brother, I’m so embarrassed. I cried when he said that. I cried and I cried. He held me as I cried... it...” She wiped her eyes.

“Oh, brother. I’m so sorry for what I said. For how I thought you must have charmed them so. Promised them riches from Master’s palace... I was ready to fight them, brother. I thought they would turn on us. After using you to find the Master’s riches. We had to be too dangerous to let live.”

She slipped off the bed. “In some ways, understanding things now is as confusing and frightening as when Master took me. I was so scared they’d harm me, once the Harper told them everything. I asked why they were not striking me. Maybe I *was* around you too much. Now I’m also unable to keep quiet when I should.”

Starting her examination, Dalyria lifted up his arms, bending the joints, working her way down to his fingertips. “You have really... really good friends, brother. I’m glad... I’m glad it was you who...” she trailed off, setting his arm down, reaching out to stroke his cheek. “Oh... your pallor has elevated grey tones.” She jumped ahead in her examination checklist, lifting up his eyelid.

“Oh gods...”

Astarion’s cornea was so cloudy, Dalyria could barely see his red iris through the milky white tissue. With a shaking hand, she recorded her observations, making sure to note the time, then dashed away, clutching the notebook tightly.



Dalyria moved Astarion's hands so they were resting on his chest. She stepped back, considering, then returned his hands to his sides. After a moment she moved one hand so his palm was resting on his abdomen. He still looked so unnatural, he never slept in this position. However, she doubted the mortals fast approaching down the stairs would appreciate seeing her brother curled in the fetal position. She stood next his bed, back straight and hands clasped behind herself.

The *Grand Duke*, who had told her to call him Wyll, walked with a heavy step, but seemed well, as did the *cleric*. She had worked with clerics of all faiths once, as Doctor Dalyria. Now this Shadowheart proclaimed herself an ally. An odd name for a cleric of Selûne, but at least she could not remember any followers of the moon maiden setting traps for spawn or storming her master's palace. The *arch mage* followed behind, with a slight limp. Dalyria worked hard to keep her gaze straight ahead, waiting to be called upon, only watching the bearded man in her periphery.

"Well met, good lady, I wish we bore better tidings and hope your tenday has been more productive than our own," said Wyll, stopping in front of her, holding out his hand.

Dalyria trembled slightly, mostly the tips of her ears, then said, "No, Ma—my lord. I apologize." She focused on the toes of his boots, keeping her head down.

"Thank you for caring for Astarion while we were gone. I deeply appreciate your efforts. Please, relax, sit. You must be so tired, the middle of the afternoon is no time for a vampire to be up and about, as he has often told me."

She looked up, relaxing her posture slightly. "I can stand. I... thank you." She motioned at Astarion. "The day that you first caught up with... with Ica, I saw the first signs of rot. I was afraid his curse had failed, but we will also show such changes if we do not feed for some time. It... it hadn't been long enough, I thought, but this is not a standard situation. Therefore, I... we fed him. Feeding is the one reflex that properly triggers. He responded well, as you can see." She lifted one of his eyelids, showing his perfectly clear cornea!

Wyll averted his gaze. "Ah. I will take your word for it. Unfortunately, we do have much information to share from our time away. We guessed she was heading to Karsoluthiyl and hurried to block her passage. Alas, we were correct on her destination and route, but she managed to flee from us once more, making it into the drow-controlled remains of the city under the waves. It would have been futile to follow her further."

"Sharran training does not focus much on capturing the enemy on the battlefield," Shadowheart said. "Though I suppose if we were targeting a young drow girl..."

Gale added, "I maintain that we would have captured her at our first skirmish if she had not known the location of a hook horror graveyard. I was not aware the species had such a high degree of sociality, what a fascinating tidbit. Once this whole business with our vampiric friend has been settled, I simply must dabble in zoological studies once more."

"Oh, I should... I should look for those sorts of books as well. We found a hook horror hatchery, in the Underdark, and I was hopeful we could farm them for blood..." said Dalyria.

“My lady, you are welcome to any book in my — very expansive, trust me — personal library. If you can do me one small favor at present.”

“Oh. Uh. ... favor?”

“May I take this seat? You are not availing yourself of its use, and my knee is aching most terribly.”

“Oh! Of... of course! It’s not mine but... yes.”

Gale sat down, sighing in relief. Shadowheart rolled her eyes and said, “We did not utterly fail; in our last encounter I managed to get close enough to snatch one of her pouches, it was filled with those infuriating spell gems she kept using.”

“And recording scrolls, very popular with drowish spell casters. They never caught on as much in ‘topside magic’; I am not sure why, perhaps most feel they take some of the... magic out of it?” Gale chuckled, stroking his beard.

“That’s... that’s fantastic, she was using those before... before she attacked Astarion. We never found them; she must have taken them with her. Maybe they will tell us what she tried to do...”

“You’re familiar with them? Wonderful! Your assistance in decoding her cipher will be most appreciated, I have been rather stymied. Not that our expeditious pace gave me much chance to attempt, in my defense.”

Dalyria blinked, looking at the other two mortals, waiting for them to object, finding them waiting for *her* to respond. “Oh... I... yes if... if you think. Um. I can try. Yes.”

“I do more than think, I *know*! You *are* that Doctor Dalyria, are you not? The one who brought Evereskan healing to the masses, first by demonstrating that with very slight modifications the same herbs could be used to reduce pain in both our peoples?”

She looked at him for a long moment, then said, “Yes.”

Gale smiled at her. This *arch mage* smiled at her. “Then there is no one better suited to assist me in this effort. And I do *not* merely mean in the scroll, but assisting our companion entirely.” He motioned at Astarion. “A puzzle such as his condition needs minds that are primed to look at problems from different angles, not stuck in the same rote paths of cognition. Trust me, of all the grand didactic works of Blackstaff Academy, guidance on how to *help* a vampire cannot be found among them.”

Wyll said, “Here I will be of very little use, we are fortunate you can take my place in this effort. Hopefully something can come from those scrolls, let there be some benefit from my tracking her over 50 kilo-peacocks, other than demonstrating I can do such a task without Mizora’s foul assistance.”

“Excuse me, what was that unit of measurement you employed?”

“Oh, sorry, 50 kilo-peacock *lengths*. My apologies, I forgot you were not from this city, Gale.”

“*What?* That is... my confusion has not abated.”

Dalyria laughed, shrinking back when both men looked at her, then standing up straighter as she said, “I was very off put when I arrived and learned of the standard Baldurian measurement systems.”

Wyll smiled as he explained, “Remember the restrictions on imports we encountered at Basilisk Gate? The wording of the proclamation gives the limit as nothing larger than a peacock.”

“You don’t want to know how they measure volumes.”

Gale frowned. “I do not approve of such a ridiculous standard for a system of measurement.”

“Ah, my friend, where you see something ridiculous, I instead see a stunning example of Baldurian ingenuity.”

“Shadowheart, please, you must also see this is senseless.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry, I stopped listening once you said the word didactic.” Shadowheart looked up and then back down at Astarion. “I was thinking of the last time I saw him. I had meant to check on him. I *knew* he wasn’t going to visit again, after that night...”

“Did his visit go poorly?” asked Wyll.

“No, not at all. Except for how he wanted to jump out the window and flee the *moment* he arrived. Once my parents began talking to him. Don’t let him fool you, he is very consumed with the idea of his mortal family.”

“His family! That... that might work!” Dalyria said.

“Do you know something of them? A clue he’s forgotten?” Shadowheart bitterly laughed, shaking her head. “What an example of complete loss... Shar would be so proud...”

“Oh... no. Not... I did not... not meet him until many years after he forgot. But if we could find his family, we... we might be able to wake him via a blood relative. I... there’s connections in the blood that... we have to try.”

“A brilliant idea, but, sadly, there are no suitable relations remaining.” Gale held his hands up and continued, “I had reason to investigate his past and made a most grim discovery.”

“He’s an Ancunín. Isn’t he?” asked Wyll.

Gale raised an eyebrow. “Why... yes. Yes, he is.”

Wyll sighed and motioned to the exit. “Let us go upstairs. Heavy talk will sit easier in our hearts with some liquor first down our throats, as my father would say...”



“Good evening, Brother. It’s time for your Lunsday examination.” Dalyria inspected his corneas, checked his ear canals, and peered at the roof of his mouth, then inspected his tongue before feeling his teeth. She noted down her findings. “Good... good. Upping your blood intake has reversed your dental mobility. No other signs of decay seen.”

She started bending his joints at his toes, talking to him as she worked, “We have a routine now. Lunsday is when I examine you. Then we meet the next day to discuss the results and try to formulate

new plans.” She finished with one leg and moved to the other.

“And by we I mean myself and Gale. Meeting at Ramazith's tower. He has a small space there and... he's made sure no sunlight can reach inside, so I can work during the day.” She paused, soft smile on her lips, before shaking her head and continuing, “Shadowheart has been helping as well, when she can, giving her clerical view.”

Dalyria laughed. “She keeps telling me she's barely a cleric... but I think she's had some really good ideas. Different from how we'd think. Is it true you had an undead killing god blessed weapon under your bed?”

She finished manipulating his other leg and stepped back, looking at the holy symbols on the wall above him. “She thinks you might not be *here* anymore. We... Gale and myself we're working to try to understand her scroll. Ica's. And the remnants of her spells clinging on you. We *think* she tried to send you away... that's part of it, there's more but... maybe your soul went, Shadowheart said, and this is only your body and... and curse.”

Dalyria looked down at him for a few moments, then said, “I... they all work so hard. They're all working so hard. You have wonderful friends. Your friend Wyll is... of course *he* is the one I tried to bite. He's so nice he... he sits down here for hours with you. I think he talks to you too. It's hard not to talk to you. Even though I don't think you're in there because... because... what if *you are*. Oh gods, brother, *what if you are!*” She took his hand, going through the motions of flexing his digits as her own hands shook.

“If you are... if you can hear me. I'm so sorry. I... I will never give up. Even if everyone else does. I won't ever give up on waking you up again. Ever. I won't give up, Astarion. I won't! You have to wake up and... and yell at me, Brother. To tell me to stop calling you brother!”

She finished with his arms and started brushing his hair, following the procedure she knew very well, for she had seen him style his hair so many nights. “You have to wake up and know how hard people are working to help you. So... so many people. Even some Gur came... children...and... and... Gale is going to take me to Blackstaff this tenday so we... he thinks I'd be an asset going through the stacks. He's taking me to Blackstaff...”

Dalyria ran the comb through his hair one final time as she whispered, “They told me about her. Karlach. I...” She dropped the comb, right on his face, then hastily scooped it up. “I'm so sorry, brother, for what I said... I didn't know. I couldn't have known!” She collapsed against his chest, sobbing into his shirt.



It was overcast in the city. The heavy clouds showed no signs of dissipating; allowing not a single strong beam of sunlight to pass them. It would be perfectly safe for those who avoided the sun to walk the streets, illithids, drow, and vampires alike.

Dalyria told herself that again and again, as she stood in the door way of Sorcerous Sundries. She had spent most of the tenday at Blackstaff Academy. Upon their return Gale had been eager to conduct additional experimental runs and she had been even more eager to return to Astarion's side, to

examine him with the scant new information gained via analyzing the archives. She bid Gale farewell, not even bothering to check the time.

They had been indoors for days upon days, she had forgotten how important it was to know the time, the sun's position in the sky. It felt impossible she had done so, but she had done it all the same. The clouds must be why Gale had allowed her to depart; she could not return to him and admit she hadn't realized the sun was still up, telling him she was too scared to step foot into it, even though it was perfectly safe.

She had to start walking. She had to!

Her feet did not move.

Dalyria was very close to conjuring up a mental image of the master commanding her to walk into the sun, when Jaheira called out, "What a surprise, to see you here."

"Jaheira!" Dalyria took a few hesitant steps towards her. "What are you doing here?"

"Not here to make sure you get back quickly. Coincidence, nothing more. I am here to pick up whatever it is one buys at this silly store."

Dalyria laughed as the pair began to walk away, "I see why Astarion was so fond of you..."

"Is."

"I see why Astarion is so fond of you."

"Better."

They arrived at Jaheira's house when Rion and the three smaller children were leaving. She motioned for them to run ahead, stopping to talk to Jaheira. Dalyria scurried past, not stopping till she would be in shade if every cloud vanished at once.

"You're late, Mother."

"Am I?"

"Never mind. I knew you forgot. Again. It doesn't matter."

"Oh good, if it does not matter then there is no need for reminding."

"I let people in to see your vampire. Have a good afternoon, Mother."

"You as well, make sure that Fig does not bring home more swords from the Fist's armory, Tate does not get spooked by the horses, and Jhessem does not annoy Liara too much. Unless she deserves it today."

Rion opened her mouth, then must have thought better of a reply, following after the other children.

Jaheira smirked, waving at the little ones, then followed Dalyria inside, almost running into the slightly shorter woman, as she had stopped in the middle of the hall.

Wyll and a young blond elven woman were sitting at the table, three mugs of tea in front of them. Jaheira stepped around Dalyria and said, "Ah, so this is who Rion was meaning. One a very frequent

guest... one not.”

“Good afternoon,” Wyll said, motioning at the woman, “I hope you do not mind; this is Maiela, one of my advisors. She requested to join me after our meeting this morning, wanting to pay her respects to our mutual friend while he is indisposed.”

“You have a lovely home. The basement is... fantastic. I was most sad when Wyll first said that was where Astarion was resting, but it’s lovely.”

Dalyria crept to the wall, putting her back against it, starting to inch towards Jaheira’s office, aiming to escape into that lovely basement. Knowing a living elf had been in his vicinity only increased her desire to examine him, fear swirling within.

“Mm. I try. My small spot of green. So many people coming to see him. Disrupt the balance in the area if we are not careful.”

“More so than a vampire in residence?” Wyll asked, taking a drink.

“Far more,” said Jaheira, keeping her face clear of any hint she might be joking.

“Oh, then you should know my—”

“*You got old!*”

“—is in the washroom,” finished Maiela.

Jaheira turned, finding the source of the shouting: a short and plump elven woman with some lines on her face, and far more white than blond in her curly hair. “Oh! You *are* that Jaheira! You got old!”

“Uh,” responded that Jaheira.

The other woman pinched her cheeks. “So many wrinkles! You’re so cute!”

“*Stop!*”

She did so, laughing. “It’s Wen! Wenny! I got fat!” Wen posed for Jaheira. “We knew each other here! This city! Over a hundred years ago. Oh, I’m so happy you got old...”

Jaheira took a moment. Then smiled. “I remember you. Hah. It has been a long time...”

At the table Maiela and Wyll blinked, stunned into silence. Dalyria was now clinging to the ceiling. Also blinking and silent.

“I knew her for a time after the end of the Bhaalspawn events. After the end of... much,” Jaheira said.

“We were both widowed um, during the *events*.”

Wyll said, “The world truly is no larger than a fishbowl.”

Wen looked around, all smiles and sparkling blue eyes again. “This is your house?” She gasped. “Those were *your children!* You’re a mother!”

“Mm. Of a sort.”

“Oh, I know that you, Jaheira, are a wonderful, wonderful mother!”

“Hah! Myself, a wonderful mother? Surprised to hear *you* say as such. Normally it is only those without children who say such silly things.”

“I think any mother who has happy living children is wonderful.” She returned to what must have been her cup of tea. “I’ve... lost all of mine now, Jaheira.”

Jaheira motioned at Maiela and asked, “Then who is this?” Wen did not answer, taking a drink of tea.

Maiela answered, “I’m her... Well... She was... was going to be my... my mother-in-law...”

As the two elves held hands, comforting one another leaving Wyll to softly say, “Her daughter, Maiela’s fiancée, was one of the civilians lost during the Absolute’s final assault upon the city.”

Wen offered Jaheira a smile as she said, “My sweet Siana, she was trying to save others...”

“She somehow managed to reactivate a steel watcher, and used it to reach the top of a guard tower, where injured people were trapped,” said Maiela.

“Siana was always so good with such things... making metal move, in ways I could never understand...” Wen wiped her eyes.

“She barely had time to send out any calls for help, letting us know where she was, after she fought her way inside. Minutes later another volley came and... it all collapsed.” Maiela looked down into her empty mug. “What a waste... she tried so hard but couldn’t save anyone...”

Wyll had moved behind the women, putting a hand on each’s shoulder. “Her actions were not a waste; she was one of the greatest heroes of the day. Her presence gave comfort to people in their final moments, for they knew then they had not been forgotten. They were not abandoned by their fellows. She gave them the most precious gift of all. Hope. Their deaths did not diminish its value, for they departed with that hope in their hearts.”

Wen’s mug clattered on the table, and she clasped Wyll’s hand, her eyes glistening with tears. “Oh, what wonderful words. You... you are truly the man who will take great care of my... my city.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I will do my utmost to lead all Baldurians into a new age. A better age. A changed age.”

“Good. This city could stand more than a few changes...” Wen’s eyes went up to the vampire spawn clinging to the ceiling. “Hello!” She waved, wiggling her fingers.

Dalyria clung even tighter to the ceiling, she was well aware of how she looked, but did not particularly care.

“Look at you up there, that looks so fun! You’re a vampire too? You’re the first one I’ve met that’s awake.” She motioned down, “Come down from there, no need to be so frightened...!”

“You have an... an evereskan accent...” Dalyria said, so quietly, she doubted any non-elves could hear her words. The high elves of Evereska had no love in their hearts for undead. Few mortals did, but they were exceptional in their hatred. She knew well the undead hunts the standing army regularly undertook. She had participated in some, during her required service.

“Dearie, I left Evereska almost three centuries ago, vowing never to go back.” She moved closer and smiled at Dalyria, then said in elvish, “<Hello! Are you enjoying your freedom? I hope you are. Don’t worry, little one.>”

Dalyria could only stare down for several moments, then responded, “<Yes.>” It had been so long since she conversed in proper elvish...

“<I’m glad. Don’t worry, I’ll leave you alone. You must be so tired from helping your... *friend?* Downstairs.>”

“<Yes. He’s my... my brother.>”

“<...is he? That’s... wonderful.>” Swapping back to common she repeated her meaning. “Wonderful...”

Maiela took her by the arm, “Come on Ms... um... Wenny. We should go.”

“Oh, yes, of course, we need to get going...” She allowed her once upon a time future daughter in law to lead her towards the door.

“Wyll, I’ll complete those inquiries you requested before our next meeting. I... I hope he’s awake soon. I miss him at the meetings...”

He nodded, “Have full faith, we are sparing no effort, expense, or rock upending.”

Jaheira held the door open for the pair; as they passed Wen said, “I thought this Harper Jaheira couldn’t have been the same Jaheira, you were so against rejoining them. I’m glad you did. Good for you!”

“Wenny! Come on, we’ll be late!”

Jaheira nodded at the elves, then shut, and securely latched the door.

Dalyria climbed down the wall, feet silently touching the floor. “She... she was... a lot.”

“Yes. She always was. Over a century has not dulled her shine.”

“Dalyria? Did your time at Blackstaff bear fruit? I confess I tarried here to sooner know the details.”

“Oh... um. Possibly. We have new ideas to try. Nothing concrete but... leads.” She nodded. “More leads.”

“You catch him up. I have... old letters to put my eyes on.” Jaheira walked to her office, leaving the two at her kitchen table.



“—support that it was adding thinking creature blood to his rations that resulted in claw rejuvenation, not the arcane glyphs activation. The glyphs show no reduction in the power used to activate them beyond what we can account for via known ambient decay rates,” Dalyria finished her report, motioning at the glowing symbols at the foot of the comatose Astarion’s bed.

“Thank you for your excellent report, doctor. I am as frustrated as a troll with an ingrown toenail with my inability to contribute anything of merit to the effort...” Wyll stepped back from the bed, offering

Dalyria a smile.

Gale clapped Wyll on the back and said, “Now now! Your contribution of liquid capital has been most helpful, consumable material components for research of this caliber cost a mighty pretty penny.”

“A fat lot of good my coin has done; it has been over two months and what have you discovered? Naught but that a vampire responds to blood!”

Shadowheart laughed behind her hand, then blinked, falling quiet as she studied the various holy symbols on the wall above Astarion, tapping her nose with one finger.

“Ah...” Gale lifted his hand up, starting to say more, but refraining when Dalyria put her own hand on his shoulder.

“My apologies, friend, I should not take my frustrations out on you. I admit to some regret, wondering if perhaps it is far past time that I return to tracking down the necromancer who did this to him. Put the weight of Baldur’s Gate to bear...”

Jaheira said, “Stop that foolishness. Drow Harpers have reported she has returned to Menzoberranzan and was not lying about her ties to the ruling houses. Seeking her out is too risky at present. If it comes to that, I will take charge.”

“Do not count out our research efforts just yet! However, if a more aggressive strategy is needed, Blackstaff does have connections with academic circles in the city-state. Possibly we could arrange a spot of covert espionage, focused on their libraries.”

Dalyria blinked. “Stealing their books?”

“*Borrowing* their books. Surreptitiously.”

“*The blood of Lathander!*” shouted Shadowheart.

Every head in the room turned to look at her. Except for Astarion’s, of course.

“Vampires respond to blood. We have literal god’s blood. We must be able to do *something* with that!” Shadowheart explained, rubbing her hand.

“Oh! Why... possibly, yes,” said Gale. “Why didn’t you mention we still had access to the weapon sooner? You are the one handling the divine side of this inquiry.”

She glared at him. “*I did.*”

“Oh... did you?”

Wyll said, “Yes. She did.”

Dalyria could not help but laugh, nodding when Gale looked to her for assistance, laughing more when he sighed at her response.

Jaheira said, “This plan will work.”

“Oh? Do you have some druidic insight to share?” Gale asked.

“Not a thing. But I know that our little bat will say he was right to keep the mace if it saves him. So. It will work.”

Wyll chuckled. “He *does* love saying I told you so. Possibly his favorite activity. His eyes light up so...”

“...Ah.” Gale clapped his hands together. “*Anyway!* Yes, Shadowheart, a most brilliant idea. We shall revisit the concept of rousing him with a radiant overload. This time, one powered by the Blood—”

Shadowheart interrupted, “I’ll arrange to retrieve the relic. You don’t get along with the gods. Unless you’re getting along *too* well with the gods...”



Dalyria monitored the necromantic power distribution report; a glowing outline of a humanoid shape on the scroll in her hands. There was the faintest glow in the very center of the torso. Exactly as there had been all day. All days these past two months. She desperately watched for any change triggered by their directly celestially powered radiant overload.

“Report?” Jaheira said from the entrance to the alcove.

“I thought I saw a slight change shortly after they left. A flare of power, as if it was trying to flow but... it hasn’t repeated.” She kept her eyes on the scroll as she asked, “What if... what if this doesn’t work?”

“Then we will try something else.”

“But... what else is there?” She looked over her shoulder at Jaheira. “He was so young! He never got to *live*. He was a *baby!* And... this was the only freedom he *ever knew!* Why would he have *ever* wanted to spend it with *us!* Of course he wouldn’t! And I killed him for it!”

“Done now?” Dalyria stared at the scroll as Jaheira continued. “There are solutions yet untried, others discarded without full thought. We *will* wake him. For you see, some people, we are not let go of so easily. The work is yet undone.”

Dalyria startled when Jaheira reached over her shoulder and slid her fingers just *so* over the scroll, turning off the display.

“Come upstairs. Now. He has one already that sits next to him for hours being sad. He does not need another.”



In the place after this, whence few ever return, and those who do remember scant tales to tell.

“Oh. Oh... It’s time.”

“You have fucking fun, Fangs! Enjoy the new shit you can do!”

“Come along for the ride? I’ve spent, *oooooh*, most of the past two centuries with someone else in my head. Plenty of room for another, you’d be the best roommate of them all, *by far*.”

“Don’t think it works like that, honey. ‘sides, I got my own plans. You know that! You were helping.”

“Mm... do not take too long. Please.”

“I’ll make sure to come back before you get all old and wrinkled!”

“Hah. Hah.”

“You’ve not seen the last of me. Nobody has!”

“I... I have to go. If I don’t go now, I never can.”

“Then get the fuck out of here already!”

“I love you.”

“I love you too! Now get your ass in gear and get gone!”

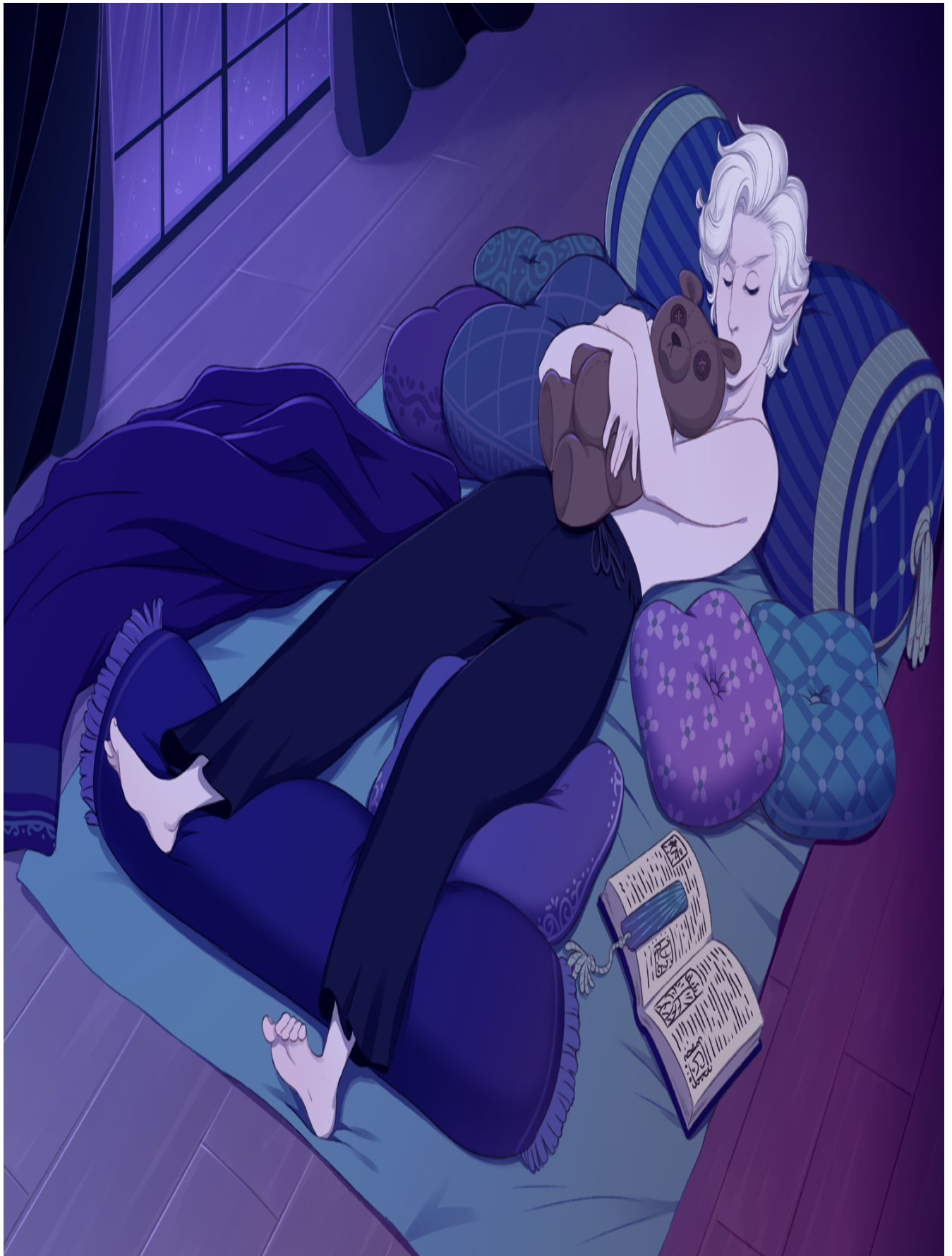
Chapter End Notes

IT'S OVER!!! For real this time.

I told you there'd be a bonus chapter! It just took a bit haha. I've been doing some other things, as you can see if you peak.

But now it is really over! I'm going to be going through and doing some MINOR edits to stuff, but I'll put a link to where to DL the version before i start messing with stuff. All very minor! No plot changes or the like, just some style stuff that bugs me now.

Here's some awesome chapter one art, that you'd miss if you are just reading this now as it goes up!



welp! If you wanna talk about bg3 fanfic, the game in general, or see my amazing collection of Astarion emoji, you can join the bw3 discord: <https://discord.gg/aZzKHupvV3>. I hang out there an awful lot! :3

Ty for reading and going on this journey!

End Notes

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Come look at my endless reblogs of Astarion (or just say hi!) at Tumblr

@[amischiefofmice](#)

or bluesky! [Gallies](#)

I'm gall\_ie on discord, always down to chitter if you wanna add me or have servers or w/e

I love all types of feedback, kudos and comments alike~

Emote only comments are super sweet too!

Comment section is a totally judgement free zone (as it should be lol)

Ty for putting my words in your eyes! <3

I'm a mod at the Baldur's writers III server, come join! Talk about fanfic, the game, writing process, or whatever~

We have work in progress games and lots of super friendly people! I'm bad at adverts!

<https://discord.gg/aZzKHupvV3>

Works inspired by this one

[The Midwinter Market Mystery \(or never trust a wizard with a snowglobe\)](#) by [Denesmera](#)

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